
Polarity Thinking and Oshry's Organic Systems Framework

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The fundamental business of all human systems is based in a dual need to survive and develop. A system expresses its power through individuation and differentiation, its love through homogenization and integration.

~ Barry Oshry

Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic.¹

~ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

This chapter explores powerful intersections between the work of Barry Oshry² and Barry Johnson³ to support robust system outcomes for leaders, teams, and organization systems. Specific focus is given to key stakeholder conditions contributing to empowerment and avoiding disempowerment in the context of two polarities inherent to Oshry's Organic System Framework. Note that Key Stakeholders are those who are or will be impacted by a planned change process.

Engaging Key Stakeholders

Oshry's work examines the power of key stakeholders in organization systems from "Top, Middle, Bottom, and Customer" (TMBC) perspectives. His new perspective expands on our general view of TMBC as only hierarchal. This supplemental perspective revealed that, depending on the context of work processes, all of us can function in any of the TMBC role relationships regardless of our hierarchal position. The choices we make as key stakeholders in our TMBC roles and relationships as they relate to *both* the hierarchy *And* the conditions have a profound impact on power.

The following *Figures 1-4* provide a high-level summary of the process framed as "stories" – conditions, responses and outcomes – that each key stakeholder might follow when leading from any TMBC condition. In summary, when key stakeholders make Conscious Choice Responses in the context of each condition it leads to Empowerment and Robust System Outcomes while Blind/Reflexive Responses in the context of each condition leads to Disempowerment and Weak System Outcomes. Seeing these TMBC conditions improves capability and capacity of key stakeholders to attain and sustain Oshry's "Total System Empowerment."⁴

¹ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/134364-power-without-love-is-reckless-and-abusive-and-love-without>

² Oshry, B. *Seeing systems: Unlocking the mysteries of organizational life*. Berrett-Koehler, 1995.

³ Johnson, Barry. *And: Making a Difference by Leveraging Polarity, Paradox or Dilemma. Volume One: Foundations*. HRD Press, 2020.

⁴ <https://govleaders.org/total-system-power.htm>

Figure 1: Leading from the Top

Robust System Outcome		I/Others Share Power	
EMPOWERING	Empowerment	↑	<i>"I'm shaping the system, diagnosing the dangers and opportunities structuring and resourcing the system so that it is better able to cope and prospect."</i>
	Conscious Choice Response	↑	<i>I'm a Developer. "My work is strengthening the capacity of the system to cope and prospect."</i>
	Condition	↑	<i>"Things are complex, complicated, changing, and uncertain. Danger and opportunity are everywhere."</i>
Relationship Role		When You're a Top	
DISEMPOWERING	Condition	↓	<i>"Things are complex, complicated, changing, and uncertain. Danger and opportunity are everywhere."</i>
	Blind/Reflexive Response	↓	<i>"I'm responsible, so I will suck-up responsibility."</i>
	Disempowerment	↓	<i>"I'm not doing enough or doing it well-enough. I'm letting everyone (people) and everything (system) down."</i>
Weak System Outcome		I/Others Lose Power	

Figure 2: Leading from the Middle

Robust System Outcome		I/Others Share Power	
EMPOWERING	Empowerment	↑	<i>"I'm sharing system 'intelligence' to resolve issues that otherwise land on Tops or Bottoms."</i>
	Conscious Choice Response	↑	<i>I'm an Integrator. "My work is to help others deal with their issues, which are not mine."</i>
	Condition	↑	<i>"Things are so conflicted. Demands, priorities, and pressures constantly change."</i>
Relationship Role		When You're a Middle	
DISEMPOWERING	Condition	↓	<i>"Things are so conflicted. Demands, priorities, and pressures constantly change."</i>
	Blind/Reflexive Response	↓	<i>"I'm responsible, so I try to resolve everyone's issues or try to resolve others' conflicts."</i>
	Disempowerment	↓	<i>"I'm not pleasing others. I'm feeling weak, incompetent."</i>
Weak System Outcome		I/Others Lose Power	

Figure 3: Leading from the Bottom

Robust System Outcome		I/Others Share Power
EMPOWERING	Empowerment	↑ <i>"I'm closest to Customer work and I'm using that closeness together with my brain power, experience, and expertise to fix problems or see they get fixed."</i>
	Conscious Choice Response	↑ <i>I'm a Fixer. "My work is shift from 'they are responsible' to 'I am responsible'."</i>
	Condition	↑ <i>"Things don't work (tools, structure, rules, procedures), and there's a lack of information."</i>
Relationship Role		When You're a Bottom
DISEMPowering	Condition	↓ <i>"Things don't work (tools, structure, rules, procedures), and there's a lack of information."</i>
	Blind/Reflexive Response	↓ <i>"I'm suffering from the actions / inactions of insensitive, incompetent, or malicious Tops and Middles."</i>
	Disempowerment	↓ <i>"I'm looking up the chain to those responsible for fixing these problems."</i>
Weak System Outcome		I/Others Lose Power

