Polarity Thinking*
Polarity Mapping

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What are Polarities?

Polarities are two equally attractive possibilities that exist in tension with each other such as a “part” (for example a business unit) and a “whole” (for example, the entire organization).

Overemphasis on one pole to the neglect of the other leads to its “downside” and eventually the “upside”, then the “downside” of the other pole.

If not managed well, the polarity cycle is experienced as wild oscillations, leading to wasted time and resources.

Poorly managed polarities lead organizations and individuals to create the future they fear. Well managed polarities help them create the future they desire.
Polarity Thinking

Organizations often think they have a “problem to solve” when what they really have is a “polarity to manage”.

Polarities are values and attributes that come in pairs. Over focus on one leads to focus on the other, which, in turn, leads to vacillation, wasted time and wasted resources. What is wanted is the “best of both”.

When “either-or” answers aren’t clear, it’s because the choices may actually be polarities.

Breathing is like a polarity:
• You can’t decide to do one or the other.
• Breathing in leads to breathing out.
• Breathing out leads to breathing in.
Some Identified Polarities

There are More!

Polarities are interdependent pairs. Neither is intrinsically “better” or “worse” than the other. Over focus on one leads to the other.

People describe polarities in language that is meaningful to them, so different sets of words might describe similar polarities.

Some generalized polarity descriptions, such as “part-whole” or “tight-loose” may also describe more specific situations such as “business unit-the overall organization” or “directive leader-collaborative environment.”

- Action
  - Be Focused
  - Directive Decisions
  - Build Relationship
  - Care For My Business Unit
  - Care Of Customers
  - Centralized
  - Change
  - Clarity
  - Coaching Culture
  - Collaboration
  - Tight
  - Part
- Common Sense
- Competitive
- Creativity
- Customer Service
- Efficiency
- Initiator
- Innovation
- Interdependence
- Long Term
- Mission
- Retain Employees
- Short-term
- Supportive Management
- Tradition
- Traditionalist
- Debate
  - Hang Loose
  - Participative Decisions
  - Get The Job Done
  - Care For Whole Company
  - Care Of Organization
  - Decentralized
  - Stability
  - Flexibility
  - Directive Culture
  - Competition
  - Loose
  - Whole
  - Facts
  - Collaborative
  - Standardization
  - Service To Organization
  - Quality
  - Follower
  - Tradition
  - Self-reliance
  - Short Term
  - Margin
  - Hire New Talent
  - Long-term
  - Evaluative Management
  - Innovation
  - Change Agent
Applications of Polarity Thinking

- Strategic Planning
- Managing “Unsolvable” Problems
- Assessment
- Performance
- Collaboration
- Alignment
- Negotiation
- Team Discussions
- Surfacing Hidden Issues
- Uncovering Hidden Attitudes
- Team and Individual Coaching
- Mediation
The Polarity Map

Polarity Maps are graphic tools that show the upsides and downsides of pairs, warning signs of over focus on either pole, and potential action steps to balance the polarity and reach desired goals.

Travel through the upsides and downsides of each pole is represented by the infinity loop.
Managing Polarity Pairs

The infinity loop traces how well the polarity pair is being managed. Normal “flow” is from the downside of one pole to the upside of the other.

In a well managed polarity, attention is paid to both poles and maximum time is spent in the upsides of the poles. Balanced, more profitable circumstances, are experienced than in the wildly swinging oscillations that come with neglecting one pole or the other and thus spending more time in the downsides of the poles.

Action steps and early warning signs are used to help manage polarities.
Polarity Mapping Facilitates Discussion

Polarity Maps can be used to facilitate discussions about strategy, performance and other issues.

The power of the maps comes from their ability to surface issues and tensions, to do so in a way that honors the validity of different ways of approaching situations, and that builds in mechanisms for both action and reflection.

Maps can be drawn informally on flip charts and filled in by a facilitator as executives or other groups talk about their situations.

They can be created more formally in computer templates. There is also a computerized assessment tool.

Once people understand the concept of polarities—they begin to see interconnected pairs in many facets of their work. They are able to use these insights to clarify and address important issues, to make better decisions and to take more decisive action.

