

*Polarity Practitioners*

**And**



*Making a Difference  
by Leveraging  
Polarity, Paradox or Dilemma  
Volume Two: Applications*

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# *Managing Community Issues Through Polarity Thinking™*

Margaret Seidler, MPA

## **Charleston, South Carolina: A City Grounded in History and Tradition 2019 – A Brief Reflection**

Having returned home to South Carolina in 2001, the year after meeting Barry Johnson and learning about Polarity Thinking™,<sup>1</sup> I made a commitment to spread the word far and wide, to all corners of the country, and most especially to this city where *either/Or* thinking had dominated the landscape for centuries.

The story begins in April 2010, with the city of Charleston Police Department, where Polarity Thinking was applied to support a relatively new Chief, Greg Mullen, in gaining support for the department's first ever strategic plan. Successful polarity work with the police led to further work with department heads across the entire city. After using Polarity Thinking within the city's internal leadership, we came out publicly to facilitate the local community in a highly visible and polarized situation. The *Late Night Activity Review* project addressed the complex issues surrounding Charleston's burgeoning nightlife area while also supporting the health of daytime businesses and the quality of life in nearby neighborhoods. We achieved a resounding success in bringing unity of purpose to these differing "camps." Next, we took a bold step forward and one that we hope becomes a model for the nation.

In light of police shootings in 2014 and 2015, even one in an adjacent municipality, we watched as riots erupted across the country. In the wake of the Charleston massacre, and the death of nine parishioners, during the Bible Study at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in June 2015, Chief Mullen felt an obligation to honor those who lives were taken and those who had professed forgiveness at the bond hearing for the perpetrator. With the confidence of several years of experience by city leaders and police command staff using the principles of Polarity Thinking, Chief Mullen, Jake Jacobs, Chandra Irvin, Bob Seidler, and I embarked on a groundbreaking effort to ask citizens how to Strengthen Relationships with Police; how to *both* Preserve Public Safety *And* Safeguard Individual Rights.

I want to share with you the groundwork laid over several years, because it is important to see how the multiple steps of trainings and consulting efforts developed a new-found capacity for the police within the city. From this work grew a higher level of openness in being more vulnerable with the community, which resulted in Chief Mullen taking this calculated risk of asking the public for input. The promise

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson, Barry. *And: Making a Difference by Leveraging Polarity, Paradox or Dilemma. Volume One: Foundations*. HRD Press, 2020.

was to hear and honor all voices, regardless of community status, and from that input crafting a plan of action for police and citizens.

### 2010 – A “Chance” Encounter

All of my extended family was in Charleston when I was raised there. Community service and leadership was a core value across the male members. I also subscribed to that as the first-generation female active in the community. At this time, I headed a large committee of several Charleston single-family residential neighborhoods. With nearby high-profile crimes in the apartment communities, I called the Charleston Police Department to come address our large group and explain what actions they were taking to “fix this problem.” After the meeting, the Police Lieutenant asked me where the folks from the apartment communities were, that it just seemed to be single family residents in attendance. This was a major “wake up” call to me, a professed systems thinker, and Polarity Management Mastery graduate.

It was now apparent that I had invited only *my part* of the system to the meeting; a traditional “us vs. them” approach for an issue that was complex, chronic, and much better suited to the *both/And* approach. I was seeing that “others” needed to fix the “problem” rather than an opportunity to collaborate across a whole geographic area.

I began where I had the most influence and control – with the neighborhood committee. We first expanded the committee to include apartment owners and managers. We had a community dinner where we got to know each other better and during the meeting portion, we focused on learning about polarities. Together, we drafted a Polarity Map® where our common desire for a Safe Community (Greater Purpose) could provide the solid ground to build relationships and begin the process of creating partnerships in our effort. Charleston’s new police chief, Greg Mullen, was in attendance. After the session, he handed me his business card and asked if we could meet in his office at nine the next morning. This was a pivotal moment, and of course I agreed to meet.

### Polarities in Policing Services

Here is what Chief Mullen said the following morning at our meeting: *I believe we have these things you call ‘polarities’ in law enforcement.*

Imagine my excitement when I was able to respond with a resounding “YES.” I further stated that polarities are ubiquitous and that the more able we are to see their existence, the better able we are to manage them.

