

Polarity Practitioners

And

Volume Two: Chapter 38

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

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Themes Found in And: Volume Two

Volume Two is more of a resource book than a linear narrative; every chapter can be referenced by theme. The authors have identified up to three themes their chapters most directly address. One way you may find this book useful is to identify the theme(s) of greatest interest to you and focus on the chapters that include them.

Theme	Chapter
• Consulting & Leadership	1, 2, 4-23, 25, 26, 28, 33-42
• IT & Tech	6, 18, 22
• Healthcare	19-24, 32
• Learning & Education	2, 9-12, 14, 17, 19, 24, 27, 30, 32, 34, 40, 41
• Social & Cultural	1-5, 26-29, 31, 35-39, 42
• Faith & Spiritual	3, 11, 28, 29
• Democracy & Politics	1, 4, 5, 25, 30, 31
• Methodology & Model	3, 6-10, 12-14, 17, 20-24, 26, 27, 29-42

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Introduction to And: Volume Two and Authors

Barry Johnson

And: Volume One is a foundational book for understanding what polarities are and how they work. Polarities are interdependent pairs that need each other to be successful over time. Because they are interdependent, we connect the two poles of a polarity with the word “*And*.”

One central polarity from Volume One is Claiming Power *And* Sharing Power. Volume One and Volume Two can be seen in the context of this polarity. Volume One is an example of me claiming power while Volume Two is about sharing power. In Volume One, I am talking; in Volume Two, I am joining you in listening.

About the Authors

When it came to inviting people to contribute to And: Volume Two – Applications, I chose those who have graduated from our two-year Polarity Mastery Program at Polarity Partnerships. They are all well-grounded in Polarity Thinking™ and represent a variety of disciplines and life experiences. They were invited to write a chapter and to invite other practitioners to co-author their chapter if they desired. I am grateful for their response and for the richness they have created.

Section One: Polarity Thinking Supports Radical Possibilities for Equity

This opening section directly addresses the polarity Dominant Culture *And* Marginalized Cultures by listening to polarity practitioners who are members of one or more marginalized groups. They are providing us with perspectives from the marginalized about how a polarity lens can be useful in addressing marginalization. This section provides a context for looking back at Volume One and looking forward to the rest of Volume Two.

Section Two: Expanded Applications of Polarity Thinking

The rest of the book provides a wide range of perspectives and experiences from an extended group of caring and creative people. Each has made a solid connection between their passion and Polarity Thinking. It is a feast of thought and experience.

I think I speak for all of the co-authors of And: Volume Two in hoping that you find this book useful in your own efforts to make a difference.

Enjoy, Barry

Find bio and contact info for all lead authors for each chapter at
www.polaritypartnerships.com/certified-polarity-practitioners

Polarity-Based Inquiry

Cliff Kayser, MSHR, MSOD, PCC

The art of progress is to preserve order amid change and to preserve change amid order. ~ Alfred North Whitehead²⁰⁸

The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between the two, the leader must become a servant and a debtor. That sums up the progress of an artful leader. ~ Max DePree²⁰⁹

You know the adage “People resist change.” It is not really true. People are not stupid. People love change when they know it is a good thing. No one gives back a winning lottery ticket. What people resist is not change per se, but loss. When change involves real or potential loss, people hold on to what they have and resist the change. ~ Ronald A. Heifetz²¹⁰

The quotes above capture the essence of Arnold Beisser’s Paradoxical Theory of Change²¹¹ which Barry Johnson discussed in *And: Volume One – Foundations*, Chapter 13.²¹² This chapter is a Paradoxical Theory of Change “how-to” for the art of progress and artful leadership that relies on using people’s “resistance” as wisdom for defining reality in order *And* change. We explore how the impact of thinking competencies in order *And* change makes the difference between dueling gap polarization and leveraging dual gaps. Variations of this approach appear in *Volume One*, Chapters 16 and 17, while unique support for this chapter is provided by Chapters 29, 30, 37, and 38.²¹³ Following are details and discussion of the case application.

