

## Polarities

### A Summary Introduction

Edited by C. McKanders, 2020

The **Polarity Management** framework and principles provide a practical set of resources for dealing with all polarities in life. Polarities are ongoing, chronic issues which are both unavoidable and unsolvable. Attempting to address them through customary problem-solving only makes things worse. These situations are not problems to solve; they are polarities which require effective management. Leaders, teams, and organizations become more effective as they learn to distinguish between the two and deal productively with both. Through this work, they can consciously use diversity and divergent thinking as resources for developing high performing cultures that promote community and productivity.

**Polarity Management** increases in value as an issue or a system increases in terms of:

- ❖ Complexity – by permitting a view of both the forest and the trees;
- ❖ Change – by converting resistance to change into a resource for stability and change;
- ❖ Conflict – by developing “Both/And” thinking, creating “Win/Win” outcomes;
- ❖ Diversity – by respecting, utilizing, and celebrating differences.

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.

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

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.

## **IDENTIFYING TENSIONS**

Wheatley, Margaret J. Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future, San Francisco: Berret-Koshler Publishers, Inc., 2002.

## **“Willing to Be Disturbed”**

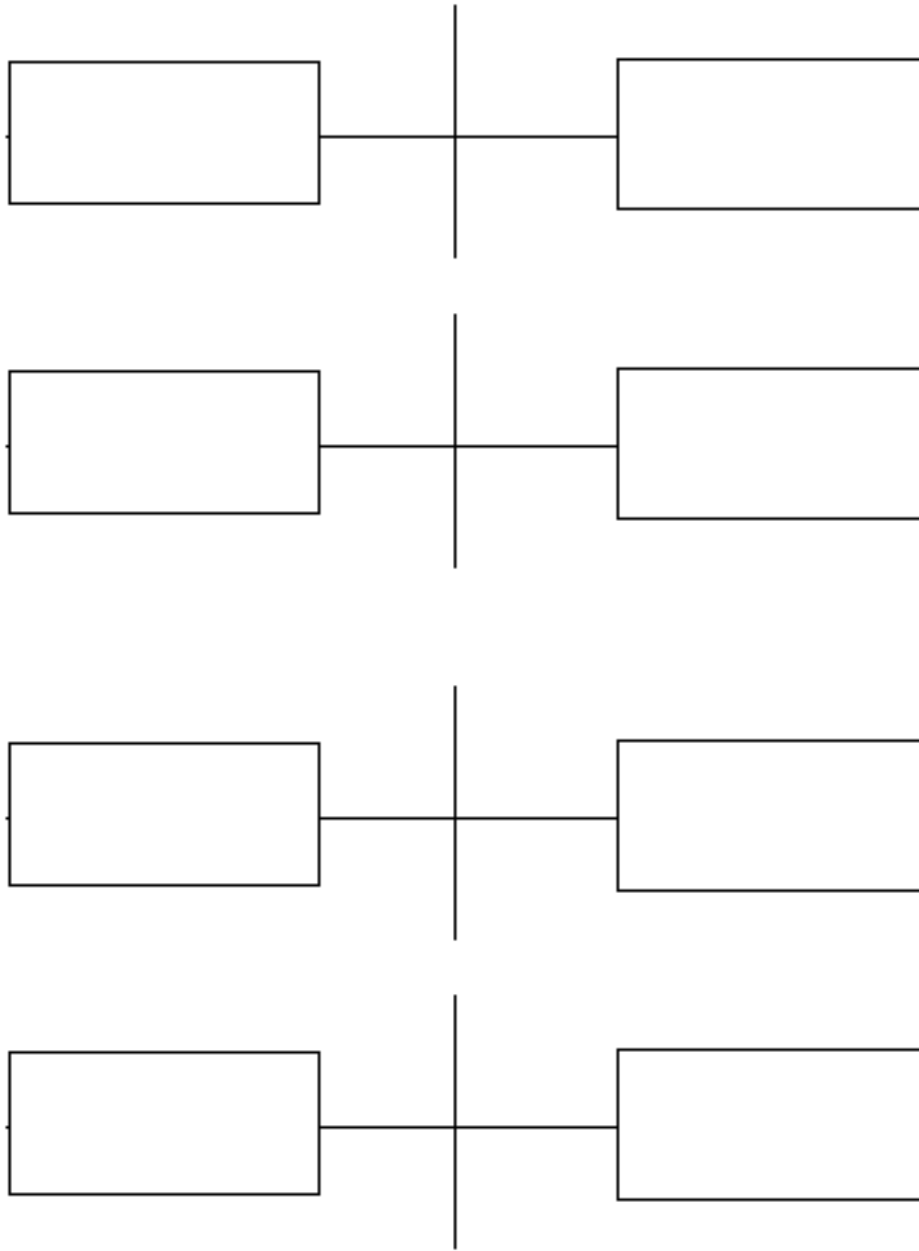
As we work together to restore hope to the future, we need to include a new and strange ally- our willingness to be disturbed. Our willingness to have our beliefs and ideas challenged by what others think. No one person or perspective can give us the answers we need to the problems of today. Paradoxically, we can only find those answers by admitting we don't know. We have to be willing to let go of our certainty and expect ourselves to be confused for a time.

