

BUILDING & SUSTAINING LEADERSHIP GREATNESS THROUGH THE POWER OF “AND”!

By Barry Johnson and Margaret Seidler, Polarity Management Associates

The Polarity Management™ model and set of principles are a user-friendly way to deal with all polarities in life. Polarities are ongoing, chronic issues that are unavoidable, unsolvable, and indestructible. Attempting to address them with traditional problem solving skills only makes things worse. There is significant competitive advantage for those leaders, teams, or organizations that can distinguish between a problem to solve and a polarity to manage and are effective with both.

Polarity Management increases in value as the system or issue:

- Increases in complexity
- Increases in diversity
- Increases in speed of change
- Increases in resistance to change

Polarity Management can help to:

- Simplify the complexity without being simplistic
- Convert intuitive wisdom into strategic action
- Address multiple facets of leadership
- Bring clarity to leadership and other organizational dilemmas
- Capitalize on diversity without alienating the diverse groups
- Increase the speed, attainability and sustainability of change efforts
- Address chronic issues
- Reach and sustain top performance

Effective Leaders Manage Complexity and Ambiguity

Through a combination of experience, intuition, and hard-earned wisdom, effective leaders have developed the ability to look within complex issues, identify opposites in tension and capitalize on that tension. These interdependent opposites are sometimes called dilemmas or paradoxes. We call them polarities. We all have a degree of ability in managing polarities because they are such a central part of our daily lives. We have an implicit understanding that there are many opposites in tension in our lives. Yet most leaders do not have an explicit model and set of principles to both enhance their skills with these issues and to collaborate with others to intentionally manage them better. The lack of such a model and set of principles undermines our ability to teach this core leadership competency to others.

A Multipurpose “Swiss Army Knife” for the Leader’s Toolbox

The Polarity Management™ map and set of principles provide a user-friendly resource for effectively addressing organizational complexity and the dilemmas within that complexity. The power of the Polarity Management™ Map is found in its ability to convert what is complex and hard to define into something that is simple to see while raising awareness to a deeper level.

Like a Swiss Army Knife – the Maps have multiple applications in a variety of situations. For example, they have been used as a core competency in leadership development; in change efforts as a way to

convert resistance to change into a resource for change; to build cross-cultural competence, both domestic and international; in mergers and acquisitions as a way to capitalize on the best of two or more cultures; as a key to integrated healthcare; in identifying corporate values, which are best seen as pairs in tension; in strategic planning; and, in South Africa to assist in the ending of Apartheid. The situations above have a number of things in common:

1. They involve complex issues at many levels of system.
2. There are key, underlying polarities (dilemmas, paradoxes) within the difficulties.
3. The “problem solving” mindset, alone, is not up to the challenge these issues present.
4. Identifying and intentionally managing one or more key polarities has made a big difference.

A Case Study from Barry of “The Expansive Leader”

While interviewing executive team members to identify current organizational issues, I was told by one executive, “Barry, if you really want to make a contribution here, I suggest you just leave as soon as possible and don’t look back.” I inquired as to whether there was an option “B.” He smiled and said, “It’s nothing personal, Barry, it’s what you represent. You are the most recent in a long line of people who have been invited in here by Don (the CEO) because he wanted to try out the latest fad that caught his interest. We keep starting one thing after another and never finish any of them. We are overwhelmed and frustrated with unfinished projects all over the place. So you are a part of the problem.

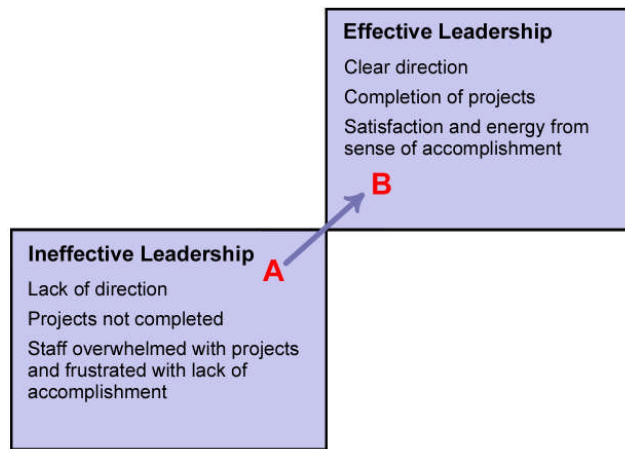
“If you are serious about helping us out, I can think of one thing that would really help. If you could get Don to be more focused and provide some clear direction. We need to choose a few projects and make sure they are completed. Then people wouldn’t be so overwhelmed and would have a sense of completion and accomplishment. Can you help us get Don to do that?”