Case Description

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) measures employees’ perceptions of whether – and to what extent – conditions characteristic of successful organizations are present in their agencies by administering the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS). A department (“Department”) focused on biotechnology in global health and safety for one of the nation’s oldest and largest agencies requested Polarity Thinking™ principles, tools, and consulting/coaching support in an effort to improve the Department’s low FEVS scores. In the 2014 project-launch meeting

²⁰⁸ Whitehead, A. N. From the series “Great Ideas of Western Man.” Smithsonian American Art Museum, 1964.

²⁰⁹ DePree, Max. *Leadership is an Art*. Michigan State University Press, 1987.

²¹⁰ Heifetz, R. A., Linsky, M., and Grashow, A. *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*. Harvard Business Press, 2009.

²¹¹ Beisser, A. “The Paradoxical Theory of Change.” In Fagan, J. and Shepherd, I.L., (Eds.) *Gestalt Therapy Now*. Harper & Row, 1970.

²¹² Johnson, Barry. *And: Making a Difference by Leveraging Polarity, Paradox or Dilemma. Volume One – Foundations*. HRD Press, 2020.

²¹³ Ibid.

with his senior team, the leader (“Leader”) shared a number of complex issues he believed were responsible for the Department’s low FEVS scores. We had no idea how those challenges would be compounded, or how the success of Polarity Thinking in this Department would initiate its use throughout the organization.

Outcomes: Short and Long Term Success

Between 2015-2018, the Leader and his Department faced a change of agency leadership, a new administration post-presidential election, and an escalation of global disruptions in the industry the agency serves. Despite multiplying and escalating challenges, FEVS scores in the Leader’s Department improved as scores in other agency Departments declined. In 2018, to expand the use of Polarity Thinking principles, the Department’s Center for Training and Organization Development (CTOD) received training and access to a suite of online resource tools available through Polarity Partnerships. Today, CTOD’s Training curriculum offers a basics course in Polarity Thinking, and mapping polarities is part of skill and competency development in training for courses in communication, change, and conflict. CTOD’s internal OD consulting work is enhanced by its ability to use the Polarity Assessment™ (another tool in the suite of online resources) to create custom polarity-based performance assessments for individuals, teams, and the organization.

Overview of a Polarity-Based Inquiry

The mantra is: *Start slow with SMALL to go big and go fast.*

- Seeing: Start slow by answering “where” are we going, “why” are we going there, and “who” needs to be part of the process for getting there.
- Mapping: Answers “how” the process will happen and “what” questions will be addressed.
- Assessing: Answers “where” are we now in the dual gaps of order *And* change.
- Learning: Answers “what” questions are emerging.
- Leveraging: Go big and go fast by answering “what now” for dual-gap strategies.

Step 1: Seeing

Where and Why

The top of the Polarity Map® provides a place for the Greater Purpose Statement “GPS” to function as a “Global Positioning System.” The GPS “pins” the end point for the effort to determine “where we’re going” and “why we’re going there.” Going slow to get these questions answered early and clearly has great payoff both in the short and long-term.

When the Leader answered the GPS questions, a concern quickly arose. Internally focused FEVS scores were low, while external performance indicators relating to the Department’s mission of protecting the health and safety of the American people were quite high. The Leader wanted to ensure that focus on internal performance didn’t compromise the external performance successes. Therefore, both internal and external performance dimensions were included in the GPS to:

Gain and sustain improvement in FEVS scores, while continuing to deliver on the Department’s vision and mission.

Who

Who needs to be on-board for this challenge and/or opportunity if we are to be fully successful now, and over time?

Involving key stakeholders reduces risk of a future breakdown the same way preventative maintenance on a vehicle does before taking a long or important trip. The engine for progress in order *And* change is people. Failing to engage the people who will be impacted likely contributes to the reason there is a 70% breakdown rate of organizational change efforts.²¹⁴ When a malfunctioning GPS is part of the story, drama and frustration becomes another dimension in the failure.

Because of its size, a small cross-section of the Department was recruited and selected to act as a “design team” to represent key stakeholders across the system. They named it the “Polarity Design Team” (PDT). Diversity on design teams is crucial, and the Department sought to recruit between 8-12 people who had: 1) strong opinions, 2) broad knowledge of external client needs, and 3) internal organization perspectives from the top, mid-level, and front-line staff.