For me, the best place to start working with a client is to find something for which they already have energy, where a polarity approach can be an enhancement. The Police Department’s strategic plan was a good candidate. As a new chief, it was something Mullen had pressed hard to create. Formalizing a strategic plan and a strategic planning process would be a major shift for his officers and staff, a shift from thinking about everyday tactics to thinking about the big picture and long-term successes. As you might imagine, he ran up against a predictable resistance.

We imagined that each of his five key strategic directions actually were Greater Purpose Statements (**GPS**):

Figure 1

<b>Enhancing Community Safety</b>
Law Enforcement <i>And</i> Community Support
<b>Creating Community Partnerships</b>
Department's Interests <i>And</i> Citizens' Interests
<b>Creating an Exceptional Workforce</b>
Operational Commitments <i>And</i> Education/Training
<b>Effective Resource Management</b>
Take Care of What We Have <i>And</i> Get What We Need
<b>Advancing Technological Efficiencies</b>
End-Users Needs/Capabilities <i>And</i> Innovations

We were off to a great start. Next, we discussed the steps to engage his officers and staff in supporting a broader, new view of their roles.

### **Strategic Planning: Tapping Tradition to Create Change**

We invited a highly diverse group of 35 police department employees – including sworn and civilian, young and old, Black, white, Hispanic – to learn about themselves individually and collectively using a polarity lens. Our mix was diverse by design. We included those who might naturally hold onto the way things had been done in the past as well as others who might naturally prefer going after new ways of doing things.

Using a time tested one-page exercise we call “The Preferences,” we helped the group gain an appreciation for seeing how strengths can become weaknesses when the benefits from both poles are not present and honored over time. With solid context in place, we then applied the learning to individual leadership polarities in their day-to-day lives. I intentionally added Traditionalists *And* Pioneers to the list, having each declare their preference. Then I asked the Traditionalists to please raise their hands again and keep them up in the air. I turned to Chief Mullen and said publicly, “Chief, you seem to have a strong preference for being a Pioneer.” As he nodded yes, I continued, “You see these Traditionalists? These are important in your department; honor them and hear them for the wisdom about what is working today and that you may want to hold onto while you bring about needed changes in the Department.” You could see the Traditionalists, who *had* been the resistors to change, react to the news that they were not only valuable, they were necessary over time for success as a police department.

From that place of all being honored for their values, they eagerly jumped into the process of mapping Enforcement *And* Community Support, and the other Strategic Directions. The group created five high quality, initial Polarity Map drafts in just a few hours! From those maps came the Strategic Plan, a new, yet guiding force for the ensuing years.

**2013 – Engaging all City Departments**

As Chief Mullen’s experience with polarity thinking in the police department began to take root, we decided to look at the ongoing tension among the more than 30 departments across the city. We conducted a similar session for the city’s Executive Steering Group (ESG). Again, we entered using an existing truth; turning an *either/Or* view of My Department vs. Other Department into a heightened *both/And* awareness that would systemically lead to cooperation and collaboration. Again, the group developed a staff leadership plan based on six Greater Purpose Statements (**GPS**) with each key polarity mapped out.

Figure 2

<b>Robust Service Delivery</b>
Quality of Service <i>And</i> Cost of Service
<b>Sustainable Community</b>
Thriving Economy <i>And</i> Beautiful Environment
<b>Effective Public Engagement</b>
Needs of the Community <i>And</i> Needs of the City
<b>Effective Intergovernmental Relations</b>
Local Focus <i>And</i> Get What We Need
<b>Exceptional Workforce</b>
Operational Requirements <i>And</i> Org. Development Needs
<b>Efective Resource Management</b>
Take Care of What We Have <i>And</i> Get What We Need

**2014 – A City Polarized**

With a burgeoning nightlife economy in Charleston’s Central Business District, specifically Upper King Street, crowding, public safety, and quality of life issues in adjacent neighbors became contentious and polarizing. As those interests took sides in a public debate about who was right and who was wrong, then Mayor Joe Riley decided it was well worth a try to take Polarity Thinking outside of the city operations and into the public arena for addressing this complex problem.