Since I was asked by Don to come in and help apply Polarity Management to a few key issues, I used this issue to explain Polarity Management to the 3 executive team members who had raised it. I went to a flip chart and summarized what they had been saying about Don by drawing the simple Model One below.

What the 3 executives were asking is that I help them get Don to move from area A, which was seen as the problem, to area B, which was their solution. Don would then become a more effective leader.

When you look at Model One, it is quite obvious that an organization with the problems in A could clearly benefit from moving to the solutions found in situation B. This is a very understandable change strategy which is based on a problem solving mindset using “gap analysis.” First you describe the present state in negative terms and declare it the problem = A. Then you describe an improved future state in positive terms and call it the solution = B. Finally, you decide on a strategy to bridge the gap between A and B which is symbolized by the arrow.

Model One



Polarity Management Map™ **

**Polarity Map available in Polarity Management, Identifying and Managing Unsolvables, HRD Press, 1992.

When I put the model on the flip chart, they agreed that it summarized their statements. I told them this situation was a good example of a polarity to manage. I then indicated that if it were treated like a problem to solve, with B as the solution, efforts to get Don to area B would meet with significant resistance and that, even if they could get Don to agree to go to area B, he wouldn't go there.

They looked surprised and said, "Who have you been talking to?" I said, "No one but you 3, so far." They said, "You have described exactly what happened. Two years ago, we had a meeting with Don and told him about our frustrations with lack of direction and too many uncompleted projects and the need for direction and completion and he agreed to move to B, like you've written it on the chart. But in the last two years we haven't moved an inch in that direction. How did you know that was going to happen?"

I told them that, from a polarity perspective it was quite predictable. The problem with the model they were using was with what was missing. It was accurate. If you have a lack of direction, you need direction. If projects aren't completed, you need to complete them. The limit of the model was that it was incomplete. It was based on the assumption that this was a problem to solve when it is a polarity (dilemma, paradox) to manage. What was needed was to see the whole picture.

Model Two, below, is a polarity map. This was the mental model I was using as I was hearing them describe their problem and their solution.

The two poles, describing the underlying tension they were dealing with could be called "Being Expansive" (E) and "Being Focused" (F). Don liked being expansive and they wanted him to be more focused. The reason Don would not go to the upside of Being Focused (B) is because he strongly valued the upside of Being Expansive (C). He liked being flexible, innovative and exploring new ideas and opportunities. And, the stronger his value for the upside of Being Expansive (C) the stronger will be his fear of the downside of Being Focused (D). He will do anything to avoid getting in a rut with lack of innovation and creativity leading to boredom for him and the staff.

Notice that “Effective Leadership” (G) moved from being in area B, as in Model One, to being on top of the model with an arrow pointing to it which separates the two halves of the polarity map. The goal of effective leadership is not to get Don to area B as the solution. The goal is to get the upside of Being Expansive **AND** the upside of Being Focused which, in combination move toward Effective Leadership. Also, “Ineffective Leadership,” (H) moved from being in area A, as in Model One, to being at the bottom of the polarity map. This indicates that there are two ways, within this example, to become an ineffective leader – over-concentrating on Being Expansive or on Being Focused will get you in trouble.

Model Two



Once the executives saw the larger picture and began to understand the dynamics of how polarities work, it changed the whole conversation and approach to addressing their concerns with Don. Paradoxically, if you want more focus, you have to embrace the benefits of being expansive and be clear that you are not rejecting expansiveness. Looking at the map together, the shared challenge is to get the upside of both over time. That is what it means to manage a polarity well.

Competitive Advantage

There is significant competitive advantage for leaders and organizations that can both solve problems and manage polarities. The research is very clear on this. Leaders and organizations that tap the power of polarities (dilemmas, paradox) out perform those that don't. Below are a few examples:

- In Managing on the Edge, Richard Tanner Pascale studied the 43 companies identified in, In Search of Excellence five years after the original research. He discovered that 14 companies retained their

“Excellent” rating and the 29 that did not. The key factor that distinguished the 14 from the 29 was that they managed 7 polarities better. He calls it “managing contention.”