Fast-forward to the end of 2019. The Leader was a guest presenter sharing the case study of his Department’s success at a 3-day network leadership course at American University with over fifty of his fellow agency leaders from around the world in attendance. In his response to a question about the recruitment and selection of PDT members, the Leader shared a few unexpected “byproducts” of that process. First, the recruiting proved to be quite effective as a way to “market” and communicate the initiative. Second, the Leader had either not been aware or was reminded of several existing initiatives with similar goals. For example, an Employee Engagement Committee had been established a year prior, but was poorly resourced yet rich in member dedication and passion. By selecting individuals from those initiatives to serve on the PDT aligned the Department’s limited internal resources.

Step 2: Mapping**How**

How will key stakeholders (or a design team) answer key questions?

Figure 1 on the following page shows the Polarity Map for the Continuity (order) *And* Transformation (change) Polarity-based Inquiry that also integrates Past/Present *And* Present/Future.

What

Realities, defined by key stakeholders or design team, are based on four “what” questions that are focused on particular quadrants of the polarity. Each question is also considered from different stakeholder perspectives: Leader, Team, Organization, Customer, Broader Community, etc. This list can be modified based on the context and input from key stakeholders or design team.

²¹⁴ Nohria, N. and Beer, M. “Cracking the Code of Change.” Harvard Business Review, May-June 2000, p. 133. hbr.org/2000/05/cracking-the-code-of-change. Accessed February 26, 2020.

The Four “What” Questions of Polarity-Based Inquiry

Starting in the lower-left quadrant of *Figure 1*:

- “What problems are there?” Move *from Pain*: (-B)
- “What are the solutions to the problems?” Move *to Attain*: (+C)
- “What are the risks in the solutions?” Move *from Refrain*: (-D)
- “What must we not lose in the process?” Move *to Retain*: (+A)

These four questions align closely with two inquiry-based approaches: “S.W.O.T. Analysis” and Kegan and Lahey’s *Immunity to Change*.²¹⁵ Following is a summary of the four questions each asks in their inquiry process and the connection to the Polarity-based Inquiry questions. All of these are incorporated into the Polarity-based Inquiry template (*Figure 1*).

SWOT/Polarity-Based Inquiry Comparison

SWOT is a popular inquiry method used by leaders, teams, and organizations to conduct strategic planning and adapt to change. Starting in the upper left quadrant of *Figure 1*:

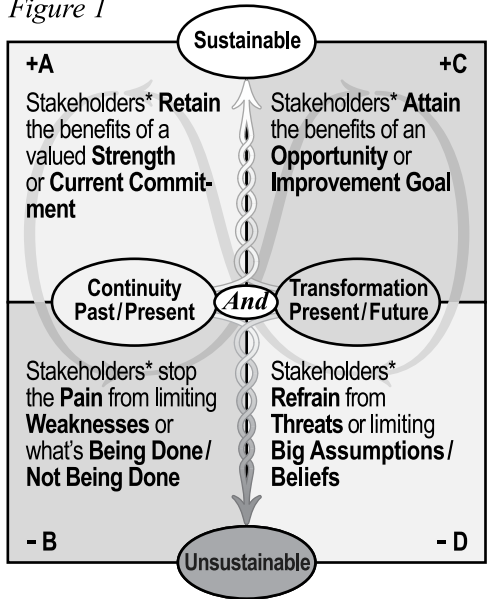
- What are the **Strengths** to **Retain**: (+A)
- What are the **Weaknesses** or the **Pain** to move from: (-B)
- What are the **Opportunities** to **Attain**: (+C)
- What are the **Threats** to **Refrain** from: (-D)

Immunity to Change/Polarity-Based Inquiry Comparison

Immunity to Change transforms people’s way of talking to help them avoid the causes of failed change. Starting in the upper right quadrant of *Figure 1*:

- What is the Commitment to an **Improvement Goal** to **Attain**: (+C)
- What is **Being Done/Not Being Done** Instead causing **Pain**: (-B)
- What is/are the Hidden/Competing **Commitments** to **Retain**: (+A)
- What are the **Big Assumptions/Beliefs** to **Refrain** from: (-D)

Figure 1



* Stakeholders are Leaders, Teams, Organizations, Customers, or Broader Communities

²¹⁵ Kegan, R., and Lahey, L. L. *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome It and Unlock Potential in Yourself and Your Organization*. Harvard Business Press, 2009.

