



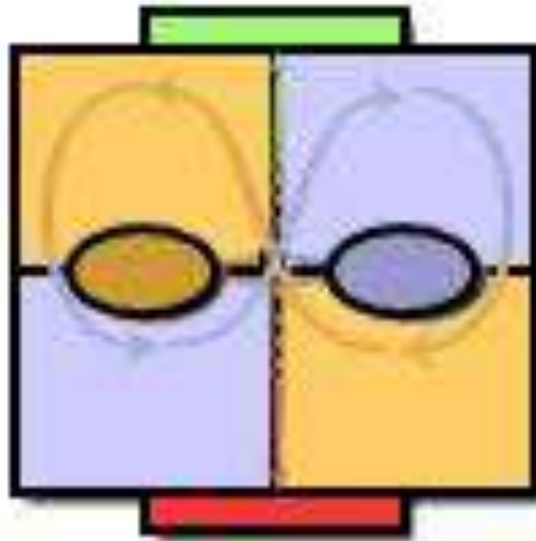
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**White Paper
Tapping the Power of Polarities
A Summary Introduction**

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based on the work of Dr. Barry Johnson,
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Tapping Polarities – A Summary Introduction

Scratching the surface of “both/and” polarity thinking.

A “polarity” is a pair of interdependent values that need each other over time to achieve some higher purpose that both values share. Polarities are different from problems to solve because they are by their nature, unsolvable. However, the energy of polarities can be intentionally tapped to create generative and sustainable high-performance for leaders, teams, and organizations.

Learning about polarities is important because so many of our life experiences come to us in pairs. The most basic “system” is the pair and systems are made up of multiple pairs and values that are all interdependent. When we experience chronic pendulum swings, fixes that fail, or “ditch to ditch” driving in our life or teams, or in organizations, it’s a good bet that one or several key interdependent values are being treated as independent variables. If the leader, team or organization can see the whole picture, things begin to right themselves and the potential exists to create a synergistic effect – tapping the energy of the polarity/ies. The critical first step, however, is the thinking distinction -- ability to distinguish between what are “either/or” problems to solve and “both/and” polarities to tap.

For example, we need activity AND rest – we can’t choose one or the other. Most of us, at some level need to take care of work AND to take care of home – we can’t choose one or the other. We need structure AND flexibility – we can’t choose one or the other and get along sustainably. Organizations need the benefits of centralized control AND the benefits of decentralized freedom – when we treat one or the other as if it’s a problem to solve, it’s a set-up for trouble. Today, organizations need to create consistency/stability in operations AND be agile/resilient in the face of change – not one or the other.

These and other polarity tensions are often looked upon as problems or challenges (the business literature describes them in various ways -- dilemmas, paradox, wicked problems, competing values, etc.). I believe polarities are gifts for several reasons. First, we’re all IN them together and we have choice and creativity in how we address them – it’s what makes us human! Second, they’re not going anywhere and we have lots of “2nd chances” to do them over when we mess them up (unless we completely kill the system by mismanaging them). Third, when we learn HOW to tap the energy of polarities, we can create generative and sustainable high-performance and convert resistances into resources.

We manage polarities implicitly, having navigated the tensions through experience or learning through the experiences of others, whether we have ever heard about “polarities” or not. There are also many useful tools, methodologies and theories that assist us to manage these tensions that don’t explicitly name the tensions as polarities. The popular Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is one of many such examples. The MBTI identifies four polarities that are important to pay attention to with respect to personality. A key, if not THE KEY leadership and organizational competency needed for success today is the ability to distinguish problems from polarities, and to tap the energy of polarities once identified. One of the best questions to ask early when encountering a difficulty is: *“Is this a problem we can ‘solve,’ or is it an ongoing polarity we can tap?”* If it is a polarity and it’s treated like a problem using standard problem-solving methods, things are likely to get worse instead of better. A clear symptom of treating polarities as problems to solve is polarization. Using the Polarity Map and tool developed by Dr. Barry Johnson reduces polarization and increases polaroptimization for individuals, teams and organization systems. The process is a practical, useful, and user-friendly way to tap collective experience and wisdom to:

Tapping Polarities – A Summary Introduction

- 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

Why polarities don't get the attention they deserve?

