Managing System Polarities

OUTCOMES

• Understand the principles and tools for managing system polarities

• Explore applications

• Explore using polarity management principles and tools to help mediate self and others toward balance and “getting Unstuck”
For every complex problem there is a simple solution. And it’s wrong.

Anonymous, Cited by Barry Johnson

A fundamental question to ask when encountering a challenging situation is: “Is this a problem we can solve, or is it an ongoing polarity, paradox, or dilemma that we must manage well?” Polarities to manage are opposites which do not function well independently. These seemingly opposing ideas or actions are not customary problems to be solved with “Either/Or” thinking; they are actually polarities or dilemmas or paradoxes which must be managed with “Both/And” thinking. Because the two sides of a polarity are interdependent, one cannot choose one as a solution while neglecting the other – without experiencing negative outcomes. The point of Polarity Management is to leverage the best of both opposites, while avoiding the limitations of each.

Consider how common it is for us to send someone for training. One common example is sending managers off to “charm school” because they are too rigid (a problem), and their employers want them to be more flexible (a solution). Imagine the resistance on the part of such managers! The most common reason for managers to balk at such training is that there is something that they value about what is called “rigid.” They value clarity. Furthermore, there is something that they fear in the press for “flexibility.” They fear ambiguity. Those who resist know that flexibility alone does not serve as a
solution. An effective leader is clear and flexible. This situation presents a polarity to manage, not a problem to solve. The challenge becomes two-fold.

1. “How to bring sufficient clarity to a situation without bringing rigidity?”
2. “How to bring sufficient flexibility to the same situation without being ambiguous?”

It is only possible to view the situation in this “Both/And” way when we have let go of the problem-solving paradigm in which the problem is a rigid manager, to which the solution is to cause the manager to be more flexible. The Polarity Management perspective moves beyond the “Either/Or” viewpoint to one of “Both/And” thinking. Through the lenses of Polarity Management, we see a more complete picture and create the opportunity to respect the wisdom of those who resist the “solutions” which are decided by others.

Effective leaders, teams, and organizations manage the clear/flexible polarity on a continual basis. The clear/flexible challenge is one which is both unavoidable and unsolvable -- a polarity. In facing this polarity and all of the others which we encounter, the question is not if we will manage them, but how well.

Interestingly, “Either/Or” thinking and “Both/And” thinking form a polarity in themselves. We need both. Either alone will prove dysfunctional. The rejection of “Either/Or” thinking is in fact an example of “Either/Or” thinking.

Problems to solve are seen in situations in which there is one right answer, or two or more right answers which are independent. Many problems, or questions, to which there is only one right answer are essential to the passing of culture from one generation to the next. “How do you spell _______________?” “Who was the first President of the United States?” “According to the Ten Commandments, is murder right or wrong?” All three of these are examples of single-answer questions.

In contrast, polarities have two or more right answers which are interdependent. These, too, are essential for one generation to socialize another in significant cultural ways. Examples are “how to survive,” “how to be successful,” and “how to get along with others.” We teach children to share, as part of getting along with others. Sharing involves an important polarity because it includes two right and interdependent answers to the question: “As I get along with my friend, should I be concerned about her, or should I be concerned about me?” Satisfactory relationships require that we attend to our own needs and to the needs of others.

Effective leadership requires proficiency in seeing and integrating multiple interdependent perspectives through “Both/And” thinking, as well as proficient problem-solving with “Either/Or” thinking. The Polarity Management framework and principles provide powerful resources for meeting this challenge.

The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, Cited by Barry Johnson
Breathing is a Metaphor for all Polarities.
Polarities to Manage = Issues with 2 or more right answers that are Interdependent.

You cannot solve the Inhale/Exhale polarity by choosing to either inhale or exhale. You manage it by getting the benefits of each while appreciating the limits of each. It’s not a static situation. It is a process, an ongoing flow of shifting emphasis from one to the other and back again. Managing this polarity requires choosing both inhaling and exhaling.
Distinguishing Problems to Solve From Polarities to Manage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problems to Solve</th>
<th>Polarities to Manage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They are not ongoing.</td>
<td>They are ongoing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>There is an endpoint.</td>
<td>There is no end point.</td>
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<tr>
<td>They are solvable.</td>
<td>They are not solvable.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>They must be managed together.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independent Alternatives</td>
<td>Interdependent Alternatives</td>
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<tr>
<td>They can stand alone.</td>
<td>They cannot stand alone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is no need to include an alternative for the</td>
<td>The alternatives need each other to optimize the situation,</td>
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<td>solution to work.</td>
<td>over time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often contain mutually exclusive opposites.</td>
<td>Always contain mutually inclusive opposites.</td>
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1. *Should* we promote Bob?  
2. *What* should we include in our parent survey?  
3. *Should* we adopt learning and teaching standards?  
4. *When* was World War II?  
5. *Should* we remove one level of management?

