



DIFFERENTIATED
COACHING ASSOCIATES

Moving from Either/Or to Both/And Thinking

Tired of polarizing debates and pendulum swings in policies, “solutions” and practices? Master the tools of polarity thinking to help individuals, teams and groups look both ways at once!



*By Jane Kise, Ed.D. Adapted from *Unleashing the Positive Power of Differences: Polarity Thinking for Our Schools* © 2014 by Jane Kise, Ed.D. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin and Learning Forward.*

Which is better? Breathing in or breathing out?

That may sound like a silly question—the answer of course depends on whether you last inhaled or exhaled!

Yet, in business, in politics, in schools, we take equally crazy stands even though both choices hold part of the truth. For example, which is better in these pairs?

You can't blow out candles without breathing in first! Think of when you intentionally leverage breathing patterns—for exercise, to control emotions, to wake up—and more. You've literally been leveraging polarities since your first breath. The question is, how well are you leveraging them?

- Top-down or distributed leadership?
- Autonomy or collaboration?
- Individual freedom or community health?
- Memorizing arithmetic algorithms or finding efficient ways to solve problems?
- Extraversion or Introversion, Sensing or Intuition, Thinking or Feeling, Judging or Perceiving?



Polarities are represented by an infinity loop, with the word AND indicating the interdependency of the two poles.

Tools such as the MBTI®, TypeCoach, and others help clients identify which of the 16 personality types best describes them, providing insights into client preferences for perceiving the world and making decisions

Polarity thinking changes the debates over such issues from either/or to both/and thinking: “What is the upside of each position? What is the downside? How do we ensure that we access the best of both while avoiding as much of the negative as possible?” By identifying mutual goals and common fears, as well as warning signs that the focus is shifting too far to one side or the other, we can learn to leverage the energy in these debates, turning vicious cycles into virtuous circles of managing these complex issues.

The Polarity Thinking Framework and related tools are the brainchild of Barry Johnson and are outlined in his book *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems* (HRD Press, 1992). He worked with me to bring his framework to education in *Unleashing the Positive Power of Differences: Polarity Thinking for Our Schools* (Corwin Press, November 2013) to hopefully bring civility to debates over issues such as standardized testing, teacher evaluation, meeting the needs of both gifted students and those with learning disabilities, and many other debates that are polarizing educators and draining energy from efforts that might produce real solutions.

In business, battles erupt over common polarities such as centralization and decentralization; individual and team; outcomes and people; planning and flexibility, and many more. Bringing civility to these debates is crucial, for when one side “wins,” everyone loses because of a fundamental truth about polarities: If the pendulum of change swings too far to one side for these kinds of issues, *we get all of the downside of that position as well*. That means that eventually the pendulum will swing back—until we’re so immersed in the opposite upside that we get its downside as well. That’s one of the ways you can recognize when something is a polarity; the pendulum of change continues to swing.

Leveraging Polarities

Leveraging polarities involves three simple, yet in no way simplistic, steps:

- ♦ **See it.** We first must recognize when we’re dealing with a polarity with two equally valuable perspectives on an issue, rather than a problem that has only one



Polarity management
works best where
conventional
methods fail.

–Barry Johnson, founder of
Polarity Partnerships

viable solution. Four key considerations in identifying polarities are:

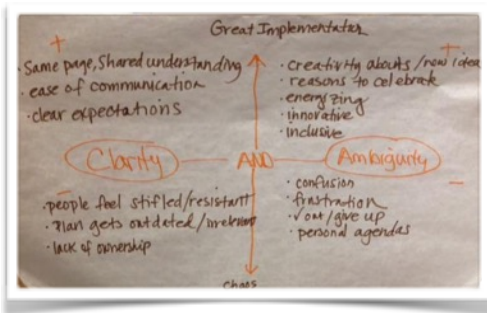
- ◆ Is it ongoing?
- ◆ Are the alternatives interdependent?
- ◆ Over time, are both solutions/poles needed?
- ◆ If we focus on only one upside, will we eventually undermine our greater purpose?
- ◆ **Map it.** We then work with stakeholders to identify the upsides and downsides of each position, as well as where in a polarity map (a version of an infinity loop) they would currently place themselves.
- ◆ **Leverage it.** Stakeholders then work together to identify action steps they can take to leverage the polarity and maintain a virtuous cycle, and warning signs that their efforts are swinging too much toward one pole or the other.

At the end of this article is a sample polarity map. Below is a simple exercise for introducing groups to polarity thinking. To quote Barry Johnson, “Polarity management works best where conventional methods fail.” It’s a tool well worth mastering.