The incredible value and power in either/or problem solving...

“Problems to solve” are those with one right answer or two or more right answers that are independent. Problems with one right answer are essential for one generation to pass key knowledge of language, math, history, science, and morals of its culture on to the next generation. They are absolutely essential and it is difficult to overstate their importance. There are many positive results from getting the **“right answer”** to problems:

- You learn essential pieces of your culture and thereby gain membership in the culture.
- You experience “success” and rewards = “A” grades or high test scores or promotions.
- You get “closure,” and end to the search for the answer
- You may save time, money, and resources, which free you up to take on the next problem
- You learn your culture's basics of right and wrong and definition of morality.
- You move toward simplicity by eliminating the “world of wrong alternatives” — which is powerful even when you don't get the right answer.

There are severe negative results from rejecting “Either/Or” Problem Solving:

- You don't learn essential pieces of your culture or gain membership in the culture.
- The many “successes” that come from solving problems are not available.
- There is no closure when there could be.
- The possibility of becoming amoral.
- The “world of possible alternatives” could become overwhelming.
- Indifference or indecisiveness due to overwhelm of complexity.

Polarities are often described as problems, which mask their uniqueness and blur the important distinction from solvable problems. However, we pass the learning of social guidelines to help us get along or survive that are polarities implicitly. A few simple examples to illustrate the point:

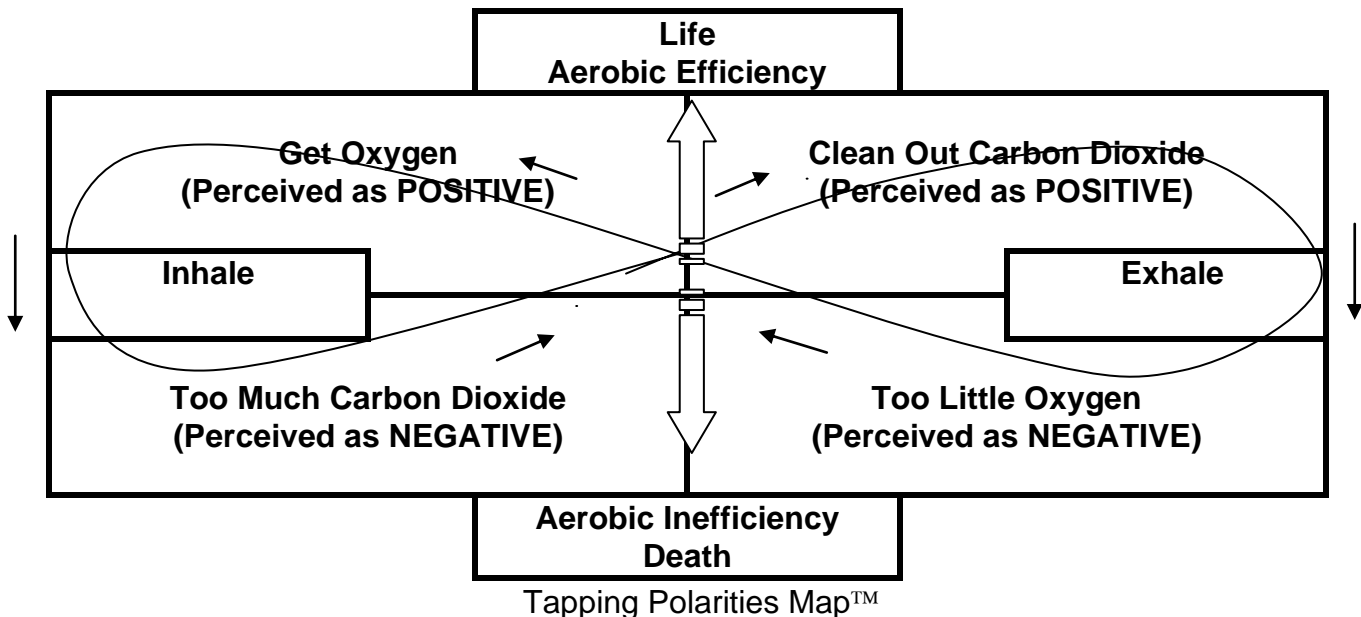
- **“Solution” to a tension = Sharing.**
The process of sharing is the way we tap the tension in relationships that involve two interdependent, right answers to a tension. For example, in a relationship with others, should I be concerned about the **other person** or should I be concerned about **myself?** (the polarity of “Self AND Other”). If I just take care of the other and neglect myself, it won't be a very satisfactory relationship. If I just take care of myself and neglect the other, it won't be a very satisfactory relationship. Sharing is taught to us from an early age as the “solution” to the “problem.” However, seeing the tension as a polarity and not a problem in the first place – that in relationships, we need to pay attention to our own needs **and** we need to pay attention to the needs of others – helps illuminate the ongoing nature.
- **“Solution” to a tension=Gift Cards!**
It's the holidays, you are a parent, and you have 3 children, each of which is to receive a gift.

