

# The Conversation: Polarity Thinking for Equity and Justice

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Like many people, Caroline Blackwell, vice president of equity and justice at NAIS, was introduced to polarity thinking through the classic breathing tension—the inhale and exhale. She has since become a student of polarity thinking, which describes situations where there is truth and wisdom on more than one side of an issue. She’s done a lot of polarity mapping work, which involves

a shift from thinking about particularly complex problems as challenges to solve to understanding that there are polarities or interdependent tensions to manage. It requires moving from using either/or thinking to both/and thinking to gain the benefits or “upsides” of both poles.

Nearly 45 years ago, Barry Johnson coined the term “polarity thinking” and created the polarity map, both of which were highly influenced by his Gestalt therapy training, in which he learned about paradoxical change, as well as his theological seminary training and activist work during the Vietnam era. As the founding partner of Polarity Partnerships, Johnson has worked to help people and organizations leverage this wisdom that has been in human culture for thousands of years into conscious, active use.

With so much polarization in the United States, so many tensions dominating the collective mindset, and a focus on acknowledging and addressing institutional racism and systemic inequities in our nation and in our schools, Blackwell recently read Johnson’s new book *And: Making a Difference by*

*Leveraging Polarity, Paradox or Dilemma*. She reached out to Johnson to ask him about how we can use polarity thinking concepts to frame, navigate, and respond to the challenges we're facing today, specifically to discuss the most effective polarities to lift up in a community to help explain the continuing oppression of Black, Indigenous, and people of color.

**Caroline Blackwell:** On the second page of your book, you say, "I am a white cis male, financially secure, college educated, raised in a heteronormative family, all white, from a Christian tradition, without any physical or mental disabilities." You go on to talk about the power and privilege that comes as a result of that, and then you say it doesn't make you a bad person or a good person. It just means that you would have to learn to be responsible and learn from marginalized groups as well as to work with them in order interrupt these systems of oppression and dehumanization. How does this introduction speak to anti-racism and social justice work through the lens of polarity thinking?

**Barry Johnson:** Whenever you deal with a polarity, it's always a values and language clarification process. You're trying to name the poles to say, "Well, what would be the upside of each? What would the downside be?" Within a polarity, there will be two goods (the upsides) and two bads (the downsides).

If we map *justice* and *mercy*, for example, there's an upside to focusing on justice and accountability, and there's an upside to mercy and forgiveness. They're both upsides.

We need to pay attention to justice and laws. But laws without mercy lead to a kind of cruelty and abuse. If you focus on the mercy side without the accountability side, the downside of that is another bad, which is the unresponsiveness to the evil you see. If we end up overfocusing on justice to the neglect of mercy, we really do become abusive of ourselves or others. We become highly punitive, and we create a bunch of people who can't own their own shortcomings.

All of us at some level need a screen to project what we can't own onto others. We can find somebody else and say, "It's not me, it's them." We need for that projection screen to be clearly not us—it's a very powerful need for all of us. The reason that color and racism is such a powerful force in the U.S. and around the world is because it's an obvious difference. And the reason that sexism is such a powerful force is because there's an obvious difference. The more obvious the difference, the easier it is to project on that other. In Germany during the rise of the Third Reich, you didn't know by just looking at somebody whether they were a Jew. So the Third Reich made it obvious—all Jews had to wear a Star of David on their outer garment when they left home. This clarified the projection screen. We psychologically want our projection screen to be clean. We don't want anybody to mess with it. And if you mess with someone's projection screen, you will get attacked for messing with it.

**Blackwell:** So there's a fear system at play that gets in the way of us moving toward our expressed goals.

**Johnson:** In the process of dealing with racism in the country, even the strongest advocates—to the

degree they see it as a problem with a solution and ignore where the resistance is going to come from in themselves—it's just going to be undermined. It isn't about them being bad or weak, it's about a misperception of the energy system that they're in.

White people who are living in abundance will be willing to give half of their money to move toward basics for all, such as basic health care, housing, education. We'll invest our time and money in doing it—and we will sabotage it. We'll sabotage it because we have an unconscious assumption from an either/or mindset—that if we really did have basics for all, we'd have to give up the nice house we live in and most of what we have to live out basics for all.

I've seen this with Fortune companies I've worked with. They've got the money. They've got the leadership agreeing. And they won't go. Why? Because they assume that if they go to where they say they're going, there's a terrible downside they're afraid of. Their gut is keeping them from going where their head knows they need, should, and have to go. It's this kind of evidence in working with large corporations that helps me say, "If you've got white people who say they're joining you as an ally to deal with racism, and they seem to be resistant, you can assume that's unconscious racism. But there's another unconscious bias that is getting in the way. In anti-racism work, we need to do it with both unconscious biases, not just one.