1. Tough Love & Gentle Love  
2. Recognize the individual & Recognize the Team  
3. Reduce Cost & Improve Quality  
4. Honoring my culture & Honor other cultures  
5. Work Commitments & Home Commitments.
Guidelines for Creating a Polarity Map

• **Identify a key polarity.**
  This is done through dialogue to create a non-blaming description of the issues, opportunities, and polarities present in any given situation.

• **Agree on names for the poles.**
  Remember both poles are necessary and interdependent.

• Write the pole names on the map.

• **Brainstorm together the content for each quadrant.**
  Aim for four to eight entries in each quadrant. Identify both upsides. Then identify both downsides. (Can modify this order to meet individual and group needs.) Oppositional values and fears get identified and respected as important.

• **Agree on a higher purpose and deeper fear.**
  Agreeing on a higher purpose integrates oppositional views and provides a reason to manage the tension between the two views.

Tips for Using Polarity Maps

• Remember that to pursue the benefits of one pole, you must also pursue the benefits of the other pole. The solution is not static.

• A suggestion is to identify indicators for each pole, which will let you know when you are experiencing its downside. Putting feedback mechanisms in place aids in managing the polarity. (Example: using conversation maps and tools)

• Listen deeply and facilitate dialogue, especially with “nay-sayers.”

• Brainstorm strategies for staying in the upsides of both poles.
Well Managed Polarity
Listening for and Communicating Polarities

1. **To what are you listening?**
   
   A. Listen for natural tensions (divergent and opposing views, polarizations, “sides”…) in conversations and interactions. Also, attend to non-verbal.

   B. There are some common polarities that individuals and organizations face in their quest for wholeness—embracing both autonomy and interdependence (holonomy)—which are necessary for community building; staying viable and productive; and dealing with life, change and transitions. Know these.

   *Examples:* intellect and intuition; self and group; ambiguity and certainty; knowledge and action; thing and energy; self-assertion and integration; solitude and interconnectedness; macro-centric and micro-centric; tight and loose; effective and efficient; inner focused and outer focused; ego-centric and allo-centric; home and work; change and stability; planning and action; clear and flexible; individual responsibility and group/organization responsibility; and honor and challenge.

2. **Mediate and normalize tension by paraphrasing.**

   Paraphrase polarities.

   *Example:* “You’re wondering how you might honor the friendship and be honest about your feelings.”

   The shift conceptual focus paraphrase is invaluable for integrating seemingly competing values and views—elevating conversation to a common higher purpose.

   *Example:* “Some of us feel strongly about tightening rules for student hallway passing while some believe that students need to be taught how to use freedoms to self-regulate. It is apparent that a goal that we all hold is how to support students in exhibiting more productive behaviors.”
3. Inquiry is powerful. Facilitate groups to consciously and skillfully lift, explore and challenge beliefs and assumptions.

4. Mapping the polarity is useful. Mapping allows groups to see the whole picture of a dilemma and provides a structure for collaboratively examining and managing the polarity.

5. Support individuals and groups in getting “unstuck”.


7. Support groups and leaders in normalizing tension/conflict and view as it as a resource. Use and elaborate language such as: natural tensions; engage cognitive conflict; both/and thinking, diverse beliefs, values and practices; differing ideas/views; group dynamics; opportunities for expanded options and ownership; higher purpose, etc.
Team Scenario

Some new staff members say that they have little power or influence on their teams and they feel that they have to “pay their dues.”

During discussions about curriculum or making decisions about how to do things, they feel there is a way that things have been done before and that way seems to prevail. Their ideas might not be picked up on by other team members. Decisions usually sway in the direction of what one or two of the veteran team members want.

Some question whether their voice is important. They are asking themselves if they add value to the team. Several express that they haven’t felt this way before, that they have held leadership positions at previous schools and have felt that their voice is integral.

If someone were to observe a team meeting, not much of this would be obvious, they say. It is more the cumulative effect of realizing that one’s ideas are not taken seriously time and time again. It’s the pattern that is causing them to not feel empowered. They want to contribute more and are finding it hard not to take it personally.

• What might be some polarities here?

• Write a couple paraphrases which may mediate and normalize tensions.

Adaptive Schools Seminars, 2013  www.thinkingcollaborative.com
Getting Unstuck

Adaptive

1. Continuity
   - Core values
   - Tap past and present wisdom

2. STABILITY
   - Stagnation
   - Loss of energy
   - Missed opportunities

3. CHANGE
   - New energy and direction
   - Creativity
   - Tap new wisdom

4. Extinction
   - Lose continuity
   - Lose core values
   - Foolish risk

5. Extinction