Tapping Polarities – A Summary Introduction

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 two right answers that are interdependent. We need to respond to both the uniqueness of each child **and** treat them equally. Gift cards help manage the polarity tension to address the unique needs of the part and maintain equality within the whole. You can probably think of many part and whole examples at work, in your community, etc.

Tapping the Energy of Polarities.

Breathing as a metaphor for all Polarities



The act of breathing is the easiest way to picture and to remember how all polarities work – their consistent structure and dynamic flow. Knowing how they look and work can help you see the whole picture, which by the way is “the first accountability of any leader,” according to Max DePree. Knowing how polarities work can help you be both strategic and tactical.

1. Experience the dynamic. Follow your own breathing process and read through the four quadrants, you will be able to experience the normal flow, which is how polarities work.
 - 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.

The parts of the Polarity Map. (See the .pdf of the Polarity Map™ on the homepage of www.XperienceIT.com for more detail)

Tapping Polarities – A Summary Introduction

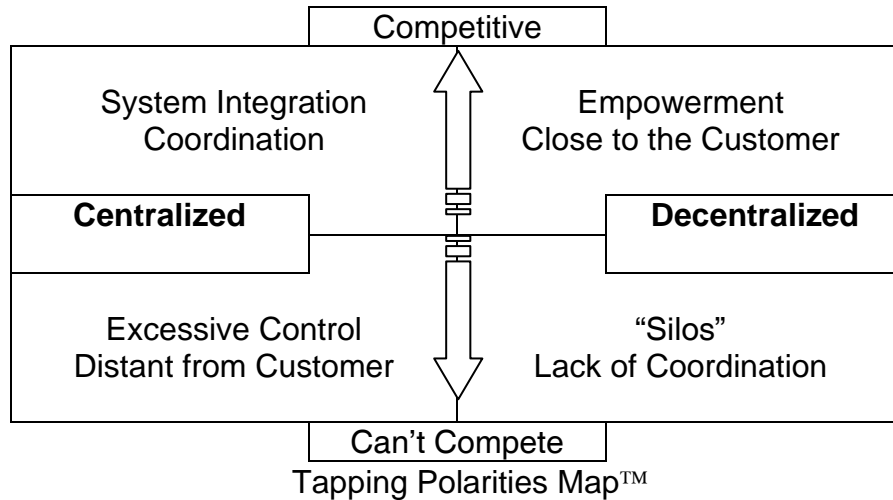
- Two neutral or positive poles
 - Two upside quadrants
 - Two downside quadrants
 - Two Early Warning Sign elements that relate to downsides
 - Two Action Step elements that relate to how to get upsides
 - The Higher Purpose or Greater Purpose Statement that tells you what you get when you achieve both upsides sustainably
 - The Deeper Fear that tells you what you get when you manage a polarity poorly over time
-
- 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.

Tapping Polarities or managing them poorly – a common real world example...