## Uniting All Sides Through a Common Greater Purpose

A 21-member Steering Group called the *Late Night Activity Review Committee* was formed with an overriding goal to ensure that those working on this nightlife activity initiative were not confrontational. Throughout the process, we engaged the committee and the public in a calm, measured exploration of public sentiment. With each step, we built greater understanding and agreement. A highly diverse group of neighborhood leaders, nightlife business owners, daytime business owners, real estate developers, and zoning board members came together because there was something each agreed they wanted at the end of the day; for “Charleston to Remain a Vibrant, Relevant, Forward-looking City;” their defined Greater Purpose Statement on the Polarity Map.

## The Wisdom Resides Within

Mayor Riley told me that he wanted me to use a Polarity Thinking approach without first providing the training to the committee. He feared that it would seem too theoretical for everyday citizens. So Jake Jacobs and I abbreviated the process by asking the questions from a Polarity Map without explaining Polarity Thinking. We used the pole names, Nightlife Business *And* Diverse Business/Neighborhoods, with a Greater Purpose, “Charleston to Remain a Vibrant, Relevant Forward-Looking City.”

Once the committee had created the map, the next question was, “How are we doing with managing this polarity?” We used the online Polarity Assessment™<sup>2</sup> and results for the Steering Group to see the whole picture. A pivotal element for the committee’s success was that all involved felt that their voices, points of view, and concerns were heard. This inclusion honored the essential roles businesses and neighborhoods play in the city’s success.

With a more complete picture of the situation and the assessment findings, the committee conducted public listening sessions and had more than 120 citizens repeat the process of answering four key questions in support of this common Greater Purpose and then suggest Action Steps for how to get the best of both poles.

The results were phenomenal. The citizens’ ideas were focused on the positives of both poles in pursuit of a common Greater Purpose. With this input, the Committee crafted a set of integrated recommendations, which ended with a broad base of support across the city. Every recommendation from these previously polarized constituent groups received a unanimous vote from City Council.

## 2015 – Mayor Joseph P. Riley Comments to Charleston City Council

Report of the *Late Night Activity Review Committee*

*Before we begin, let’s just thank them. This has been a community civic engagement/elected legislative body partnership in action. What seemed*

<sup>2</sup> The Polarity Assessment™. <https://www.polaritypartnerships.com/the-polarity-approach> 2020.

*a year ago to be an intractable challenge, a group of citizens, well-led and well-facilitated, came together in a series of meetings over a period of time for this amazing American city that presents marvelous opportunities as well as challenges for this very special place we have. They have worked hard, listened and came together with amazing unanimity and recommendations. There really is no college course in civic engagement that could top this as an example of a best practice. It converted 'either/Or-thinking' to 'And'; the result is just extraordinary.*

### **2015 – The Illumination Project**

The morning of June 17, 2015, the above-the-fold front page headline in Charleston's *Post and Courier* newspaper proclaimed the success of the *Late Night Activity Review Committee's* work. That euphoria was short-lived when that evening, around 9 pm, a hate crime occurred just across the street from our Committee's public Listening Session.

Race relations nationally, especially between communities and law enforcement, had already resulted in riots across the country. If ever the Charleston Police Department needed assurance of the importance of the pole of Community Support, they saw it now. They had been consciously building relationships in the preceding years. Polarity Thinking principles and actions had prepared them to deal with this crisis both as law enforcement officers and as trusted members of the community.

Within minutes of the massacre, officers reached out to community influencers deep and wide. These were citizens with whom they had already built relationships, confidence, and trust. They shared what they knew and began the process of calling people together. In the days following the massacre, outsiders descended on Charleston with intentions to protest as a way of expressing their outrage. The community's response was to request they leave. What the community and its police officers had created together in the previous five years made an undeniable difference in the face of this unimaginable tragedy.