- In Built to Last, Jim Collins and Jerry Porras call it, “The Genius of the ‘AND’.” This central distinction existed in 18 “Silver” companies that outperformed the stock market from 1926 to 1990 by a factor of 2, and the 18 “Gold” companies that outperformed the stock market during that same period by a factor of 15! In Collins’ next book, Good to Great, elements common to the 11 selected companies are described in terms of the “AND” they manage either explicitly or intuitively.
- In Charting the Corporate Mind, Charles Hampden-Turner calls it, “re-resolution of dilemmas.” His research repeatedly shows that organizations effectively managing key organizational dilemmas results in better bottom line performance than those not managing the same dilemmas well.
- In Building the Bridge as You Walk on It, Robert Quinn identifies the eight polarities essential in describing “the Fundamental State of Leadership.”

The Phenomenon is Everywhere

The phenomenon of interdependent opposites (dilemma, paradox, polarity) has been written about in philosophy and religion for over 4,000 years. It is a central reality in all of life and all human systems. It has only been in the last 50 years that it has been explicitly identified by business and industry as an important dimension to pay attention to because tapping the power of this dimension of life gives a competitive advantage. Blake and Mouton were early contributors with their grid in the 1950’s.

All of us focusing on these wonderful phenomena have been saying that it is both a core leadership competency and a core organizational capacity. As leaders we need to use our head and our heart. We need to show all people basic respect as human beings regardless of performance and we need to show respect for good performance. We need to listen and talk. We need to manage and to lead.

Polarity Management Associates suggest that leaders constantly manage inherent tension within these polarities:

Task AND Relationship
Candor AND Diplomacy
Responsibility AND Freedom
Guidance AND Tolerance
Confidence AND Humility
Critical Analysis AND Encouragement
Control AND Empowerment
Grounded AND Visionary
Structure AND Flexibility
Logic AND Creativity
Individual AND Work Group
Planning AND Implementation
Decisiveness AND Mindfulness
Conditional Respect AND Unconditional Respect

It is not a question as to whether you have any polarities in your personal and organizational life. Polarities are everywhere and they have been everywhere since the beginning of time. What is an important question is. “How we can learn to see them more clearly and tap the wonderful potential within key polarities in our life for something constructive and life enhancing rather than have the inherent tension between the poles become destructive and life destroying?”

More than One Model

There are a host of bright, compassionate people who have been doing some very creative thinking about this phenomenon of interdependent opposites (dilemma, paradox, polarity). Our experiences have led to some different models. In each case the desire is to create more effective organizations in all dimensions of effectiveness: good places to own, good places to lead, good places to work, good places to supply, good places with whom to be a customer, and good places to have in the community.

And it goes beyond just effective organizations. It is about the quality of life with our loved ones, our spouses and families. It is about our relationships as nations and unique groups within nations.

What is important about this growing group of people attempting to help us tap this phenomenon beyond the helpful models that are emerging is that we are calling attention to the phenomenon of interdependent opposites and saying, “This is important. It has great potential for every aspect of your life. It is worth looking into.”

Summary

- The research is clear, those organizations that are better at tapping the potential of interdependent opposites (the Genius of the AND) out-perform those that are not so good at it.
- Part of what makes good leaders good is that they have learned through some combination of intuition, experience, and wisdom to tap the potential of interdependent opposites.
- Polarities are everywhere. You have been dealing with them all your life and will continue to deal with them all your life. The only question is, “How well?”
- Polarity Management™ is one user friendly model and set of principles to help you:
 1. Distinguish between problems you can solve with traditional problem solving skills and polarities (dilemmas, paradoxes) which require an alternative approach.
 2. Be intentional and collaborative in managing these polarities effectively over time by using a shared model and set of principles which apply to all polarities.
 3. Increase the speed, attainability and sustainability of change efforts.
 4. Tap the wisdom of resistance in ourselves or in the system.
 5. Assess how well we are managing any polarity.
 6. Identify polarity patterns within complexity to make it more manageable.
 7. Address conflicts often wrapped around polarities.
 8. Tap cross-cultural differences as a resource.