Tips for the Step 2 Mapping Process

There are no “hard-and-fast” rules for the order of quadrants key stakeholders or a design team addresses first, second, third, or fourth.

If, in a particular organization system’s context the negative emotion level is high, trust level is low, or there is a combination of the two, it is helpful to start with the two upside quadrants, (+C) Attain and (+A) Retain, and then move to the two lower quadrants, (-B) Pain and (-D) Refrain. In addition, it may be advisable to engage support from an experienced external or internal facilitator who has a background and/or training certification in PACT™ (Polarity Approach for Continuity and Transformation).

Be creative about how to populate each of the quadrants. Use your entire room to physically move to locations as each quadrant is populated. Leverage the polarity of Fun *And* Serious.

Dual Gaps in Step 2

Gap-analysis is a common term in change management and typically refers to the gap between where you are and where you want to go, or the perception of a gap between negative and positive performance. *Figures 2 and 3* identify the dual gaps in Continuity *And* Transformation revealed in the Polarity-based Inquiry.

Figure 2: Present/Future – Transformation Gap

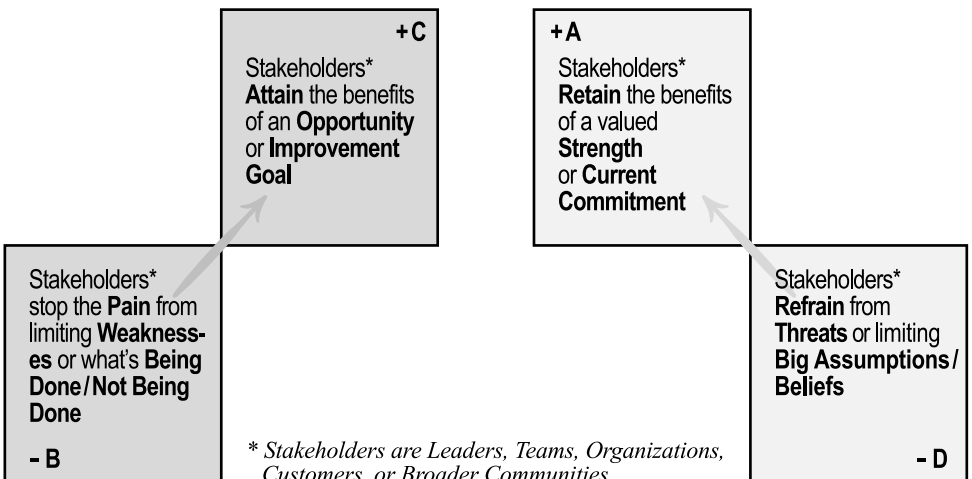
The Gap presents when you move *from* (-B: **Pain** from limiting Weakness or what’s Being Done/Not Being Done) *to* (+C: **Attain** the benefits of an Opportunity or Improvement Goal).

Figure 3: Past/Present – Continuity Gap

The Gap presents when you move *from* (-D: **Refrain** from Threats or limiting Big Assumptions/Beliefs) *to* (+A: **Retain** Strength or Current Commitment).

Figure 2: Transformation Gap

Figure 3: Continuity Gap



Dueling Gap Polarization – Misapplying *Or*-thinking

There is wisdom in both diagonals. Each gap focuses on an important dimension of the Continuity (order) *And* Transformation (change) polarity and each is technically correct, but incomplete. It is not unusual for people to hold a preference, a strong preference, or even view one or the other of the gaps as clearly superior. When *Or*-thinking is misapplied to preferences in an effort to alleviate or “solve” the tension between the gaps, dueling gap polarization results. This polarization undermines the ability to utilize the wisdom in both gaps. Often, the dysfunction escalates over time or flips back and forth between the gap “solutions.” In either case, the dysfunction escalation or negative pendulum swings is unsustainable.

