

Polarity Management

A Summary Introduction

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Polarity Management – A Summary Introduction

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Polarity Management – A Summary Introduction

Overview

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 and unsolvable. 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:

- Simplify the complexity without being simplistic
- Capitalize on diversity without alienating the diverse groups
- Provide predictability and stability amidst accelerating change
- Convert resistance to change to a resource for sustainable, ongoing change-ability

A fundamental question to ask when encountering a difficulty is: “Is this a problem we can ‘solve,’ or is it an ongoing polarity we must manage well?” If it is a polarity you must manage, applying traditional problem solving skills will increase the problem rather than help it. The Polarity Management model and set of principles will help you distinguish between Solvable Problems and Polarities and help you effectively manage those polarities most important to your organization’s success.

The value of Either/Or Problem Solving.

1. Definition = “Problems to solve” are those with 1 right answer or 2 or more right answers that are independent.
2. Problems with 1 right answer are essential for one generation to pass key, knowledge elements of its culture on to the next generation. Below are five elements of culture and a corresponding “Either/or” problem (test question) we are likely to give our children in an effort to assess their understanding of the subject.

Language – How do you spell _____?

Mathematics – $4+4 =$ _____?

History – The first president of the United States was _____?

Science – Why do apples fall down off trees rather than up? _____?

Morals – According to the 10 commandments, killing is: Right _____ Wrong _____

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All of the above, academic type “problems” have 1 right answer. No culture can teach its language, mathematics, history, science or morals without using primarily single answer, problems. They are absolutely essential. It is difficult to overstate their importance, power and influence in the lives of those growing up in any culture. No single answer problems, no culture.

3. There are 5 positive results from getting the “**single, right answer**” to questions in the above disciplines:

You learn essential pieces of your culture and thereby gain membership in the culture.
You experience “success” and rewards = A grades, high A.C.T. Scores, get into college.
You get “closure,” and end to the search. As any problem is solved, $4+4 = 8$, you experience an end to that problem which frees you up to tackle the next problem: What is $3 \times 3 = \underline{\quad}$?

You learn your culture's basics of right and wrong, its definition of morality.
You eliminate the “world of wrong alternatives.” This is a very powerful and yet subtle result from getting the right answer.

For example, when you know that $4 + 4 = 8$, you know that all the other possible answers are wrong. This is a great relief. You do not have to worry about the millions of other, potential “right” numbers because all of them are wrong. If Washington was the first president of the USA, all other possible names (Jefferson, Franklin, etc.) are wrong.

4. There are 5 negative results from rejecting “Either/Or” Problem Solving:

You don't learn essential pieces of your culture or gain membership in the culture
Many “successes” are not available
May not get closure – and end to the search
May become amoral
May be overwhelmed with the “world of possible alternatives” and become indecisive.

5. 95-99% of the problems we are asked to solve in formal education are problems with a single right answer. Of the remaining 1-5%, virtually all of them are problems with more than 1 right answer that are **independent**. These are multiple option questions in which many of the options are valid, independent “solutions.” For example:

How can you get to the top of this mountain? There could be several ways to get there but they are independent: 5 different foot trails, a road, a tram, a helicopter, etc. All would be “right” answers. The answers are independent. If an avalanche wiped out the road and 3 foot trails, you could still get to the top of the mountain using 1 of the remaining options. The remaining ways are independent of those blocked by the avalanche. Getting to the top by helicopter is independent of the closed trails.

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The value of Either/Or Problem Solving - Summary

“Problems to solve” have 1 right answer (the vast majority of problems in formal education), or 2 or more right answers that are independent (virtually all of the remaining problems in formal education).

Traditional Problem Solving is here to stay. It is essential for one generation to pass key, knowledge elements of its culture on to the next generation.

Regardless of our culture, such a high percentage of our education “problems” have a single right answer, we all tend to respond to difficulties at work and home from an Either/Or Problem Solving orientation. We come by this tendency to look automatically for the “right answer” honestly. It has been and will continue to be an invaluable resource for work and life.

All of the above is intended to appreciate how important either/or thinking is and how strong is our tendency to use it whenever we experience a difficulty. The above is also intended to make absolutely clear that, in my enthusiasm for Polarity Management, you do not get the message that I am rejecting either/or thinking. Polarity Management is a supplement to either/or thinking not a replacement.