In a facilitated discussion with key stakeholders:
1. Define the difficulty or difficulties
2. Determine relevant polarities
3. Build the polarity map:
   a. Fill in the “higher purpose” and “deeper fear”
   b. Fill in the “upside” of the left pole.
   c. Fill in the “downside of the left pole.
   d. Fill in the “upside” of the right pole.
   e. Fill in the “downside of the right pole.
   f. Fill in the “warning signs”
   g. Fill in the “action steps”
4. For each quadrant, imagine being in the organization this list describes
5. Determine the infinity loop path
6. Assess and determine action
Polarity Map Example: Continuity and Change

**Action Steps**
- How will we gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on the left pole?  What? Why? By When? Measures?
- Make sure everyone understands the core values and knows how to “walk the talk” in their daily work.
- Benchmarking, establishing “what is.”
- Identify and name what is most valued in the status quo.

**Early Warnings**
- Measurable indicators (things you can count) that will let you know you are getting the downsides of this left pole.
- Decrease in suggestions for improvements.
- Decrease in improvements.
- Increase in complaints of boredom.
- Existing ways of doing things are not meeting current needs.
- Increase in concerns from new employees that our systems and equipment are not up to date.

**Continuity AND Change**

**Values = positive results from focusing on the left pole**

- A: We know and live our core values.
- B: We deliver consistency to our customers.
- C: We know what to do most of the time.
- D: We are good at what we do.
- E: People feel good at their jobs.

**Values = positive results from focusing on the right pole**

- A: We are better able to meet changing needs of our customers.
- B: We are taking advantage of new technical advances.
- C: We are trying out new processes for the future.
- D: We are open to new business arrangements and organization.

**Falling Behind**

- Deeper fear from lack of balance.

**Fear = negative results from over-focusing on the left pole in the neglect of the right pole**

- A: Lost traditions.
- B: People not as good at new jobs.
- C: We have changed plans that we shouldn’t have.
- D: We have lost track of proven processes that we need to succeed.
- E: People can’t keep up.

**Action Steps**
- How will we gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on this right pole?  What? Why? By When? Measures?
- Identify the new values needed and help people translate them into their daily work.
- Identify and name what is most valued or desired in the future.
- Establish milestones for improvements.
- Identify stakeholders and identify what is required to get buy in from them.

**Early Warnings**
- Measurable indicators (things you can count) that will let you know you are getting the downsides of this right pole.
- Increase in actions that are not consistent with our historical values.
- Increase in complaints about lack of follow through.
- Increase in complaints about too much change.
- Increase in mistakes without time to learn from them.
Infinity Loop Lets You Track How Polarity is Managed

Well Balanced Polarity
Ready for the Future

Too Much Time in Downsides
Falling Behind

Unbalanced Polarity
Missing Advantages of Change

Unbalanced Polarity
Will Soon Start to Experience the Downside of Change
Getting Unstuck

The Polarity Map can help an organization or group get “unstuck”.

The normal flow from the downside of the left pole is to the upside of the right pole.

Sometimes, though, there is considerable resistance to doing so. The normal movement is effectively blocked. The way out is to “reverse” the flow.

To help people get “unstuck”, change the path of the infinity loop. Instead of trying to go directly to the upside of the right pole when people resist, visit the quadrants as below. Imagine being...

1. first, in the upside of the left pole
2. then take the “bridge” to the downside of the right pole
3. go to the upside of the right pole
4. go to the upside of the left pole
5. finally, revisit the higher purpose
Polarity Map Example: Short Term and Long Term Focus

### Action Steps

**Short Term and Long Term**

**Achieving Success**

- **Values** = positive results from focusing on the right pole
  - A. We consider the long term impact of decisions we make.
  - B. We measure and reward long term success.
  - C. We regularly achieve our long term goals.
  - D. We take the time to plan.
  - E. We are confident we're prepared for the future.

**Short Term**

- **Values** = positive results from focusing on the left pole
  - A. We consider the short term impact of decisions we make.
  - B. We measure and reward short term success.
  - C. We regularly achieve our short term goals.
  - D. We move easily in our established systems.

