

Polarity Management

Not all problems are meant to be solved

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The issues and circumstances of today, tomorrow, and for months to come require us to expand how we think. We consider what is possible and valuable. Dr. Barry Johnson's work on Polarity Management is a great place to start that process. His basic premise is both strikingly simple, and, at the same time, profoundly complex. Since 1975, he has taught that not all problems we try to solve are really problems nor should they be solved. Some problems are really polar challenges to manage.

Picture the two-faces/goblet or old/young lady images often used as meeting ice-breakers. Some people focus on one side and cannot see the other while others see the opposite image and still others can see both. Regardless of who can see what, it is impossible to see the entire image simultaneously. The viewer must switch back and forth to see and understand the complete picture. Working to "see both sides" is critical for leadership to be successful, whether volunteer leader or staff.

Polarity Management (PM) is a tool for seeing both sides of a situation with neither side being favored or invalidated. It is a valuable method for dealing with organizational change (big or small) especially when two interdependent, opposing sides are at play. PM involves moving from focusing on one pole as the problem, and the other as the solution (either/or thinking), to value both sides (both/and thinking). Good polarity management recognizes the best of both poles while avoiding the limits of either.

Which of the following organizational polarities are you trying to solve as if a single problem exists?

- Individual and Team
- Diversity and Uniformity
- Stability and Change
- Evolution and Revolution
- Competition and Collaboration
- Reduce Costs and Improve Quality
- Vertical and Horizontal Systems
- Work and Personal Commitments
- Centralized Cooperation, Decentralized Initiatives

Polarity Management creates a neutral space where comparison, inquiry, discussion and examination allow the organization to put into action the positive aspects of the apparent polarity or paradox. It balances the positive sides of both rather than trying to force a solution to one. When we try to solve something that is not designed to be solution-based, we get resistance to that "solution." A quick review of past failed board and staff initiatives is likely to reveal the reality of this circumstance. When we manage polarities for their benefits and perspectives, we see attainable results. As Abraham Maslow said, "If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail."

Albert Einstein said it best: "We can't solve today's problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them." Thus, the employment by our association community leaders of Polarity Management will grow in its value as we break free from the following limits:



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- Problem solving methods that alone have proven they cannot work on many of our most critical issues are advanced. Using PM, we supplement our traditional either/or thinking to confront our more chronic problems. Especially those that appear unsolvable, yet seem unavoidable, and remained immovable.
- Strategic planning events have evolved into trying to loosely manage sets of problems rather than appreciating them as a series of polarities and paradoxes. As highly committed leaders, we must practice balancing the polarities in life.
- Organizational change practices can be successful as PM methods, allowing for a better understanding of the resistance an organization may face to the changes the board and staff wishes to make. This creates a more effective environment for negotiating with those in opposition to new initiatives.
- Leadership using PM methodology leads to more effective mediation. Leaders are better able to anticipate and diminish problems from occurring when polarities are managed. Leaders using the “and” model tend to be better decision makers since they are not limited to “either/or” scenarios.

Guide posts

- Distinguish between problems that are inherently solvable and finite, and those which are both unsolvable and unavoidable.
- Investigate both the positive and negative aspects and effects of each polar side.
- Combine the points of view reflected in each to give a more complete picture of the known situation.
- Be mindful of the group size that prefers one polarity to another - if the majority favors one view over another then the decision is likely vulnerable to being overly focused and out of balance.
- Be clear on the positive and negative preferences the organization holds for one pole over another and the reasons (historical baggage).

The bottom line

When today’s leaders champion an “and” world, working within their organizations to transform the “either/or” mentality that limits creativity and innovation, more is accomplished more effectively.

“Nothing will ever be attempted if all possible objections must be first overcome.”– Samuel Johnson

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