While not new to our discussions, in August of 2015, Chief Mullen recognized an opportunity, almost an obligation, to those whose lives were so senselessly taken, hence *The Charleston Illumination Project* was born. Our work is to Preserve Public Safety *And* Safeguard Individual Rights. The Greater Purpose Statement for this polarity was: "To further strengthen relationships between the police and the citizens they serve Grounded in Trust & Legitimacy." It provided an avenue for Charlestonians to do something positive and to move forward together. Before going public, Polarity Thinking training was provided to the most diverse group of 99 community influencers ever assembled in Charleston. Within the city of Charleston, we hosted 34 public listening sessions and engaged more than 850 citizens in dialogue about their ideas for what improvements can be made for both police and themselves as citizens. The effort brought forth more than 2,200 ideas/comments for police and citizens. From those came suggested priorities resulting

in a new Strategic Plan of 86 strategies. In addition to bringing Jake Jacobs back to Charleston, we secured the special expertise of Chandra Irvin, a Master of Divinity, peace agent, and Polarity Thinking Master. With Chandra's support, we broadened our work by engaging faith communities in their places of worship, an additional way to engage large numbers of citizens, explore commonalities, learn, and pray for our community's continued success. With Jake's leadership, the project model is now starting in other cities.

### **2017 – Broadening the Base**

We learned a lot in 2016, including seeing that a police department can serve as a portal into many parts of a community and that relationships, never previously imagined, are formed. Using this momentum, we hosted 16 Listening Sessions during the year, mostly focused on racial history in Charleston. More than 900 citizens participated. Police were always present, part of the experience, and included in our signature facilitated small group discussions. Police effectiveness has moved from the foreground since the Strategic Plan was put in place. That year, we created for our police many shared experiences to continue building relationships for community support, and all the while they continued to enforce the law to provide a safe place for all.

We were humbled to announce that the *National Law Enforcement Museum* in Washington, D.C., which opened in fall of 2018, contacted us and developed a permanent video exhibit of the *Illumination Project*.

In 2016, Police Chief Gregory G. Mullen was named by Polarity Partnerships as the first Honorary Polarity Master Practitioner. He now serves as Associate Vice President for Public Safety and Chief of Police for Clemson University.

Find bio and contact info for author Margaret Seidler at [www.polaritypartnerships.com/certified-polarity-practitioners](http://www.polaritypartnerships.com/certified-polarity-practitioners)

# Praise for And



“To be able to make a difference in the world has always mattered to me. This book has supported me to break out of the constrictions of *Or* and into my expanding world of *And* which holds more possibilities for me. In the space of more possibilities, I am more aware of my increased capacity to love and to be connected. I am no longer perplexed by the chronic conflict and polarization I see in organizations and in the world. I feel I can access the energy flow between two wants and hold the whole. That is how I make a difference in my circle of influence, and it is my hope that in some small way I make a difference in the world. I am confident that others will benefit as much as I have.”

~ *Shareefah Sabur, MA, MNO, CDP, GPCC, BCC*  
*Executive Director, Gestalt Institute of Cleveland*



“*Both/And* thinking allows for the recognition that two seemingly contradictory things can both be true at the same time. Within equity, inclusion, and justice work, the *Both/And* lets us be honest about our privileges without descending into guilt or shame, recognize urgency while understanding that growth takes time, and focus on the concerns of marginalized communities while uplifting our shared humanity.”

~ *Shelly Tochluk*  
*Author, Witnessing Whiteness: The Need to Talk About Race and How To Do It and Living in the Tension: The Quest for a Spiritualized Racial Justice*



“Polarity Thinking is the most elegant approach to dealing with the critical issues that we wrestle with in institutions, organizations, and groups the world over. When we grasp the concepts and their application, we realize that we can truly make a difference in the world by seeing and making sense of both horns of knotty dilemmas. We can have our cake and eat it! Leaders at all levels too-readily see complex issues as problems to solve rather than polarities to leverage. Leaders thus make the issues more complex by invoking solutions that ‘solve’ only one pole of the issue. The shadow of these one-sided solutions eventually come to the foreground and thus cause downward spiraling and anguish for all involved. Barry’s vision has energized and innovated my own work. I’m happy to endorse Polarity Thinking because it has made such a difference in the work I do with leaders at all levels and the design of programs and interventions with those leaders and their organizations.”

~ *David Magellan Horth*  
*Director of Innovation Venturing and Partnerships / Senior Fellow,*  
*Center for Creative Leadership*

**Free peek at Volume Two**

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