**Early Warnings**

- There are unexpected long term consequences to decisions we've made.
- We spend all our time on critical short term issues and no time or very little time on forecasting, trend analysis and long term goals.
- People are not making milestones.
- We miss business opportunities.

**Falling Short of Success**

Deeper Flaw from lack of balance
Polarity Map Example: Business Unit and Company

**Fortune 100 Company - USA**

**Action Steps**

**Higher Purpose: Why Balance This Polarity?**

- Synergistic value – achieve the company vision.
- Greater value to company.

**Positive results from focusing on this left pole:**

1. Higher capital authority level (increase amount for BU) and processing speed – Bob and Dave will make recommendation – May 14, 2003
2. Taken a common customer approach with 3-5 selected customers (where we have them between BUs and/or w/ company, work together synergistically) – Buns – May 14, 2003
3. Mary & Ed meet to share customers and have a common sales approach
4. Joint sales training (more sophisticated) – have a joint design discussion
5. Joint development of ingredient systems (look at how we gather a customer about other systems we have access to in the company – work together with the company to figure out how we are going to develop ingredient systems) – SEE COMPANY UPSIDE 5 & 6 GREEN FLAGS

**Early Warnings**

- Measurable indicators (things you can count) that will let you know that you are getting into the downside of the left pole:
  1. We don’t address the duplication of effort (tread line on SGA as a percentage of gross profit)
  2. Platform: the approach; revenue goals are not met
  3. Less knowledge sharing (how measure? Call reports?)

**Action Steps**

**Negative results of over focusing on this left pole to the neglect of the Right pole:**

- More overhead
- Bureaucratic and slow
- Lack of clarity (internally & externally)
- Lack of focus on ingredient sales
- Narrower customer base
- Slower to market slower day of week ingredients
- Less of cash flow
- Less of some specific capabilities or individuals (specialty ingredient skills)

- Deeper fear from Lack of Balance?
- Some of the existing BU’s will not exist

**Positive results from focusing on this right pole:**

1. Synergy/coordination
2. Strategic advantage (distinctive)
3. Greater leverage of capabilities and broader skill set
4. Integrator
5. New revenue streams
6. Insulation of ingredient sales
7. Different customers relations
8. More emphasis on innovations (IP)
9. Less capital intensive
10. Knowledge generation/sharing

**Early Warnings**

- Measurable indicators (things you can count) that will let you know that you are getting into the downside of the Right pole:
  1. Meeting audit (measure of value, speed of decision making)
  2. BU revenue goals are not met
  3. Shrinking BU customer base
  4. Engagement survey “that relates to lack of clarity”
Polarity Map Example—Information Sharing and Information Security

Action Steps
1. Marketing (understand imperative to share)
2. Training (holistically to change)
3. Integrate security solutions into sharing activities
4. Implement ISF Community Information Security framework (I-SF) standards
5. Implement good governance and oversight
6. Implement the DoD Not-Confidant Data and Services Strategy by mission area and community
7. Implement ABAC

Early Warnings
- Measurable indicators (things you can count) that will let you know that you are getting into the downside of the left pole.
  1. Loss of Personality Information (PII) up
  2. Successful infiltration/data exfiltration up

Values = positive results of focus on the left pole
- Innovation
- Creativity
- Agility
- Attracting not generation
- Workforce
- Collaboration
- Effective Decision Making
- Knowledge Management
- Synchronization
- Increased National Security (Awareness)

Values = positive results of focus on the right pole
- Protected
- Reduced loss
- More costly for attacker
- Increased National Security (Protection)
- Identity Protection
- Data Integrity
- Continuity of Operations
- Integrated Security and Risk Management

Information Sharing and Information Security

Irrelevance and Insecurity
Deeper I car from lack of balance

Greater Purpose Statement (GPS)—why balance this polarity?

Action Steps
1. Marketing (understanding the value of security)
2. Training (practicing good security hygiene)
3. Providing good security tools
4. Implement good governance and oversight
5. Develop better metrics to measure security vulnerabilities
6. Implement ABAC

Early Warnings
- Measurable indicators (things you can count) that will let you know that you are getting into the downside of the right pole.
  1. Information in newly fielded systems not visible/accessible outside of the enclave
  2. Time to get required information up
  3. Access to information denied