The breathing metaphor may seem simple and obvious, and it is. That is its beauty. Let's try substituting something we've likely all experienced in organizations -- centralization for inhaling and decentralization for exhaling -- and then think about the multi-million dollar fights over EITHER one OR the other for which the best strategy. Like inhaling and exhaling, every polarity has two equally valid right answers which are interdependent. You cannot choose one as the one right answer (either/or thinking applied to a polarity) and be successful for long. The same is true for decentralization and centralization... No matter which side “wins” in a power struggle between centralizing and decentralizing, the organization will lose. And, there can be significant impact to individuals and teams in the fight to “win.” Here are three key points:

1. A “Tapped Polarity” is one in which you choicefully and intentionally 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. Tapping this polarity would give you a generative and sustainable advantage (especially over organizations that were treating this as a problem to solve.)

Tapping Polarities – A Summary Introduction



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. 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.
3. This issue could also 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.

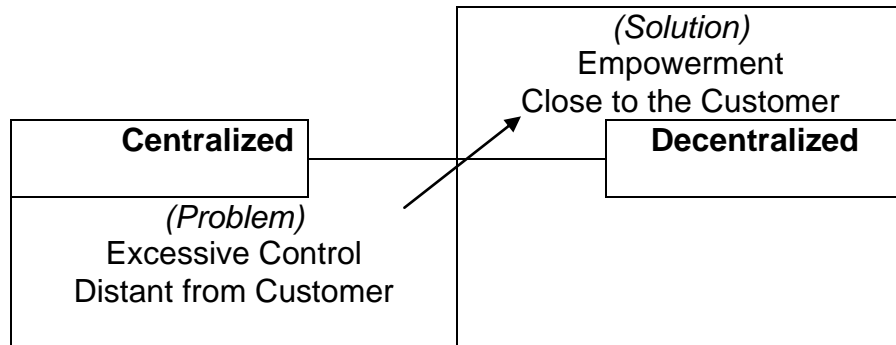
Tapping a polarity well or managing it poorly – Summary.

- It is possible to tap the inherent power of polarities for generative and sustainable high-performance. 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 causes more problems.

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.

Tapping Polarities – A Summary Introduction



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 $\frac{1}{2}$ of a polarity to manage. For example, in the $\frac{1}{2}$ map below, it appears that you have a problem to solve.

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! That is why so often we see this as a question of “survival for ourselves and those who will come after us...” There is wisdom in that point of view, but it’s not the whole picture...

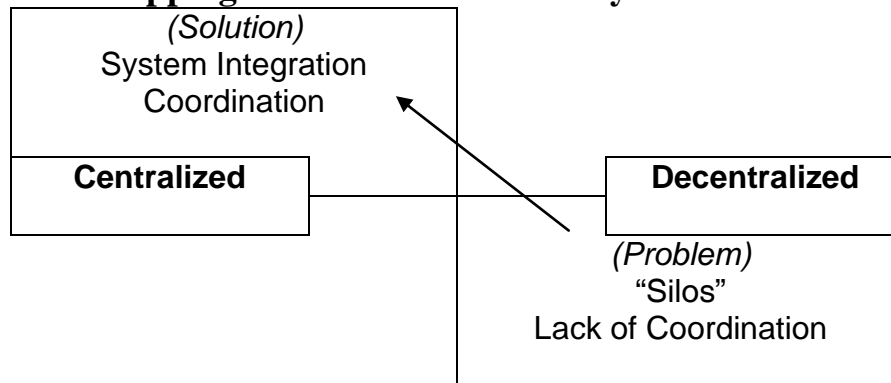
“Gap analysis” is driven primarily by a problem solving mindset which is satisfied if it has three elements

- 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.

As a consultant myself I know that consultants make a ton of money helping client organizations create one or more of the above three things. This is a good and helpful thing to do **if you have a solvable problem**. However, it is an incomplete picture and an incomplete process if it is a polarity to manage. A consultant and/or client who do 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 “IT” -- the issue as a polarity -- and knowing how to tap it can radically reduce the speed and increase resistance while also creating new 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.

Tapping Polarities – A Summary Introduction



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!