The value of Polarity Management.

1. Definition – Polarities have 2 or more right answers that are **interdependent**.
2. The managing of polarities is essential for one generation to pass key, socialization elements of its culture on to the next generation. These come in the form of social guidelines described as, “How to get along.” Or , “How to survive.” For example:

We teach our children to share. The process of sharing is a polarity issue because it involves 2, interdependent, right answers to the problem: “In my relationship with this childhood friend, should I be concerned about her, or should I be concerned about myself?”

If I just take care of her and neglect myself, it won’t be a very satisfactory relationship. If I just take care of myself and neglect her, it won’t be a very satisfactory relationship. Sharing is a response to a polarity. In a relationship, we need to pay attention to our own needs **and** we need to pay attention to the other’s needs.

You are a parent during a holiday season in which each of your 3 children is to receive a gift. Should you give each one something that is unique to them and responds to their interests and desires at the moment? Or, should you pay attention to giving gifts of approximately equal value so they will all feel that they were treated equally? This is another polarity in which you have 2 right answers that are interdependent. We need to both respond to the uniqueness of each child **and** treat them equally. Either choice, alone, will undermine the family over time.

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Clearly these socialization guidelines come to us from our parents, teachers, and other adult leaders as a part of growing up. They are not identified as “problems” like the thousands of single right answer questions required to learn spelling, math, science etc. But they represent a whole set of difficulties we learn to manage through social guidance, intuition and experience.

Because we are not tested on polarity type difficulties in the classroom, we don’t tap this intuitive and experiential wisdom when faced with a “problem” at work or home. Whenever we experience a “problem,” our problem solving mindset kicks in and we start looking for “the right answer.” The result is we tend not to tap the usefulness of polarity thinking for those difficulties for which it is the best resource.

3. There is significant competitive advantage for organizations that can both solve problems and manage polarities. The research is very clear on this. Organizations that tap the power of polarities out perform those that don’t. I will share three examples below.

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, Collins and Porras call it, “The Genius of the ‘AND’.” This was a central distinction between the 18 “Silver” companies that outperformed the stock market for the period 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! The Gold companies tapped the power of polarities = “The Genius of the ‘AND’.”

In Charting the Corporate Mind, Charles Hampden-Turner calls it, “re-solution 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.

The value of Polarity Management - Summary

Polarities to manage have 2 or more right answers that are interdependent.

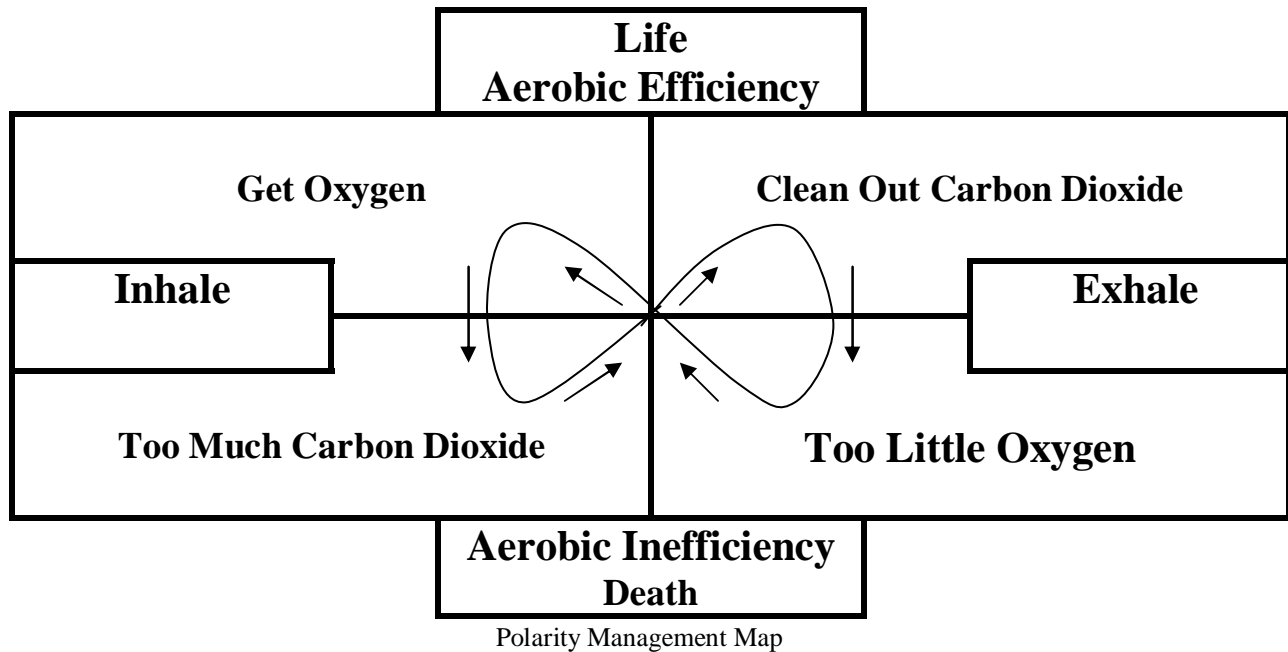
Managing polarities is essential for one generation to pass key, socialization elements of its culture on to the next generation.

