

When Either/Or Won't Do:
Learning to Engage the Creative Tension of Both/And Thinking for Sustainable Impact

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Getting the Best of Both with Polarities Thinking

- To be successful, should you focus your attention on your **work** or on your **family**?
- Is it better to be a **decisive** leader or an **inclusive** leader?
- What's more important---the needs of the **individual** or the needs of the **community**?
- In this COVID time, is it better to do what we **know** with certainty works or to be open to **learn** new ways of doing things?

If you found yourself saying “it depends” or “I want to do both both,” you are not alone. Each of these is a false dichotomy, and choosing either one alone may work for a short while but not in the long run. These pulls between competing priorities go by many names: polarities, paradoxes, dilemmas, wicked problems, tensions. They are all places where we can feel the stress of making an Either-Or decision when both are critically important. High performance leaders and organizations develop an instinctive wisdom about navigating polarities. Their experience and intuition empower a natural capacity to “... hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function” (F. Scott Fitzgerald). Over the next nine months, you’ll have many opportunities to notice and leverage many of the polarities that can enable our regional success, your success as the Leadership Quest class of 2021, and your individual success and well-being as a leader.

Context

Barry Johnson first articulated the concept of polarities in the early 1990’s in his book *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvably Problems*. Applications and research have continued to build on this strong conceptual foundation. The evidence is clear: individuals, organizations, and communities who leverage polarities well **outperform** those who don’t, in the short term and especially in the long term. In fact, teams who don’t learn how to navigate polarities endure more than their fair share of suffering, including flawed decisions, unproductive conflict, and failure to retain key team members.

We fail to access this capacity for holding both when we think primarily in *either/or* terms: *Either* we plan for stability at the expense of innovation *OR* we push hard for innovation while losing what is intrinsically valuable in stability; *Either* the city centralizes for efficiency *OR* decentralizes for customized service. These polarities are *interdependent* pairs. Focusing solely on one, to the neglect of the other, will invariably lead to undesired outcomes. These seemingly opposite choices **need** each other for sustainability over time.

How do we make this tacit wisdom of both/and thinking more explicit so that we can tap into the power of polarities? Polarity Thinking ® enables leaders, organizations, and communities to identify interdependent pairs and to plan for leveraging the best of both, while minimizing their

downsides. The question becomes NOT whether to seek stability or innovation but how to plan for both. The solution is NOT deciding whether to centralize or decentralize but how to optimize the benefits of each these strategies, allowing us to move easily between them to accommodate our evolving needs.

How to Leverage a Polarity:

See it – Recognize when you are experiencing a polarity you need to engage over time (both/and thinking) rather than a problem to solve (either/or).

Map it – Identify the key polarity pair and create a polarity map, a complete picture from all stakeholders’ perspectives.

Engage it – Leverage the polarity by committing to ongoing attention and action on both poles.

When polarities are engaged to obtain the best of both, the tension between the poles is converted into creative energy. When the tension between stability and innovation is leveraged well, the organization benefits from the comfort and predictability inherent in stability AND the fresh energy, ideas, and positive impact that innovation can bring. When this tension is poorly leveraged or ignored altogether, stagnation occurs if stability is the solitary focus, and chaos if innovation only is valued. In either case, it’s a downward spiral. While both choices are “right,” they are insufficient by themselves. Whenever leaders mistake a polarity to be leveraged as a problem to be solved, the tension between the poles becomes divisive, with resulting suffering until both are recognized and leveraged.

