The Gift of Polarity Thinking
Making Friends with Unsolvable Dilemmas

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CourageWork LLC and
The Center for Courage & Renewal
Increase your ability to manage the 5 “Cs”

- **Complexity** – Seeing the forest and the trees
- **Change** – Convert resistance to change into a resource for stability and change
- **Conflict** – Create win/win outcomes
- **Chronic Issues** – Convert chronic issues into sustainable strengths
- **Cross Cultural Issues** – celebrate and capitalize on differences

Learn

- The value of *both/and* thinking as a supplement to either/or thinking
- To distinguish between problems to solve and polarities to leverage
- How all polarities look and work
- Steps for leveraging polarities well over time
- What polarities are alive in your life and needing attention
Thanks to

Barry Johnson and the team at Polarity Partnerships

polaritypartnerships.com

For their

DUH-HAH brilliance
Dilemmas You Face

Think of one or more key dilemmas in your life and work that:

- ARE IMPORTANT
- ARE ONGOING
- FEEL LIKE THEY INVOLVE A TENSION BETWEEN TWO FORCES, PEOPLE, IDEAS, VALUES etc.

Jot them down.

Share them with a neighbor briefly.
What is a polarity?

When:

1. There are two interdependent sides that both have “good” in them.
2. And yet they are *in tension* with each other.
3. *Both are needed* to reach a higher purpose.
4. If you overdo one side to the neglect of the other, you are guaranteed trouble.
5. The dynamic tension *can never be solved* or resolved – it goes on forever. It’s just a given of life.
Some Key Polarities

- Taking care of self AND taking care of others
- Consistency AND Flexibility: complying with rules or expectations and adapting to unique circumstances
- Fiscal Focus AND Mission or Service Focus
- Challenge AND Support: Encourage independence AND provide support to staff or clients
- Focus on Tasks AND Relationships
- Part AND Whole: needs of the individual person or group AND needs of the larger group or whole system
How is a polarity different from a problem?
How is a polarity different from a problem?

Problems:
- They are not ongoing
- There is an end point.
- They are solvable
- Options can stand alone.
- There is no need to include an alternative for the solution to work.
- Often contain mutually exclusive opposites.

E.g. What copier should we buy? Who should we hire for this job?

Polarities:
- They are ongoing.
- There is no end point.
- They are not solvable.
- Poles must be managed together.
- The alternatives need each other to optimize the situation over time.
- Always contain mutually inclusive opposites.

E.g. How should we structure our work flow? To allow for both autonomy AND collaboration.
Why does it matter to know the difference?

- What happens when you treat something that is a problem as if it were a polarity?
  - You don’t solve it
  - You waste time and energy processing too much
Why does it matter to know the difference?

What happens if you treat something that is a polarity as if it were a problem?

- People get frustrated because the dilemma won’t go away
- People get polarized into warring or opposite camps, sabotage or undermine the “other” side
- You lose the wisdom of the other side when it gives up
- You waste energy and time
- People get discouraged or confused or cynical
- The pendulum swings between extremes
- You don’t achieve your higher purpose
Benefits of “Either/Or”
Problem-solving

1. Identify clear final answers
2. Enjoy the sense of accomplishment that comes through solving a problem
3. Move on to new opportunities and challenges

Benefits of “Both/And”
Tapping Polarities

1. Save time by identifying difficulties that can only be managed, not solved
2. Accelerate desired change by getting the best of both sides
3. Sustain desired change and avoid pendulum swings/vicious cycles

Involve two equally valid and necessary points of view or truths

The boxes are either black or white (not both/and)

The equations are either correct or incorrect (not both/and)

2+2=4 | 2+2=5

Goblet and faces are both/and (not either/or)
Favorite Polarity Quotes

• *The opposite of an ordinary fact is a lie. But the opposite of one profound truth is complemented and given life by another profound truth.* Nils Bohr, the Nobel Award winning physicist

• "*I wake each morning torn between the desire to improve the world and the desire to enjoy it. It makes it hard to plan my day.*" E.B. White

• “*A person should have a piece of paper in each side pocket. On one should be written, "The world was created (just) for me". On the other, "I am originated from only dust and ashes". The trick in life, says the Kotzker Rabbi is to know when to take out which piece of paper!*"
In his last presidential address to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1967, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. defined our contemporary crisis in words that resonate today:

“Power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. And one of the greatest problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites – polar opposites – so that love is identified with a resignation of power, and power with a denial of love.