Because virtually all of our “problems” in formal education have one right answer, we automatically shift into that way of thinking when a “problem” occurs at work or home. When we use our problem solving skills to address a polarity, we make the issue worse.

The research is clear. There is an extreme competitive advantage to being able to supplement either/or thinking with both/and thinking. Both combined will outperform either alone.

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Breathing as a metaphor for all Polarities



1. Breathing is a handy way to summarize and remember how all polarities look (their structure) and how they all work (their dynamics). Knowing how they look can help you identify what is missing when you are exploring a difficult polarity issue. Having all 8 pieces to the puzzle can help you see the whole picture. Knowing how they work can help you strategically plan actions and anticipate outcomes.
2. Structure - How Polarities Look. There are 8 pieces to the “map.”

Two “neutral” boxes, at either end of the central, horizontal axis (Inhale and Exhale).

Two “upside” boxes above the neutral names in which you put the positive results of focusing on each of the poles (The positive result of Inhaling is you Get Oxygen. The positive result of Exhaling is you Clean Out Carbon Dioxide.)

Two “downside” boxes below the neutral names in which you put the negative results of over-focusing on one pole to the neglect of the other. (The negative result of focusing on Inhaling to the neglect of Exhaling is Too Much Carbon Dioxide. The negative result of over-focusing on Exhaling to the neglect of Inhaling is Too Little Oxygen).

The box on top is for the Higher Purpose. This contains the answer to the question, “Why invest in managing this polarity?” The answer goes beyond getting the upside of each pole. With breathing, one answer could be to improve Aerobic Efficiency. Another, more basic purpose could be Life itself.

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The box on the bottom is for the Deeper Fear. This is usually the opposite of the Higher Purpose and represents the worst case situation if the problem is not managed. With breathing, one answer could be Aerobic Inefficiency. A more extreme consequence would be Death.

3. Dynamics – How Polarities Work. If you follow your own breathing process and read through the four large quadrants, you will be able to experience the normal flow of all polarities.
 - A. Inhale deeply and hold your breath. Notice how it feels good at first as you get fresh oxygen.
 - B. As you hold your breath, you quickly start to experience the downside of inhaling alone = too much carbon dioxide. The longer you hold your inhalation, the more attractive exhaling becomes. So you
 - C. Exhale to get rid of the CO₂ and it feels good – at first.
 - D. But, as you hold your breath, you quickly start to experience the downside of exhaling alone = a lack of oxygen.
4. Organization Application. The breathing metaphor may seem simple and obvious, and it is. That is its beauty. Let's substitute centralization for inhaling and decentralization for exhaling and then think about multi-million dollar fights over which is the best strategy for the future. Inhaling and exhaling are a polarity to manage. It has 2 right answers which are interdependent. You can not choose inhaling as the one right answer (either/or thinking) and be successful over time. You must choose both and capitalize on each.

The same is true of centralization and decentralization. They are a polarity to manage and either/or thinking alone will only create unnecessary confusion, conflict, and resistance. No matter which side “wins” in a power struggle between them, the organization will loose.

Breathing as a metaphor for all Polarities - Summary

There are 8 parts to the Polarity Map. It is helpful to see the “whole picture.”