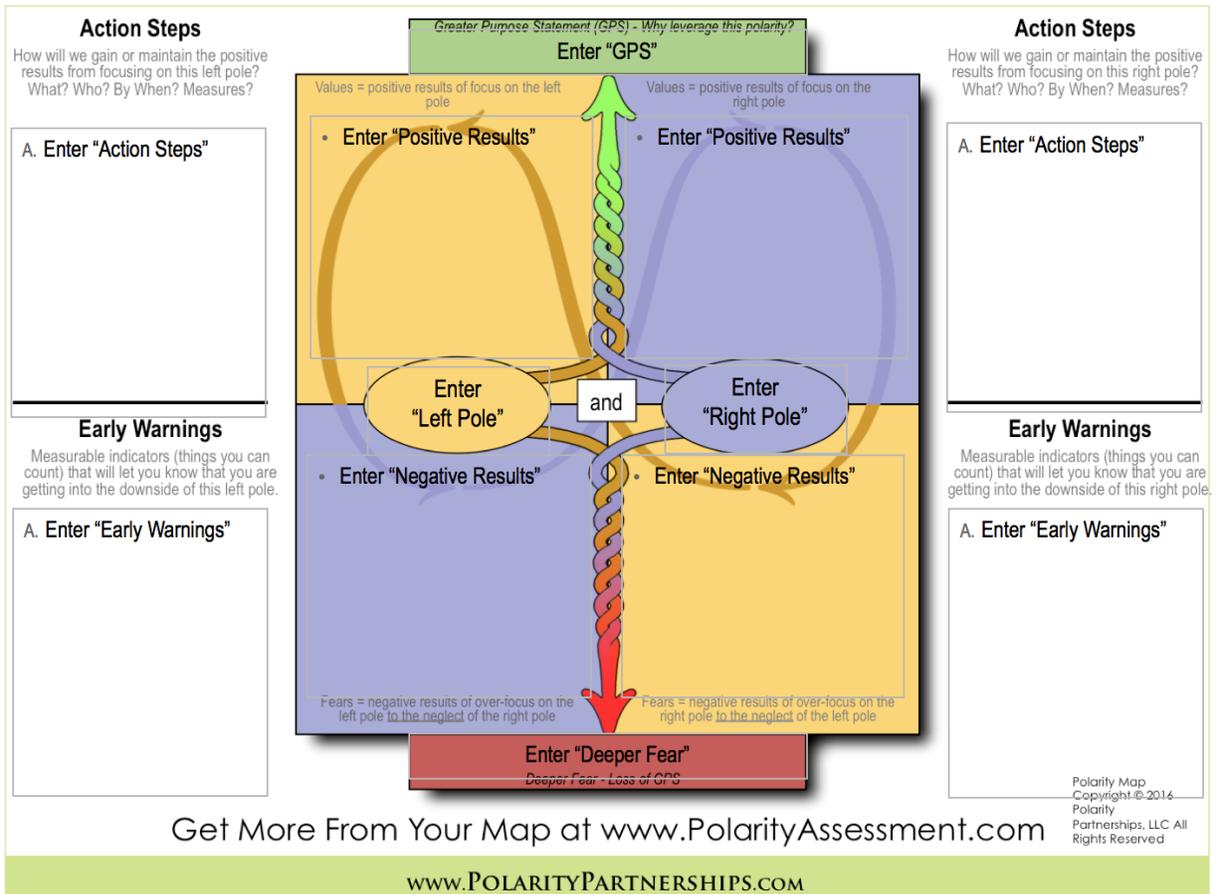
Hundreds of polarities exist. They include those most familiar and common to all of us, such as breathing, with its necessary both/and of inhaling and exhaling. They also include polarities where you may find you have such a strong preference for one pole that you don’t believe there could be another equally valid approach. That’s how I used to feel about Collaboration and Competition, believing that Collaboration was far preferable, only to subsequently recognize that Competition can be incredibly valuable in raising our game and generating energy (so long as we avoid Competition’s destructive components by also accessing Collaboration). Recognizing you are facing a polarity to engage instead of a problem to solve is the key first step to beginning to leverage polarities constructively. The second step is learning to map them. And finally, to consistently take action to leverage the key polarities.

The table below includes some commonly observed polarities that you may recognize. It is followed by a visual of the polarity mapping structure developed by Barry Johnson that you can use in mapping your own key polarities.