We weren't trained to admit we don't know. Most of us were taught to sound certain and confident, to state our opinion as if it were true. We haven't been rewarded for being confused. Or for asking more questions rather than giving quick answers. We've also spent many years listening to others mainly to determine whether we agree with them or not. We don't have time or interest to sit and listen to those who think differently than we do.

But the world now is quite perplexing. We no longer live in those sweet, slow days when life felt predictable, when we actually knew what to do next. We live in a complex world, we often don't know what's going on, and we won't be able to understand its complexity unless we spend more time in not knowing.

It is very difficult to give up our certainties- our positions, our beliefs, our explanations. These help define us; they lie at the heart of our personal identity. Yet I believe we will succeed in changing this world only if we can think and work together in new ways. Curiosity is what we need. We don't have to let go of what we believe, but we do need to be curious about what someone else believes. We do need to acknowledge that their way of interpreting the world might be essential to our survival.

## **Polarities**



**Guidelines for Creating a Polarity Map**

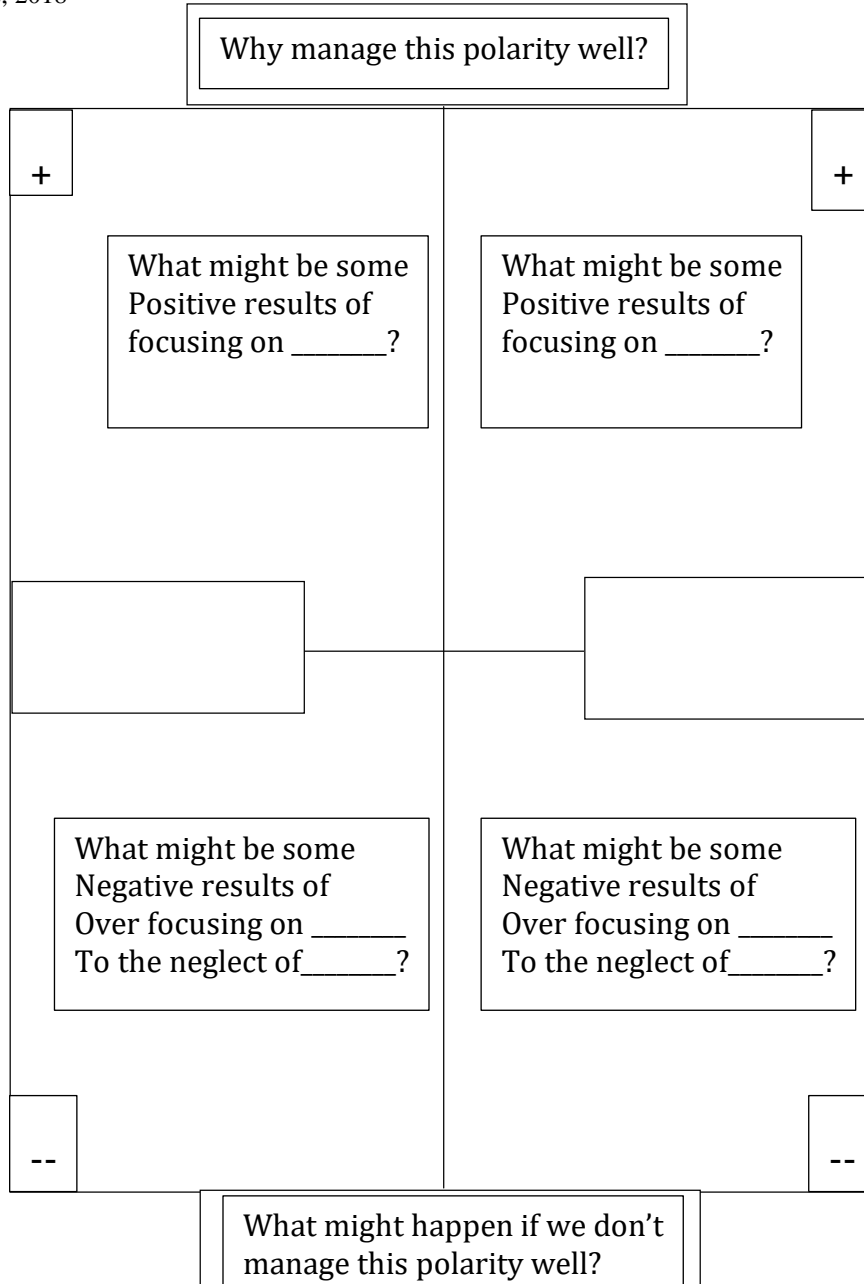
- **Identify a key polarity.**  
This is done through dialogue to create a non-blaming description of the issues, opportunities, and polarities present in any given situation.
- **Agree on names for the poles.**  
Remember both poles are necessary and interdependent.
- **Write the pole names on the map.**
- **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**