We’ve got to get this thing right. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands in the way of love. It is precisely this collision of immoral power and powerless morality which constitutes the major crisis of our time.”
Insights from Barry Johnson

If you want to guarantee a change effort will **not** be sustainable, tie it to one pole of a polarity.

If you want a solid platform on which to build a change effort, build it on a polarity – because it’s indestructible. So when we make a mistake, the polarity will be there to “get back on horse again” – this is a real gift. We get grace gift to keep working on it.
Some additional famous polarities
Which ones are alive for you? Stuck? Behind the dilemmas you named earlier?

- Work and Home
- Safety and Risk
- Tradition and Change
- Ideal and Real
- Patience and Urgency
- Accept and Resist
- Plan and Act
- Short Term and Long Range
- Head and Heart
- Honesty and Diplomacy
- Hold on and Let Go
- Rest and Activity
- Autonomy and Collaboration
- Centralized and Collaborative Leadership
- Confidence and Humility
Dynamic

- Polarities are an ongoing and unavoidable energy system… which makes them unsolvable.
- Tapping the upsides leads to generative and sustainable change – a virtuous cycle.
- Mismanaging the polarity (through over-emphasis on either pole to the neglect of its pair) can lead to increasing dysfunction and polarization -- a vicious cycle.
Tapping Polarity Energy Systems

See It

Map It

Tap It

#1 Assess Present Realities

#2 Action Steps

#3 Early Warnings

Track It

Include Key Stakeholders
Early Warnings

Measurable indicators (things you can count) that will let you know that you are getting into the downside of this left pole.

Values = positive results from focusing on the left pole

Fears = negative results from over-focusing on the left pole to the neglect of the right pole

Fears = negative results from over-focusing on the right pole to the neglect of the left pole

Deeper Fear from lack of leverage

Action Steps

How will we gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on this left pole? What? Who? By When? Measures?

Action Steps

How will we gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on this right pole? What? Who? By When? Measures?

The Polarity Map™

Greater Purpose Statement (GPS) – why leverage this polarity?
Guide to “Map It” Step

1. Keep what’s working
2. 
3. 
4. 

1. Respond to changing environment
2. 
3. 
4. 

1. Lack of innovation
2. 
3. 
4. 

1. Burn out
2. 
3. 
4. 

Stability

and

Change

Why?

Positive Results of Focusing on Stability

Neutral or Positive Name of Left Pole

Negative Results of Over-focusing on Stability to the Neglect of Change

Higher Purpose

Positive Results of Focusing on Change

Neutral or Positive Name of Right Pole

Negative Results of Over-focusing on Change to the Neglect of Stability

Deeper Fear
Identify a polarity that has real juice for you

• Name the poles – both sides good
• Fill in the up and down sides of both poles
• Identify the higher purpose and deeper fear
• Quick assessment – which pole are you over or underdoing right now? How do you know? Who might see it differently?
• What action steps would help you get the best of both sides in the future - or pay attention to the neglected pole?
An Application of Polarity Thinking to Conflict

Once we realize we have a polarity which is stuck, there are five steps we can take to get unstuck.

Step 1 -- Identify our opponent's values.
Step 2 -- Identify our opponent's fears.
Step 3 -- Identify our values.
Step 4 -- Re-affirm our opponent's values.
Step 5 -- Affirm the Higher Purpose as the reason to manage the polarity.
Your thoughts, feelings, responses?

- How could this be useful to you?
- Where would you like to go next with polarity thinking for you or your organization?
Thank You

I hope polarity thinking makes your life and the lives of your co-workers, friends and family easier, happier AND more effective. In fact, I hope it makes our WHOLE WORLD more peaceful and equitable.

Stay in touch – let me know if you’d like to bring Polarity Thinking to your team or organization.

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