

When Either/Or Won't Do:
Engaging the Power of Both/And Thinking for Sustainable Success

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The tension in the team meeting is palpable. One group believes that our clients should come first—that our focus must be on their needs, not the staff's. Clients are the reason we exist. However, others insist that we must focus on the needs of staff members. After all, the staff feeling valued and getting their needs met is what enables their well-being. Without our staff, there's no one to get our important work done. The two factions have each been trying to prove their case, and no one's budging. What can we do to move forward and function as a team?

And that's not the only tension we're experiencing. We're also struggling with change. For many of us, it's clear that we have to change, that we need to be more innovative in our approach. Others are resisting, claiming that too much change is stressful. They argue that we need to strive to be consistent and lean into existing best practices instead of changing all the time. It's frustrating, because each seem to be making some good points. How are we going to decide?

Getting the Best of Both with Polarities Thinking

Barry Johnson first articulated the concept of polarities in the early 1990's in his book *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems*. Applications and research have continued to build on this strong conceptual foundation. The evidence is clear: individuals and organizations who leverage polarities well outperform those who don't, both 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 poor decisions, workplace drama, and failure to retain key staff members.

Polarities go by many names: paradoxes, dilemmas, wicked problems, tensions. High performance leaders and organizations have developed an intuitive wisdom on navigating polarities. They demonstrate a capacity to "... hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function" (F. Scott Fitzgerald).

We need to access this Both/And capacity whenever faced with multiple "right" answers that seem opposed to each other but equally essential. For example, *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 organization centralizes for efficiency *OR* decentralizes for customized service at all locations. In those situations, it's ineffective to think in *either/or* terms. 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 over time.

How do we make the wisdom of both/and thinking more explicit so that we can tap into the power of polarities? A conscious focus on polarities enables individuals, teams, organizations, and communities to identify interdependent pairs and leverage the best of both, while minimizing their overuses. The question becomes NOT whether to seek stability or innovation but how to plan for both. The question is NOT whether to focus on staff or client needs but how both are well served.

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](#) or [Navigator Tool](#) to provide a complete picture from all stakeholders’ perspectives.

Engage it – Commit to strategies and actions that will ensure ongoing attention to 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 brings. When this tension is poorly leveraged or ignored altogether, stagnation results if stability is the **sole** 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 as a problem to solve, the tension between the poles becomes divisive, with the resulting negativity that occurs.

There are many polarities that exist. They include those 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 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, until I (finally) realized that Competition can be incredibly valuable in raising our game and generating energy (so long as we avoid Competition’s destructive components when it is overused). 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 short list below includes some commonly observed polarities that you will likely recognize. There are many many more. Once you’ve identified the relevant polarity, use one of the two wisdom organizing structures (Polarity Map, Navigator Tool) for mapping to understand and leverage each polarity pair. Doing this with all your stakeholders is especially powerful.

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	Advocacy AND Inquiry
Action AND Reflection	Fix what’s wrong AND Appreciate what’s right
Working on the business AND Working in the business	Keeping it simple AND Dealing with complexity



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

www.Andiron.com

Deaton, A. V. (2021). How does polarity mapping connect with our built-in neurology? In *And: Making a Difference by Leveraging Polarity, Paradox, or Dilemma, Vol. 2 Applications*.

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. (2018) [*Navigator Tool*](#).

Emerson, B., & Lewis, K. (2019) *Navigating Polarities: Using Both/And Thinking to Lead Transformation*

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 Unsolvable Problems*.

Johnson, B. (2020). *And: Making a Difference by Leveraging Polarity, Paradox, or Dilemma, Vol. 1 Foundations*.

Johnson, B. (2021). *And: Making a Difference by Leveraging Polarity, Paradox, or Dilemma, Vol. 2 Applications*.

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

Polarity Map, Polarity Partnerships, www.polaritypartnerships.com/