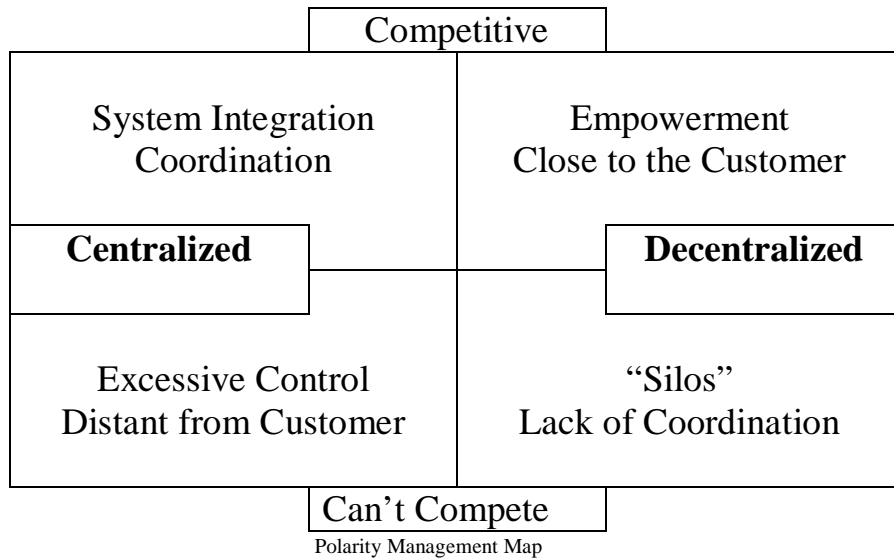
There is a natural flow from the downside of one pole to the upside of the other. After moving into the upside of the opposite pole the system, over time, will reach its limits and move toward the downside of that pole. This creates natural pressure to self correct by moving to the upside of the original pole. This flow looks like an infinity loop which is a helpful symbol because polarities are ongoing. To “solve” them is to learn how to manage them well over time.

There are two forces contributing to the shift from one pole to the other: the increased pressure from the downside of one pole and the increased attractiveness of the upside of the opposite pole. For example, Inhale and hold your breath. The longer you hold your breath, the greater the pressure from the downside of inhaling and the more attractive exhaling becomes. The more an organization has focused on centralization for a long period of time, the greater will be the pressure to decentralize and the more attractive will be the benefits of decentralization.

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Managing well and managing poorly

1. A well-managed polarity is one in which you capitalize on the inherent tensions between the two poles. You get the benefits of both upsides and the synergies between them. The results are that you fulfill more and more of your higher purpose. In the map below you would have solid System Integration and Coordination **and** increasing Empowerment of everyone involved and being Close to the Customer. Capitalizing on this polarity would give you a sustainable competitive advantage, especially over organizations that were treating this as a problem to solve.



2. A polarity is managed poorly when you over-focus on one pole to the neglect of the other. This is likely to occur when the issue is seen as an either/or problem. Remember, with a single right answer problem ($4+4=8$), if you are right, those who disagree with you are wrong. This leads to such mottoes as, “Lead, follow, or get out of the way!” If you think decentralization is the “Right” thing to do, and you have the power to overcome those who disagree, you can force the organization to decentralize. But decentralizing to the neglect of centralization will result in too many Silos and Lack of Coordination. The deeper concern will be that you Can't Compete.

This issue could be poorly managed by over-focusing on the centralized pole if that were the preferred pole of those with most power. You would then find yourself in the downside of the centralized pole with Excessive Control and Distant from your Customer. The deeper concern is the same, you Can't Compete. A good decentralization effort requires an effective centralization effort, and the reverse. Thorough inhaling requires thorough exhaling.

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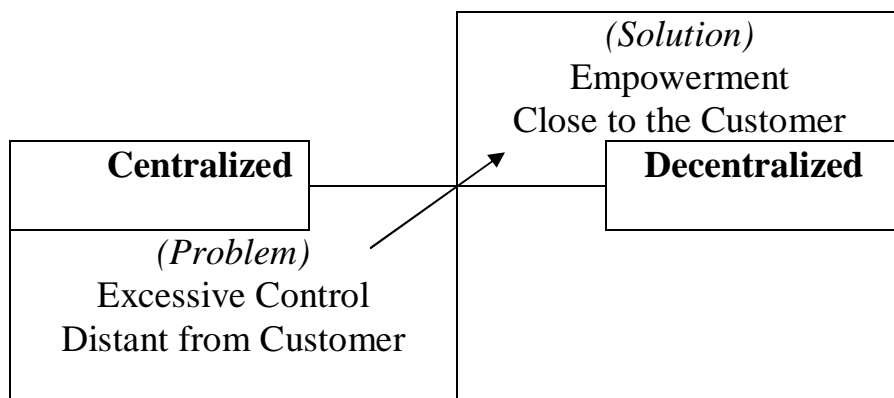
Managing well and managing poorly - Summary