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 guess what? You are! (With all the best intentions, of course...)

Within the two points of view of a polarity, being right is the easy part. And it’s too easy, actually. Both those promoting the change and those resisting it are caught in either/or thinking and engage in a “self – righteous” 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. There are many reasons why a person might not want to see the other point of view – to many to get into here...But is it really all that difficult to see why a person would fail or refuse to understand something basic when s/he is spared short-term discomfort, pain, and responsibility that result from that lack of understanding? However...

4. Resistance becomes a resource when we shift our perception of the issue from solving and either/or problem to managing a both/and polarity. To manage a polarity well, we need to see the whole picture of what’s happening. We need to SEE IT! And we need to appreciate everyone who holds 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 beginning in our early formal education and through rewards in the workplace have one right answer, so it is natural when we come up against a “problem,” to begin immediately to create or discover the “right” answer. Of course we then find ourselves using either/or problem solving for all difficulties, including polarities that can’t be solved.

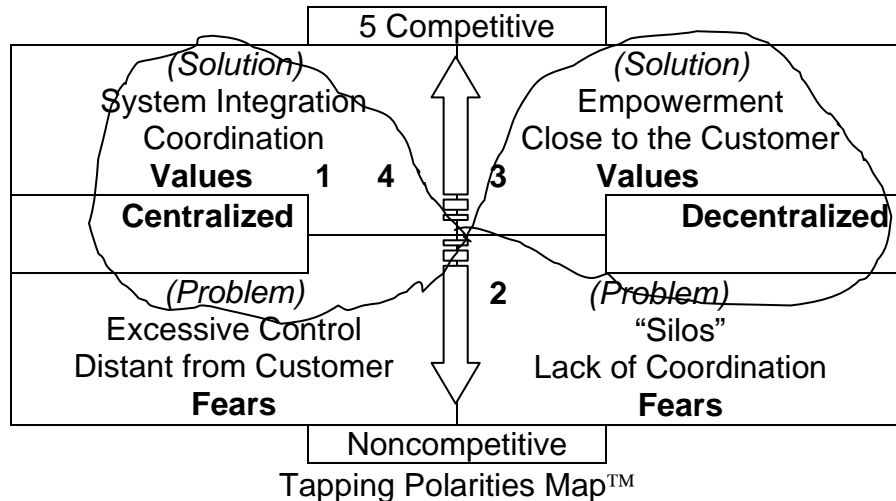
Tapping Polarities – A Summary Introduction

- ½ of a polarity looks very much like a problem to solve and it's incredibly easy to put data together to support that assertion. 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; and/or 3) How thorough our logic, research and 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. When a polarity is treated as a problem to solve, being right is the easy part – there are two rights that are accurate in every polarity! There are also two wrongs...Either point of view taken on its own while accurate, isn't the complete picture.
- There currently is not common understanding of the value of “both/and” thinking.

Using “both/and” polarity thinking to turn resistance into a valuable resource for generative and sustainable change.

1. **Values come in pairs, and therefore need to be addressed in pairs!** So why aren't they? Because we tend to prefer certain poles, and our pole preferences are a combination of our preferred values and the corresponding fears associated with the downside of the opposite pole. A person or group prefers one pole over another because 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. Turn on the news and listen to the polarization – positive stereotyping MY upside benefits (as if it has no downside through overemphasis on one value to the neglect of the other), and negatively stereotyping the OTHER value's downside as if it has no corresponding upside...Most often these points of view are accompanied by personal attacks and positioning MY point of view as if OUR FUTURE DEPENDS ON IT (which it does, halfway) and the OTHER person's point of view as ENDANGERING OUR FUTURE...That negative oscillation is often called “polarization” and it is a negative oscillation and a vicious cycle...These are avoidable if either/or and both/and thinking competencies are available to us.
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.