Table 1. Some Frequently Occurring Polarities

Focus on people AND Focus on results	Care for Self AND Care for Other
Competition AND Collaboration	Individual AND Team
Learning AND Knowing	Short-term AND Long-term
Humility AND Confidence	Stability AND Change
Flexibility AND Clarity	Activity AND Rest
Action AND Reflection	Fix what's wrong AND Appreciate what's right
Direct AND Empower	Planning AND Implementation

Figure 1. Polarity Map Structure



To learn more about Polarity Thinking, access the resources below:

Deaton, A. V. (2017). Leveraging Polarities in Changing Organizational and Leader Identity, *Practicing OD* (49), pp. 75-76. http://wecanbounce.com/system/docs/ODP-V49_No1-Practicing_OD-Deaton.pdf

Deaton, A.V. (2018). *VUCA Tools for a VUCA World: Developing Leaders and Teams for Sustainable Results*. (Chapters 30, 31, and 34 focus on the team's use of polarity thinking and mapping) <https://www.amazon.com/VUCA-Tools-World-Developing-Sustainable/dp/0692074945>

Emerson, B. & Lewis, K. Georgetown University School of Continuing Studies. Executive Certificate in Polarities and Paradox. <https://scs.georgetown.edu/programs/479/certificate-in-polarities-and-paradox/>

Gelfand, S. B. (2012) The Power of Polarities. TEDx Jerusalem. Brief intro video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqd4-eemoAw>

Johnson, B. (1992). *Polarity Management: identifying and Managing Unsolvables Problems*.

Johnson, B. (2020). *And, How to Leverage Polarity, Paradox, or Dilemma*.

Kise, J. A. G. (2014). *Unleashing the Positive Power of Differences: Polarity Thinking in Our Schools*.

Polarity Partnerships, www.polaritypartnerships.com/

To embody Polarity Thinking:

Notice the repetitive places you experience tension---holding on and letting go, asserting and accepting, focus on task and focus on relationship. Map the tensions you experience. Get another perspective if you have a strong preference for one pole.

When experiencing differences of opinion, or outright conflict, recognize you could both be right.

Use this process to get unstuck:

(1) Make the first move to understand the value (Upside) the other person/group sees in their preferred pole (e.g., What makes "A" important to you? What value does "A" bring?).

(2) Ask them to articulate the concerns they have (Downside) about your preferred pole ("B": What negative impact could it have if we "B"? What have you experienced as the problems of "B"?)

(3) Ask them to articulate the possible benefits of a focus on your preferred pole (e.g., Though ("B" could be a negative, what might be a few of the positives if we focus on ("B"? In some cases, how could ("B" bring value?).

(4) Finally, go to the possible downside of their chosen pole (What could happen if we always "A" and never "B"? You will have made it safe for the other to hold and express their perspective, and to expand to consider a broader one.



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Ann was a member of the LMR LeaderQuest Class of 2013, the best class ever! She earned her doctorate in Clinical Psychology, with specializations in neuropsychology and health psychology, from The University of Texas. Ann had a two-decade career in health care as a clinical neuropsychologist and division leader. When her hospital experienced a merger, she realized she had a lot to learn about how to effectively lead through change. She chose to earn her Leadership Coaching Certification from the Newfield Network and the Professional Certified Coach (PCC) designation from the International Coach Federation in order to support individuals and teams in transforming themselves.

Ann founded DaVinci Resources coaching business in 2003, and co-founded The Bounce Collective coaching and consulting business in 2009. She is a graduate of the 2-year Mastery in Polarities program through Polarity Partnerships. She has shared polarities thinking and mapping with diverse audiences of professionals virtually and in person and often uses a polarities approach in her coaching with individual leaders and teams. Ann is a Certified Team Coaching Practitioner. She has authored two books on team coaching and leadership development. Along with Kemia Sarraf, MD, MPH, and Antoinette Dubois-Ayers, Ann is a co-creator of the Trauma-Informed Professional Coaching curriculum for health care leaders and other professionals, and Trauma Mitigation for experienced coaches.