Leveraging Dual Gaps – Applying *And*-thinking

The Step 2 mapping process increases awareness of the interdependent dynamic inherent to the four quadrants and dual gaps. This awareness creates an increased willingness and desire to apply *And*-thinking as the best and most creative approach to fully leverage people’s wisdom in the dynamic. This awareness of the interdependence is a significant supplement and enhancement to S.W.O.T. analysis and Immunity to Change. The Polarity-based Inquiry defines reality for people’s wisdom by:

- Differentiating the dual gaps in the four-question inquiry in the context of the interdependency;
- Integrating the dimensions of the four-question inquiry in the context of the interdependency;
- Highlighting the role *And*-thinking plays in leveraging dual gaps; and,
- Highlighting the role *Or*-thinking plays in dueling gap polarization.

Steps 3 and 4: Assessing and Learning

Where Are We

Building capability to use people’s “resistance” as a resource to define reality supports a solid foundation of trust for open and honest dialogue that has the capability to hold missing or avoided conversations. The quality and safety these types of spaces provided make possible the vulnerability and courage it takes to ask bolder questions and explore answers more confidently. Conversation that was previously transactional or positional becomes more engaging and creative.

During the guest presentation in 2019 discussed earlier, the Leader described this phase of the process as, “building the bridge as they walked on it.” Under the umbrella polarity of order *And* change, the PDT identified additional polarities they believed required focus and attention to sustainably achieve the GPS. They were: Tactical *And* Strategic; Timeliness/Efficiency *And* Quality Service Delivery; Employee Empowerment *And* Employee Compliance; and, Employee Interests *And* Organizational Interests.

Step 5: Leveraging

What Now

Leveraging a polarity involves developing dual strategy execution plans to maximize benefits for both poles and minimize limitations that result from over-focus on one pole to the neglect of the other. Together, the Action Steps and Early Warning Signs create conditions for the system to “go big and go fast” to achieve the GPS sustainably.

Action Steps: *Who will do what, by when, to maximize upside benefits for each pole of the polarity?*

Early Warnings: *What are the unique and measurable indicators for both poles of the polarity that indicate – early – you’re getting into the downsides?*

There are two additional categories of Action Steps:

High-Leverage Action Steps: *Are there Action Steps that could serve to benefit the upside of both poles of a polarity?*

An example of a High-Leverage Action Step the PDT identified was the decision to conduct a custom Polarity Assessment for the additional polarities identified in Steps 3 and 4. This single action benefitted each of the poles of the polarity (Continuity – Past/Present *And* Transformation – Present/Future). The additional data gathered established an aggregate performance benchmark and supported informed choices for the Department’s actions. Additionally, individual Programs received their own reports as benchmarks. A total of 70 Action Steps emerged from this High-Leverage Action Step.

Super High-Leverage Action Steps: *Is there an Action Step that supports the upside benefits of both poles of multiple polarities?*

The PDT examined the 70 Action Steps identified to determine if there were any Super-high leverage Action Steps among them. Three fit the criterion. A fourth Super-high leverage Action Step was identified to take full advantage of the other three, and was used in performance plans for all front-line managers and senior leaders in the Department to ensure implementation.

In the guest presentation at American University described earlier, the Leader said of these Super high-leverage Action Steps:

I’m pretty convinced they played a critical role improving the low FEVS scores related to employee engagement. However, I’m also convinced that if in 2014 we would have said to our front-line managers and senior leaders, ‘Do these three things that are now in your new performance plan’ – I honestly don’t think it would have worked... The process was ultimately as important or perhaps even more so, than the actions themselves.

Conclusion

This chapter shared an artful leadership “how-to” process to define reality, capture “resistance” wisdom, and artfully progress order *And* change. *And*-thinking for leveraging dual gaps was recognized as a key to avoid dueling gap polarization caused by misapplying *Or*-thinking.

Find bio and contact info for author Cliff Kayser at
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

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