Tapping Polarities – A Summary Introduction

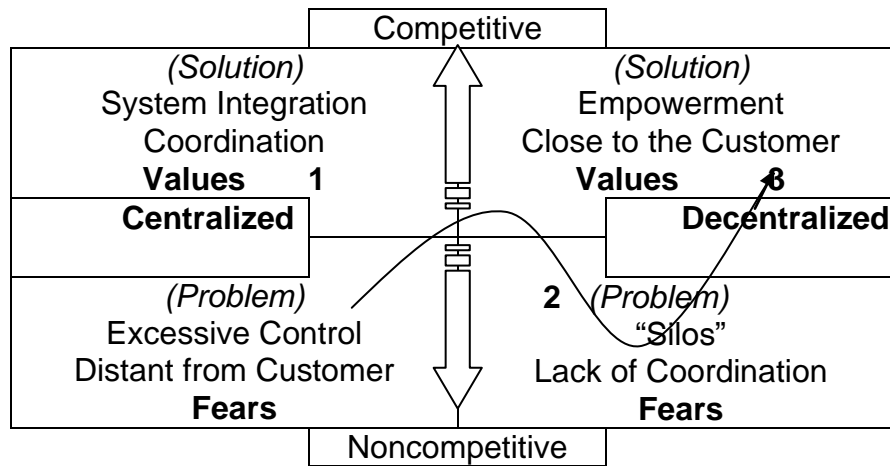


3. Getting unstuck. If a system were in the downside of Centralized, the normal flow would be to go to the upside of Decentralized. (Remember the breathing map) If this normal flow is not happening, it is because some in the system are holding on to their value of System Integration and avoiding the Silos they fear. To get the system unstuck, one must first recognize that it is a polarity to tap. 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?
4. With a polarity to tap, 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, dysfunction increases to a point of uncompetitiveness by engaging in a costly struggle without sustainable, positive results. These are commonly referred to as “ditch-to-ditch driving” or “fixes that fail.”

5. Anticipate the learning curve – a key to sustainability and a practical application of what is commonly called “the learning organization.” 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.

Tapping Polarities – A Summary Introduction



Tapping Polarities

Map™

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.

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 resource for generative and sustainable change - Summary

- Values come in pairs!
- All polarities have two sets of values and fears that are in dynamic tension.
- Those resisting a shift from their preferred pole to the opposite pole are an essential resource for two 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

Tapping Polarities – A Summary Introduction

- 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 generative and sustainable high-performance.
- See IT, MAP and TAP IT, Track IT – *Xperience IT!*

How to effectively tap polarities for generative and sustainable high-performance.

1. Getting both up sides by identifying Action Steps to get those upsides
2. 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.

3. “Early Warning Signs” 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 “Early Warning Signs” indicators that you are in the downside of Centralization?

Customer complaints about lack of responsiveness.

What are the “Early Warning Signs” indicators that you are in the downside or Decentralization?

Customer complaints about inconsistency and mixed messages.

The above elements provide a somewhat deceptively simple summary for managing polarities well over time. There are many useful approaches we’ve developed to help individuals, teams and organizations navigate these tensions. I am saying this because the steps and the process is more elaborate than what is described in this summary overview, as you might imagine. For more information and training to understand and work with polarity/ies, please contact www.polaritymanagement.com or www.XperienceIT.com

Conclusion

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

Most often we learn about interdependent opposites (polarities) through ours or others’ experience informally and implicitly. Making the distinction between problems and

Polarity Management – A Summary Introduction

polarities more explicit and providing a practical, useful, tool and process helps unleash the generative and sustainable high-performance available to us in all polarities. Leaders, teams, organizations, and nations that develop the ability to distinguish between solvable problems and unsolvable polarities – and can tap the generative and sustainable high-performance available in polarities will outperform those that can't over time.

For purposes of this summary description, here are three quick examples of polarities in business literature. I have a lengthy and detailed reference list I can provide you with if you are interested. Please contact me directly if you'd like a copy.

- 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-resolution 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.

If you, your team, or your organization is experiencing polarization, increasing frustration, and incivility – all classic signs of one or several mismanaged polarities – call or e-mail and let's work together to get out of the vicious cycles and/or pendulum swings and polarOPTIMIZE! Generative and sustainable high-performance is closer than you might think.

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