

# Managing “Unsolvable” Problems

Recently I attended a planning retreat for the Charleston Education Foundation. In a breakout group, our facilitator, Bill Youngblood, asked us to ponder this question: “Should the Foundation maintain its **focused** Mission to create Smaller Learning Communities in schools or should the Foundation begin to address **broad** community educational issues?” Well, a great debate began, and then, I recognized this issue called for a different way of thinking to address it, that we were discussing a **polarity to be managed and that requires “both/and” rather than “either/or” thinking.** The Foundation could choose to **both** retain its focus **and** take on some additional educational issues, not all.

Have you ever had mounting concerns about a work issue, implemented a solution, only to find that you’ve created another problem? Well, you may be trying to solve an “unsolvable” problem. You may be addressing a polarity not suitable for traditional problem solving. So what are polarities, what is Polarity Management, and how can recognizing and managing them help an organization or community?

**What are Polarities?** Polarities are interdependent opposites which work best when both are present to balance each other. Polarities are on-going; have no end point; are not solvable; and need each other over time to optimize a situation.

**What is Polarity Management?** Some organization challenges are polarities to manage rather than problems to solve. Knowing the difference between the two is critical to successful leadership. Polarity Management involves moving from focusing on one pole as the problem and the other as the solution, “either/or” thinking, to seeking value and pitfalls at both poles, “both/and” thinking. Polarity Management, at its finest, helps organizations get the best of both poles while minimizing downsides.

**Common organization polarities (you need the best of both to succeed over time.)**

- Individual *and* Team
- Clarity *and* Flexibility
- Stability *and* Change
- Directive Management *and* Participative Management
- Centralized *and* Decentralized
- Critical Analysis *and* Encouragement
- Cost Reduction *and* Quality Improvement

### **Polarities applied to some community issues**

- Quality Growth (Stability *and Change* polarity to develop “both/and” thinking between no growth and growth)
- Successful Port of Charleston (Stability *and Change* polarity to develop “both/and” thinking between no port expansion and port expansion)
- Affordable Housing (Part *and Whole* polarity between individual rights and social concern)
- Economic Development (Part *and Whole* polarity between local development and regional development)

**How can Polarity Management help?** With the benefit of *both/and thinking*, you increase your effectiveness in handling complex issues and dilemmas, in addressing on-going problems and by radically reducing employee resistance to change.

**How to use Polarity Management?** Last year I used Polarity Management with a senior leadership group trying to determine whether to move from a decentralized to centralized service structure. Normally, this group would have argued their opinions about the right way vs. the wrong way for days! Instead, we used Polarity Management to make sure that the interdependence of the poles was visible. Then, in a very systematic way, each leader had an opportunity to comment and reflect on the upsides and downsides of the polarity. The result, a thoroughly explored discussion and a decision that was supported by all!

To learn more about the value of *both/and thinking*, to determine whether you have problems to solve or polarities to manage, I suggest a visit to this website, [www.polaritymanagement.com](http://www.polaritymanagement.com).

*Margaret Seidler*  
*Consultant & Master Trainer*  
*1260 Winchester Drive*  
*Charleston, SC 29407*  
*843-573-3485*  
[margaret@margaretseidler.com](mailto:margaret@margaretseidler.com)

[www.margaretseidler.com](http://www.margaretseidler.com)