It is possible to manage a polarity well. When you do, you maximize both upsides while minimizing both downsides. This helps you attain and sustain your higher purpose.

It is possible to manage a polarity poorly. This is what happens when the issue is seen as a problem to solve in which those in power are able to keep a focus on one pole to the neglect of the other. In a power struggle over poles of a polarity, you will find yourself in the downside of “winner’s” preferred pole. With polarities, over time, there is no such thing as win/lose, there is only win/win or lose.

Why we use Either/Or Thinking for Polarities and why it doesn’t work.

1. When we experience something as a “problem,” our minds automatically go to the hundreds of thousands (to be conservative) of “problems” we were asked to solve throughout our education. Virtually all of them were either/or and solving them is what got you ahead. It got you good grades and contributes to your being a success today.
2. A second reason why you are likely to use Either/Or problem solving for a polarity is that they look alike. An either/or problem is often ½ of a polarity to manage. For example, in the ½ map below, it appears that you have a problem to solve.



Polarity Management Map

When you have a (*Problem*) = Excessive Control, and a (*Solution*) = Empowerment, it is quite natural to think that all you need to do is figure out how to bridge the “Gap” between the problem and the solution. All you need is a good strategy (*symbolized by the arrow*) to get there.

Given the definition of the problem, the solution is obvious. Why look any further? From a problem solving perspective, anyone resisting such an obvious solution is either stupid or immoral or both!

Remember, “How do you spell “cat?” 4+4 = 8. Washington was the first president. When you are right with a single right answer problem, those who disagree are wrong.

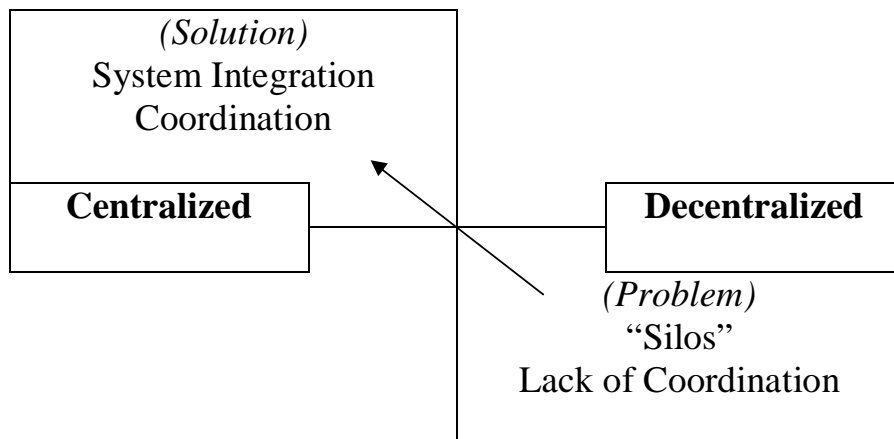
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“Gap analysis” is driven primarily by a problem solving mindset which is satisfied if it has 3 elements

- A. A clear understanding of the present “reality,” usually in negative terms = “Burning Bridge.”
- B. A clear “vision” of where you want to go = an improved state representing a “solution” to the present “problem.”
- C. A clear strategy to get from A to B.

Consultants make a ton of money helping client organizations create one or more of the above three things. This is very helpful if you have a solvable problem. It is an incomplete picture and an incomplete process if it is a polarity to manage. A consultant and/or client who does not know the difference is in for either significant resistance to their obvious solution and/or a whole new set of problems down the road. Seeing the issue as a polarity and knowing how to manage it can radically reduce both the resistance and the problems down the road.

3. Why will there be resistance and/or big trouble in the future if you treat a polarity as if it were a problem to solve? The second half of the picture holds the key.



