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INTRODUCTION TO POLARITY MANAGEMENT

Both/and thinking allows leaders to be more successful during times of ambiguity, complexity, and rapid change. This is in the realm of Complex Systems, where more and more of a leader's time is spent. **Polarity Management**, originally developed by Barry Johnson, is a powerful way for individuals, groups and systems to grow in this direction.

What is a polarity?

- A polarity is a pair of interdependent positive concepts that need to work together for sustainable and optimal effectiveness, such as **Consistency & Flexibility**.
- This is in contrast to opposites with one positive and one negative pole such as **Generous & Selfish, Strong & Weak, and Confident & Insecure**.
- Leaders often have a positive view of one side of a polarity and a negative view of the other, or at least are **biased** toward one side. That is, one side is **privileged** and the other becomes discounted, devalued, judged or ignored.

For example, in the polarity of **Individual Focus & Contextual Focus**, some leaders over-privilege the Individual side. They see everything in terms of individual accountability, and see people who focus on organizational culture as making excuses for poor performance. Less frequent are those who over-privilege organizational responsibility and then do not hold individuals accountable for their performance.

Wars are fought in organizations over the **Stability & Change** polarity, especially in times of change and transition.

- **Tradition Bearers** focus their attention on the strength of what is already working (Stability) and are afraid of the downside of Change that they see as Chaos. They might say, "Don't throw out the baby with the bathwater! If it's not broken, don't fix it! We're already doing well! Slow down!"

- On the other hand, **Crusaders** focus their attention on what needs to change, and are afraid of the downside of Consistency that they see as Stagnancy. “If we don’t change we’ll perish! Can’t you see that we’re at risk here?!”
- One of the most important Change Management perspectives is seeing the wisdom in both perspectives and being aware that the sustainable success of the organization depends on the effective integration of both.

Why are polarities important?

- Some leadership issues are simply problems to solve. A right answer can be reached through sufficient thought, such as what software program to choose for a particular application.
- However, most leadership problems involve more complexity than that, where the outcome isn’t predictable, and frequently require the ongoing management of tension between two or more seemingly opposite but nevertheless interdependent values. If leaders don’t recognize polarities and the value each pole brings, their solutions and their systems will be less effective and sustainable over time.
- For most leadership situations **both/and** thinking in order to optimally lead the organization forward.

Another polarity example is **Reflection & Action**. It’s important for leaders, their teams and their organizations to make time to step back and consider options. It’s also important for them to be actively engaged in action.

- What happens when they over-do Reflection and pay insufficient attention to Action? They just sit around talking and productivity suffers, while judging those who rush into action.
- What happens when they over-do Action and pay insufficient attention to Reflection? They stay very busy, work long hours, but often are working inefficiently or even on the wrong things, addressing symptoms rather than root causes, while judging those who are taking the time to reflect as “just talking when there’s work to get done.”
- The most effective leaders, teams and organizations see the tension between poles of a polarity as requiring ongoing management over time. Sometimes more attention is appropriately paid to one pole, sometimes more to the other, and anywhere in between. They monitor when they get into the downside of either one (in the example of **Reflection & Action**, frantic busy-ness or analysis paralysis). They understand that there isn’t a “right” answer. They also understand that the poles of a polarity, like **Reflection & Action**, are interdependent and need each other in order to optimize the effectiveness of either one and the system. They are interrelated parts of a greater whole.

Another example of a polarity that tends to not be managed well in organizations is **Advocacy & Inquiry**. In order to have an effective dialogue and optimize organizational results, it is essential to balance Advocacy (taking a strong stand) with Inquiry (asking questions of others to understand their perspective, including making upward feedback safe). Similarly, high performance organizations effectively manage the tensions of **Individual Action & Collaboration** and **Guidance & Freedom**.

Do most leaders manage polarities well?

- In a word, no. They tend to over-value one and neglect or fear or devalue the other. This leads them to make overly simplistic decisions that sub-optimize productivity and engagement.
- For example, there is a polarity **Forceful & Enabling**. Forceful leaders provide clarity of direction, hold people accountable, and are willing to take a strong stand. Enabling leaders listen well, empower, and support. Most leaders over-do one of these poles and under-do the other, and then use language to support that imbalance. It is common for organizational cultures to reward favoring Forceful over Enabling, yet both quality and engagement suffer as a result.

Leaders can build their capacity to manage polarities effectively by:

- Learning to draw polarity maps to help them examine their own thinking, as well as using polarity maps with their teams. From an adult development perspective, polarity maps are a powerful **scaffolding technique**, building the capacity for cognitive complexity over time. When teams build a relevant polarity map prior to discussing a complex issue the quality of their thinking is at least temporarily raised, as is the quality of the ensuing dialogue.
- Examining the wisdom embedded in what may be interpreted as the undesirable or opposite pole in a polarity that they or their context may reinforce, and the potential downside of what is currently being privileged, especially when it's over-done at the expense of the other.
- Examining their own biases and assumptions, and those of the organizational culture, because most organizational cultures are “lopsided” in privileging one side and discounting the other.
- Understanding that both poles of a polarity need to be optimized for sustainable operational excellence and a high performance system, and that each pole requires the integration of the other side in order to bring out the wisdom of both poles. This is a **dynamic tension** to be managed over time, not a problem to be solved.

- Understanding that over-privileging one pole over another will also jeopardize their preferred pole over time.
- Seeing that the goal is to optimize the wisdom and gifts of both poles while minimizing the downside of each.
- Recognizing that “ambidextrous” leaders will be more likely to apply the right solution at the right time, while leaders who over-privilege one pole will over-apply that pole even when that does not lead to optimal results.
- Recognizing that either/or fights, stemming from either/or thinking, push the organization into the lower aspects of both poles.

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