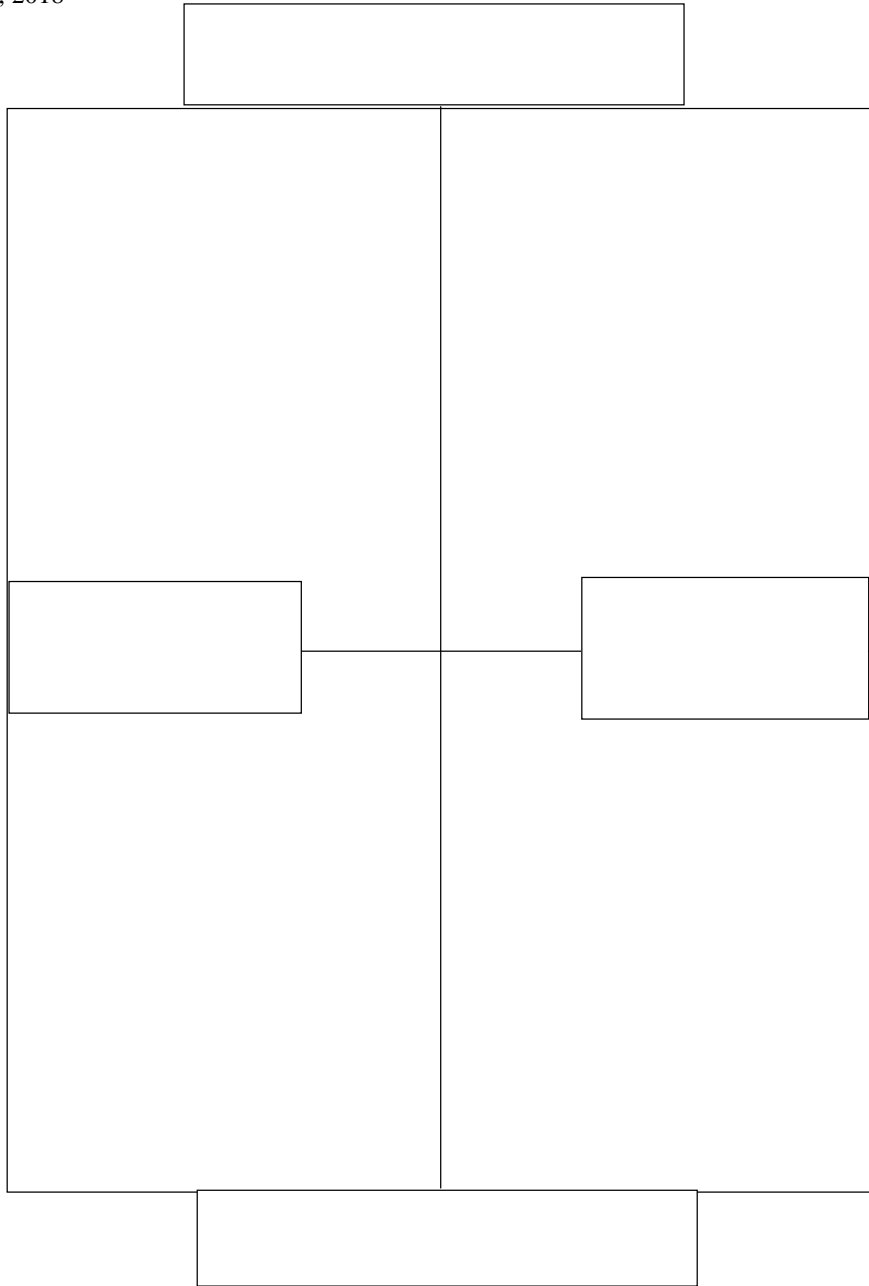
- Remember that to pursue the benefits of one pole, you must also pursue the benefits of the other pole. The solution is not static.
- A suggestion is to identify indicators for each pole, which will let you know when you are experiencing its downside. Putting feedback mechanisms in place aids in managing 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.