Polarity Management Map

Those resisting have an equally valid, alternate view of reality. They see a potential (*Problem*) in the solution being prescribed and a logical (*Solution*). They, like the rest of us, tend to see all problems as either/or. It is obvious to them that they are right which makes their opposition wrong. They thus resist this foolish move toward “Silos” and Lack of Coordination. Their resistance is legitimate and they know it. The obvious solution is System Integration and Coordination. Those pushing for Decentralization are either stupid or immoral or both!

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If you are promoting a change from Excessive Control to Empowerment and are treating it as an either/or problem, the clearer the communication, the greater the resistance. The more powerfully and clearly you articulate what is wrong with centralization and what is great about decentralization, the more the centralization advocates are convinced you are totally overlooking their reality. And you are!

Both those promoting the change and those resisting it are caught in either/or thinking and engage in a “self – right - eous” power struggle. The organization then pays twice for misidentifying this polarity as a problem to solve. First the organization pays through all the wasted energy, resistance and anger over who is right. Then it pays when one side wins, as it will quickly find itself in the downside of the “winner’s” preferred pole

4. Resistance becomes a resource when we shift our perception of the issue from solving and either/or problem to managing a polarity. To manage a polarity well, we need to see the whole map. Those resisting hold 2 important pieces to the puzzle.

Why we use either/or thinking for polarities and why it doesn’t work - Summary

Because the overwhelming majority of problems in formal education have one right answer, it is natural when we come up against a “problem,” to begin immediately to create or discover the “right” answer. Of course we find ourselves using either/or problem solving for all difficulties, including polarities.

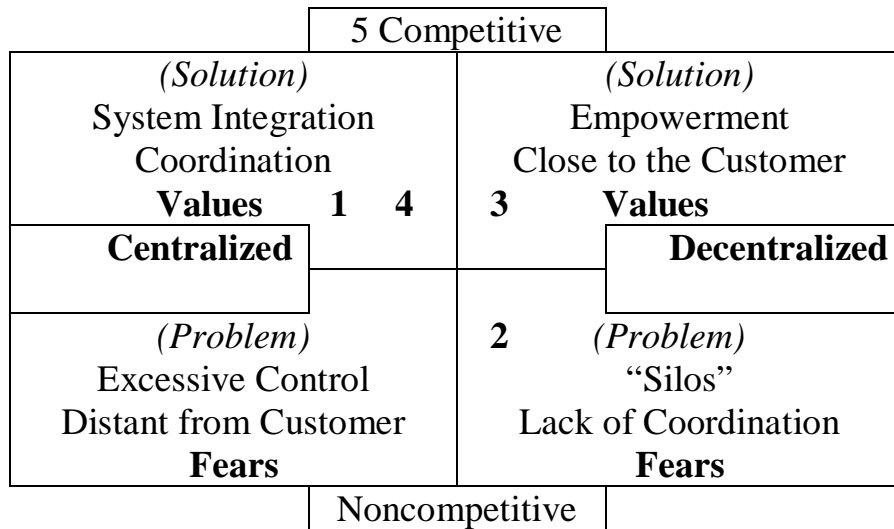
½ of a polarity looks very much like a problem to solve. When we have a “problem,” the downside of one pole, and a “solution,” the upside of the opposite pole, it seems that all we need is a strategy to move through the “gap” between the problem and the solution. From this perspective, there is no need to look any further.

Often when we meet with resistance to our solution, we think it is a communication problem that will be solved by being clearer about: 1) How terrible the problem really is; 2) How terrific and essential our solution is; 3) And/or how thorough our strategy is. This thinking increases resistance in a polarity situation. The resistance is coming from those, equally caught in either/or thinking, who see the upside of the present pole as the solution and the downside of the pole we are promoting as a problem to be avoided.

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Using resistance as a valuable resource for significant, sustainable change.

1. Pole preference is a combination of values and fears. The reasons a person or group prefers one pole over another is they value the upside of their preferred pole and/or they fear the downside of the opposite pole. When individuals or groups are in conflict over opposite poles, it is important to recognize that there are conflicting values and fears that are in tension. Both sides, naturally, want to move toward their values and away from their fears.
2. In the case below, someone valuing and promoting Empowerment would be arguing against Excessive Control, which they fear. Those resisting this move are a source of wisdom. They are resisting both because they value System Integration and they fear each part becoming a “Silo.” Their values and fears seem to be getting in the way of progress from a problem solving mindset. From a polarity mindset they are an important resource because they provide two essential pieces to the puzzle (map) which are necessary to manage this polarity well. The goal is not to get to Empowerment. The goal is to be Competitive by capitalizing on the inherent tension between System Integration and Empowerment.



