Moving from Either/Or to Both/And Thinking

Using polarity thinking tools in coaching helps clients not only see more alternatives but proactively plan ahead to get the best of two worlds!

By Jane Kise, Ed.D.

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, and in our lives, we take equally crazy stands even though both choices hold part of the truth. For example, which is better in these pairs?

• Planning or flexibility?
• Autonomy or collaboration?
• Breadth or depth?
• Meaningful work or making a living?
• Extraversion or Introversion, Sensing or Intuition, Thinking or Feeling, Judging or Perceiving?

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.


When you look at common polarities such as individual and team; outcomes and people; planning and flexibility, and many more, you’ll note that people with different personality preferences and emotional intelligence competences naturally prefer one pole over the other—and seeing both “truths” can be difficult. Yet leaders must do so, 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, *the leader or those they lead 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 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 that coaches face is facilitating Clarity for clients around purposes, processes and goals while allowing Ambiguity for changing circumstances, discovery and differences in style. 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

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
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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 personality 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 value work for you.

### Basic Steps to Managing a Polarity Well Over Time

#### Greater Purpose Statement (GPS)

**Competitive Advantage**

- Business goals are met
  - People are energized by:
    - Opportunities to learn on the job
    - Responding to challenges
    - Sense of accomplishment
  - 1. Client needs are met
  - 2. Earn a paycheck/organization can pay the paychecks

- Individuals' interests are met
  - People are energized by:
    - Pursuing outside interests
    - Time for renewal - mental and physical
    - Contributing to community
  - Family needs are met
  - Have quality relationships outside of work

**Org Responsibility for Work**

Fears = negative results from focusing on this left pole & neglect of the right pole

- Individuals' interests neglected
- People are drained by:
  - No time for outside interests and stimulation
  - Burn out - no renewal time
  - No time or energy for the community
  - 3. Family needs neglected
  - 4. No quality relationships outside of work

**Org Responsibility for Home**

Fears = negative results from focusing on this right pole & neglect of the left pole

- Business goals not met
- People are drained by:
  - Lack of professional learning opportunities
  - Lack of work challenges
  - No sense of work accomplishments
  - Client needs neglected
  - No pay check / no money for pay checks

### Action Steps

- How will we gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on this left pole? What? Who? By when? Measure?
- 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 tip 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 overworked
- Increase in concerns of absence or neglected by spouse/family.

### Action Steps

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

### Early Warnings

- Measurable indicators (things you can count) that will tip 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
  - Personal or psych check reductions

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