**Facilitator LANGUAGE for Mapping a  
POLARITY  
Brainstorm 4-8 ANSWERS/ Quadrant.**

**Polarity Map**  
McKanders, 2018

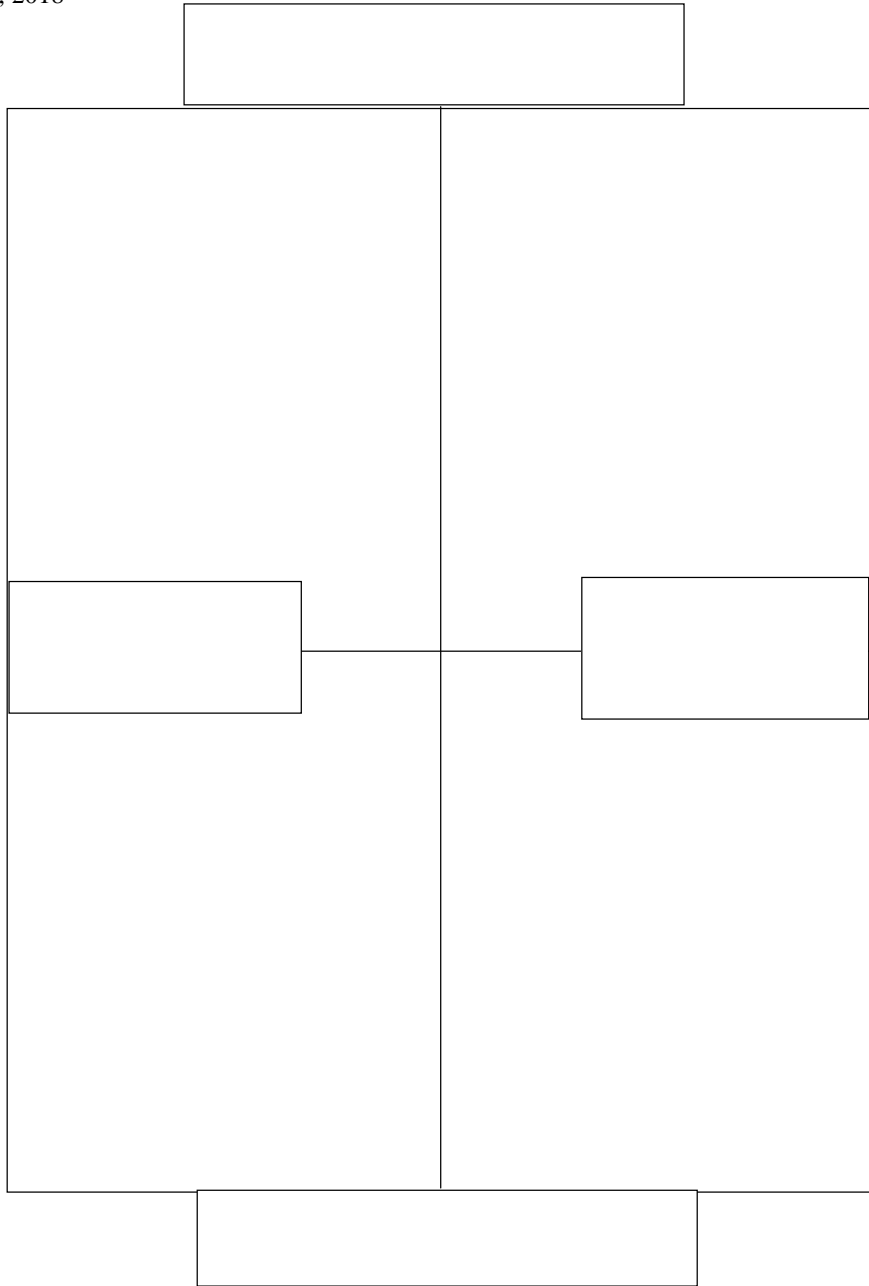


**Polarity Map**  
McKanders, 2018





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McKanders, 2018



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McKanders, 2018