Polarity Management Map

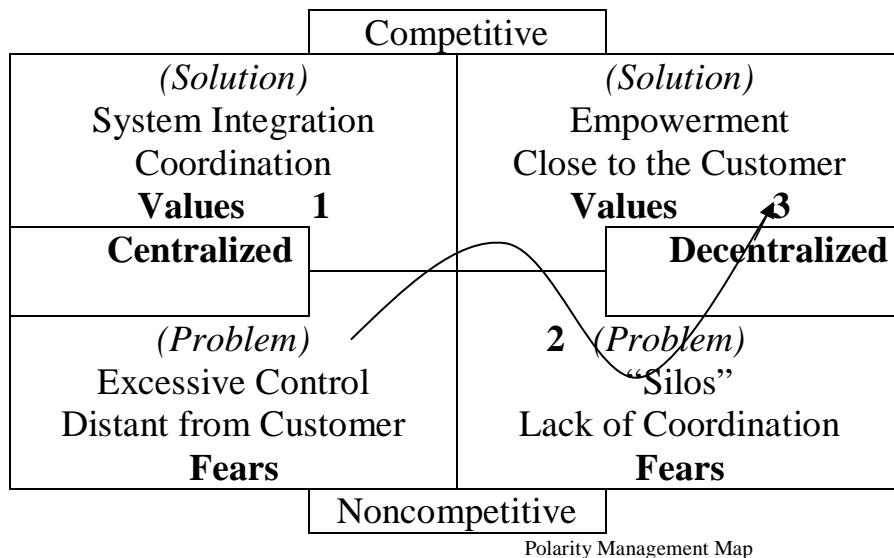
3. Getting unstuck. If a system were in the downside of Centralized, the normal flow would be to go to the upside of Decentralized. (Remember the breathing map) If this normal flow is not happening, it is because some in the system are holding on to their value of System Integration and avoiding the Silos they fear. To get the system unstuck, one must first recognize that it is a polarity to manage. Once that is understood, the job is to affirm the values and fears of those resisting. Then add your own values in order to combine them for the Higher Purpose. The steps are as follows: (see also the map, above)
 1. Recognize the value of System Integration and Coordination
 2. Recognize the legitimate concern that too much Decentralization could lead to “Silos” and Lack of Coordination
 3. Raise the question, “How can we get the benefits of Decentralization ...
 4. While holding on to the benefits of Centralization ...
 5. In order to be most competitive?

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4. With a polarity to manage, the focus on either pole alone is not sustainable. Any effort to move from the down side of one pole to the upside of the other with the assumption that the upside of the other pole is the “right answer” will generate its own resistance. One of two things will happen:
 1. The resistance will be overcome, often after a costly struggle, and you will find yourself unable to sustain the effort thus ending up in the downside of the new pole.
 2. The resistance is not overcome, often after a costly struggle, and you return to the downside of the original pole.

In either case, you lose competitive advantage by engaging in a costly struggle without sustainable, positive results.

5. Anticipate the learning curve – a key to sustainability. An extension of the getting unstuck orientation is the process of helping an individual, team, or whole organization anticipate the learning curve. This is a good way to incorporate the resistance mentioned in 4, above.



When an organization that has been quite centralized for a long period of time, attempts at decentralization will be awkward at first. Like any new learning there is a need for some tolerance for the awkwardness without over-tolerating it. On a polarity map, a drop into the downside of Decentralization indicates the learning curve. If this downside is not anticipated, it is likely that those valuing System Integration and afraid of Lack of Coordination will want to prematurely call the effort a “mistake” and pull it back to the Centralized pole.

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An agreement must be struck, in advance, with those valuing Centralization. They are asked to

- 1) Hold on to the upsides of Centralization and to;
- 2) Allow some slack and tolerate to some degree the anticipated downsides of new, Decentralized efforts in order to;
- 3) Gain the benefits of decentralization.