Exercise: Mapping a Polarity

A common dilemma in organizations is providing Clarity for processes and standards while allowing some Ambiguity for creativity and differing circumstances. Try mapping this issue with your colleagues.

1. Create four “stations” that will represent the upside and downside of each of the poles: Clarity AND Ambiguity. Place four pieces of flip chart paper and a marker at each station. Post signs that mark each station as one of the following:
 - a. Positive results of Clarity
 - b. Negative results of over-focusing on Clarity to the neglect of Ambiguity
 - c. Positive results of Ambiguity
 - d. Negative results of over-focusing on Ambiguity to the neglect of Clarity



For a group of 80 school leaders, we pre-labeled half-sheets of poster paper, and they worked at their tables. After providing a minute for them to give responses for a quadrant, I had just one table read their list and asked others to add significant points not included in the list just shared. Full engagement AND expedience, a



An "Over-focus on clarity to the neglect of ambiguity" poster from an Intentional Leadership Coaching certification program in Belgium. The horse with blinders on, walking on a circular track, says "I am on track!" while those watching exclaim "He is in a loop!"

2. Divide participants into four small groups of approximately 2-6 people. Let them know that they will work as a group at each station to brainstorm the values and fears each represents. Assign each group to a starting station.
3. Give each group five minutes at each station to write down their ideas of the values or fears of the pole assigned at that station. Make sure each group starts on a fresh sheet of flip chart paper without looking at the writings of the other groups.
4. When all groups have been at all four stations, have each group combine the results onto one piece of chart paper to summarize the ideas for that station. *OR* for the last rotation, have the groups at each station draw an image that captures the information generated on the flip charts at that station.
5. Debrief:
 - ◆ Let each group share their summaries.
 - ◆ Ask for early warning signs that a school is over-focused on one of these poles
 - ◆ Brainstorm possible action steps a leader or team could take to keep from "swinging" too far toward either pole.

Points to Remember

- ◆ Polarities are inherently unsolvable.
- ◆ We have been leveraging them all of our lives; the question is, are we leveraging them well?
- ◆ If we've been arguing about the same issue for 10 or 20 or 200 years, it's probably a polarity, not a problem with a solution
- ◆ If, when one "side" wins, everyone loses, it's probably a polarity.

When we acknowledge the potential downside of our own pole, we are acknowledging the fears (and the wisdom) of the other "side." Only then can we start using the positive power of differences to channel the energy we've been expending on debate toward better leveraging of the polarity.

- ◆ What common polarity keeps popping up in your work? Some are listed below. How might you take a first step toward introducing polarity thinking to turn entrenched arguments into energy for moving forward?
 - ◆ Autonomy AND Collaboration
 - ◆ Team Tasks AND Team Relationships
 - ◆ Continuity AND Change
 - ◆ Planning AND Flexibility
 - ◆ Top-down Leadership AND Shared Leadership
 - ◆ Work Life AND Home Life
 - ◆ ANY type preference pair
- ◆ Note the full map on the next page, showing the “greater purpose statement” at the top, the “deeper fear” at the bottom, and action steps and early warning signs. While you can work with polarity mapping right away, the tools also allow for far deeper analysis, leading to solid strategic plans that move polarized groups forward.

We encourage you to edit this map so the language and values work for you.
Basic Steps to Managing a Polarity Well Over Time

Action Steps

- How will we gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on this left pole? What? Who? By when? Measures?
- Create clear projects with measurable outcomes
- Tie compensation to performance.
- Align talents with responsibilities
- Create learning opportunities on the job
- Listen and respond to client needs

Early Warnings ***

- Measurable indicators (things you can count) that will let you know that you are getting into the downside of this left pole. Who will know?
- Increase in sick time
- More expressions of frustration with work
- Increase in complaints about being overwhelmed
- Increase in concerns of absence or neglect by spouse/family.



Action Steps

- How will we gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on this right pole? What? Who? By when? Measures?
- Allow for planned vacations
- Allow time to pursue outside interests
- Provide recovery time after intense project completion
- Respect individual family needs and traditions
- Recognize work done in the community

Early Warnings

- Measurable indicators (things you can count) that will let you know that you are getting into the downside of this right pole. Who will know?
- Reduction in profit margin
- Clients complaining about neglect or poor service.
- Increase in complaints about lack of accomplishment and boredom
- Personnel or pay check reductions

Polarity Management & Associates www.polaritymanagement.com

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