**Blackwell:** Talk about those two unconscious biases in relationship to power sharing. We've got COVID-19, racism, sexism, all of those challenges. We've got the part and the whole and the *us* and the *them*. How do those two unconscious biases get in the way of *us*?

**Johnson:** One of the key polarities in dealing with racism is paying attention to it at the personal level, the combination of prejudice and power at the personal level. And then there's also the systemic level. Both of those need attention. I have an unconscious bias of white superiority that comes from being raised as a white person in a culture that has white superiority as a cultural reality. And so this unconscious bias—internalized white superiority—will get in the way of me giving equal voice to allowing; being welcoming, curious, and interested in; appreciating all the dimensions that people of color bring from their life experiences. So I'm not likely to consider them for positions of leadership or other things—bias gets in the way.

And in my effort to fight racism, my unconscious bias toward Black people will undervalue their input. It gets in the way of sharing power. That's one kind of bias that gets in the way of being effective in addressing racism and the dominant white culture and the marginalization and systems that it has created—that we have created to perpetuate the imbalance. An unconscious bias also has to do with the unconscious bias for difficulties being problems we need to solve.

**Blackwell:** Polarity thinking empowers us to illuminate false choices. And Black Lives Matter, juxtaposed against all lives matter, is a false choice. Will you talk about how you help people understand those two things through polarity thinking?

**Johnson:** Let's put Black Lives Matter as the two poles—as the upsides. So we've got Black Lives Matter as an upside of one pole, and on the upside of the other pole is all lives matter. Somebody

who listens to Black people and white allies and is looking at it from an either/or perspective hears those advocates saying *only* Black lives matter. *What about white lives? What about other lives? What about my life? Are you saying my life doesn't matter?*

So what gets triggered is the fear. You're saying only Black lives matter, so I'm bringing it back to the pole from an either/or perspective and saying all lives matter as if I am not aware of the unique differential treatment of Black people in this country, that there's something different about the Black experience in the United States. It's like, *I don't see color. I don't see any difference in our history. I don't see any difference of who's dying at what percentage in this country.*

Of course, everybody's life matters. And of course, if it's true that everybody's life matters, then you would pay attention to the fact that Black lives are being dehumanized and battered. And you'd automatically say, "All lives matter—and look what we're doing to Black people. Let's change how we're treating Black people because all lives matter." So the motivation to support Black Lives Matter comes from, at base, the fact that all lives matter. And a polarity map says, "Those of you who are saying all lives matter, we agree. Absolutely." As a matter of fact, that's exactly why we're saying to pay attention to this part of all those lives that matter, because this section is getting short shrift.

We haven't acted as if all lives matter. And we're dealing with the anger, the frustration, the fear, because we have not lived as if all lives matter.

**Blackwell:** Schools have rules and discipline systems. We're seeing discipline systems that lead to Black and brown, Indigenous, and disabled children being forced into the criminal justice system at very early ages. How can teachers and educators use polarity thinking to consider the outcomes of their disciplinary practices, particularly as they relate to vulnerable students and the potential for them to be harmed for life?

**Johnson:** The whole school-to-prison pipeline can start so early. One of the fundamental polarities here is belonging. And the other pole is that behavior counts.

We need to make sure that kids get in touch with consequences, so you have a minimal number of rules that get them thrown out, but you have a lot of minor kinds of things where they learn about consequential thinking. You're trying to keep them out of any kind of penal situation outside of the school. The assumption is we can take care of this in the school. These kids belong here. Behavior matters, so we need to pay attention to that, but they know they are loved. This is not about whether you belong. You can't just not belong because you act up in school or have a tantrum. You belong—period—and we will do everything we can to keep you here. And if we can't, that is a message about inadequacy of the school, not the student.

We need to be more intentional and conscious about sending the message that we want you here, and we need to create a system that can deal with young people who have been harmed by the society out of which they are coming into this school. And we don't want the school to perpetuate the harm. The school needs to be safe place to learn and develop.

**Blackwell:** That's a beautiful notion, Barry. It's also a foundational value proposition of independent schools. Yet, ensuring the health, safety, and well-being of students and adults in our schools is not a given. It's a promissory note that we're called on to live into by eliminating dehumanizing policies, practices, and procedures every day. *And*—we can do this! Your work, your gift of the polarity thinking process, helps show the way. Thank you.

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## **Do You Have a Conversation to Share?**

Have you had a great conversation with a colleague recently that broke down silos or got you thinking about your work in a new way? Have you chatted with someone on (or off) campus that led to an unexpected collaboration? Tell us about it. Do you know of—or are you a part of—a great student–teacher duo? We want to hear about it. Send a brief description to [ismag@nais.org](mailto:ismag@nais.org), and we'll follow up.

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