By anticipating the learning curve and getting support in advance, the chances of sustaining the effort to gain the benefits of the other pole are greatly enhanced.

Using resistance as a valuable resource for significant, sustainable change - Summary

All polarities have 2 sets of values and fears that are in tension.

Those resisting a shift from their preferred pole to the opposite pole are an essential resource for 2 pieces of the puzzle. They have wisdom about what they value which needs to be held on to and what they fear which needs to be minimized.

Getting unstuck includes 5 steps:

1. Affirming the upside values of the present pole.
2. Recognizing the potential downsides of the pole toward which you wish to move
3. Seeking support in going after the upsides of the pole toward which you wish to move.
4. While offering support to hold on to the upside of the present pole
5. In order to gain a mutually agreed upon higher purpose

With any polarity, the focus on either pole alone will generate its own resistance and is not sustainable.

Anticipating the learning curve is a key to sustainability.

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How to effectively manage polarities over time.

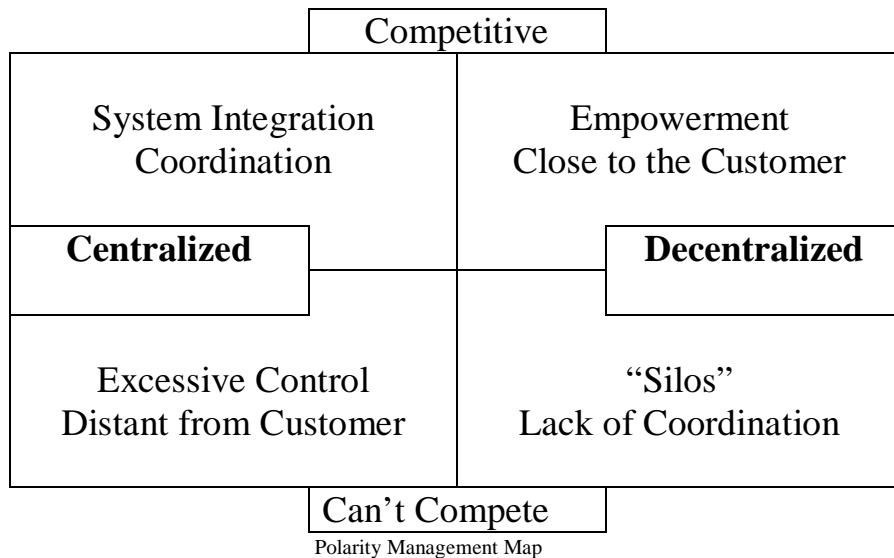
1. Getting both up sides. In order to manage the polarity you have to identify structures, policies, or practices that will insure that you gain or maintain the positive results in each upside quadrant. For example:

How will you gain/maintain the positive results of Centralization?

Be clear about which decisions must be retained for system integration.

How will you gain/maintain the positive results of Decentralization?

Identify as many decisions as possible, which can be delegated to those who work directly with the customer.



2. Identifying “red flag” indicators that let you know when you are in the downside of each pole so you can avoid spending unnecessary time in the downside of either pole.

What are the “red flag” indicators that you are in the downside of Centralization?

Customer complaints about lack of responsiveness.

What are the “red flag” indicators that you are in the downside of Decentralization?

Customer complaints about inconsistency and mixed messages.

The above elements are a simple summary for managing polarities well over time. The steps and the process is more elaborate than described and beyond the scope of a summary paper.

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Conclusion

We all tend to see the difficulties we encounter at work and in life in general as problems we must solve. We come by this tendency honestly through formal education. In the passing of knowledge from one generation to the next, either/or problems are a very useful and essential tool.

We learn of interdependent opposites (polarities) through the informal socialization process. What Polarity Management does is provides a user friendly map and set of principles in order to formalize and enhance our skills with unsolvable problems.

Those managers, parent, teachers, government leaders, teams, organizations, and nations that develop the ability to distinguish between solvable problems and unsolvable polarities and have the ability to respond effectively to each will outperform those who can't distinguish between them and who try to address all issues from a problem solving perspective.

Either/Or thinking and Both/And thinking is itself a polarity to manage. We need both. Either alone will be dysfunctional. This is not about the rejection of either/or thinking. The rejection of either/or thinking is an example of either/or thinking, alone.