Figure 4: Leading as a Customer

Robust System Outcome		I/Others Share Power
EMPOWERING	Empowerment	↑ <i>I let the system know how well it is doing or what it thinks it is doing, and the degree to which parts are working together to deliver outcomes."</i>
	Conscious Choice Response	↑ <i>I'm a Validator. "My work is to share responsibility for process and outcomes."</i>
	Condition	↑ <i>"Things are not coming as fast as I want/need, at the quality I want/need, and at a fair cost."</i>
Relationship Role		When You're a Customer
DISEMPowering	Condition	↓ <i>"Things are not coming as fast as I want/need, at the quality I want/need, and at a fair cost."</i>
	Blind/Reflexive Response	↓ <i>"I'm angry at about irrelevance of my input and being told 'Be patient' or 'We know better.'"</i>
	Disempowerment	↓ <i>"I'm the customer, I'm not responsible for the craziness of this system – others are."</i>
Weak System Outcome		I/Others Lose Power

In the next section, we explore two polarities all key stakeholders in organization systems face. First, the interdependent processes involving Power *And* Love. The second, the interdependency between Survive *And* Develop. For both of these, harnessing key stakeholder power is a critical factor in sustainable success.

Two Polarities in Oshry's Organic Systems

We use the 5-Step S.M.A.L.L.™ process and Polarity Maps to make the two implicit polarities in Oshry's work explicit; Power Processes *And* Love Processes, and Survive *And* Develop. The generic wisdom of Oshry's Organic Systems Framework has been organized in universal Polarity Map™ templates (*Figures 5 and 6*). Similarly, organization systems can capture their specific/unique TMBC wisdom using their own Polarity Map templates and the 5-Step S.M.A.L.L. process.

Power Process *And* Love Process (*Figure 6*)

Step 1) TMBC Seeing: According to Oshry, “A system expresses its power through individuation and differentiation, its love through homogenization and integration.” Power *And* Love each comprise unique *systems processes*. Power Processes involves “Differentiation” – processing difference – and “Individuation” – processing separateness (+A Values). The Love Processes involves “Homogenization” – processing commonality – and “Integration” – processing togetherness (+C Values).

Step 2) TMBC Mapping: The upside benefits of Power Processes appear in the upper left quadrant (+A). An over-focus on Power Processes without focus on Love Processes appear in the lower left quadrant (-B). The upside benefits of Love Processes appear in the upper right quadrant (+C). An over-focus on Love Processes without focus on Power Processes appear in the lower right quadrant (-D).

Steps 3 and 4) TMBC Assessing and Learning: It is important to measure the degree to which individuals and the system are experiencing a maximization of benefits of both poles (+A, +C Values) and minimizing the limitations (-B, -D Fears). This can occur through dialogue or, with more precision, by using the Polarity Assessment™⁵. In Learning, we make meaning of assessment results including factors that may be contributing to or mitigating high performance.

Step 5) TMBC Leveraging: Achieving and sustaining a “Robust System/Empowering” (Greater Purpose) and avoiding a “Weak System/Disempowering” (Deeper Fear) is illustrated in *Figure 6* with a well-leveraged infinity loop; both upsides of Power *And* Love are being maximized and both downsides of Power *And* Love are being minimized. This outcome is the result of Steps 1-4, plus identifying and implementing Action Steps and Early Warnings:

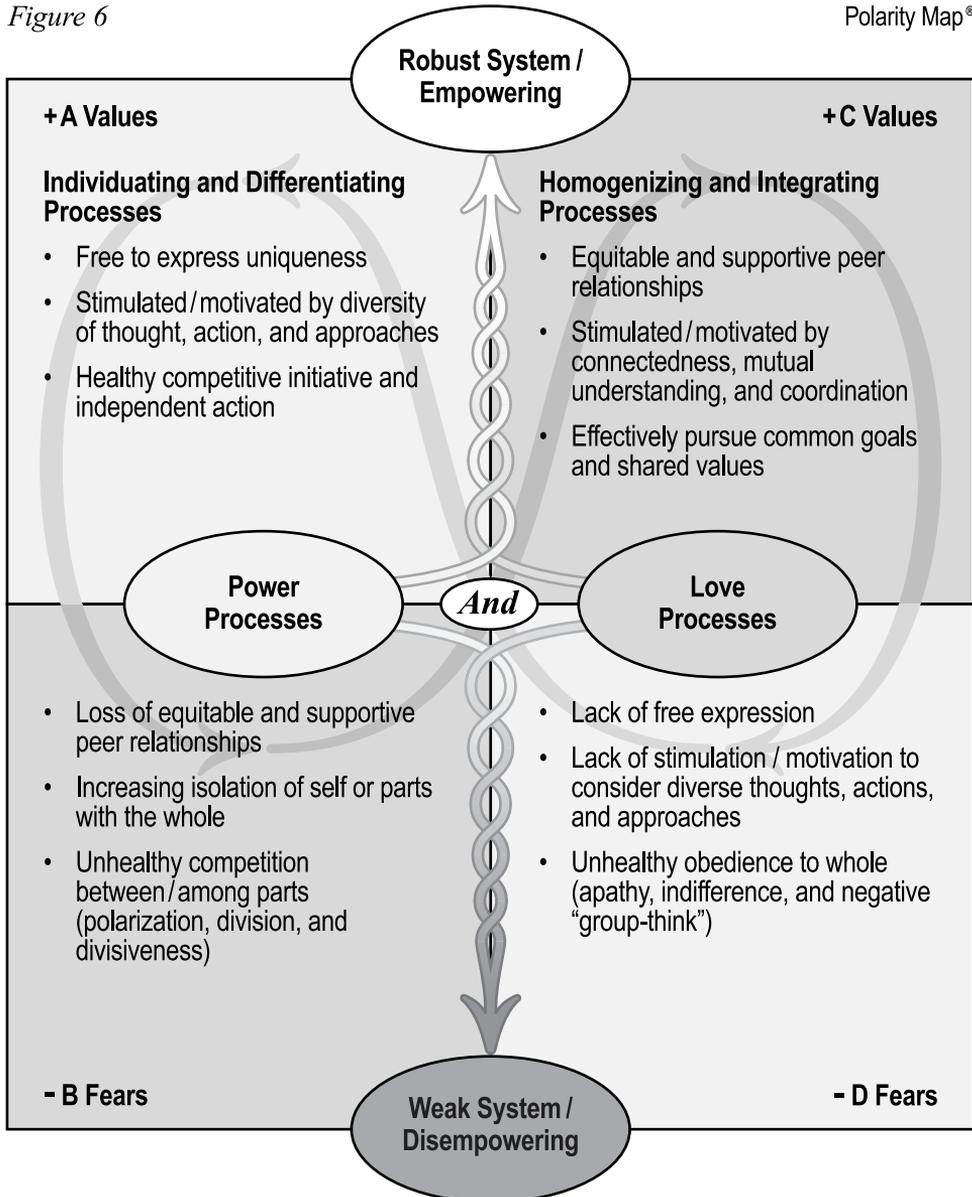
- **Action Steps:** What are the Conscious Choice Responses by TMBC's that will empower both Power/Differentiating *And* Love/Integrating, including strategies for *Developing, Integrating, Fixing, and Validating?*

⁵ The Polarity Assessment™. <https://www.polaritypartnerships.com/the-polarity-approach> 2020

- **Early Warnings:** What will key stakeholders track to help ensure blind/reflexive responses don't lead to disempowering outcomes for Power *And* Love?

Figure 6

Polarity Map®



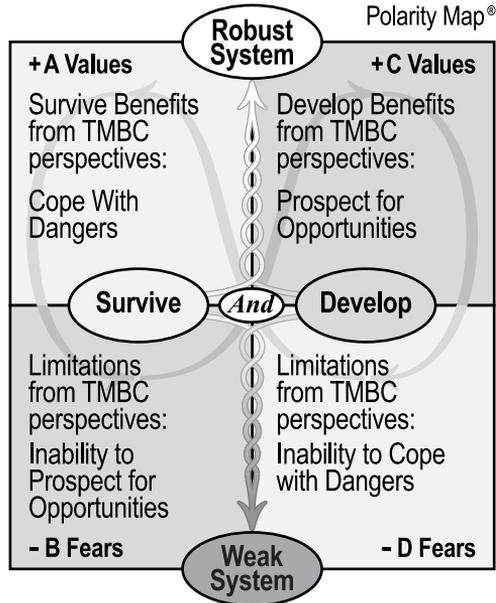
“Power without love is reckless and abusive (-B), and love without power is sentimental and anemic (-D). Power at its best (+A) is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love. (+C)” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Survive *And* Develop (Figure 5)

Step 1) TMBC Seeing: According to Oshry, the fundamental business of all human systems is based in a dual need to Survive *And* Develop.

Step 2) TMBC Mapping: To Survive, organization systems Cope with Dangers (+A). To Develop, systems Prospect for Opportunities (+C). An over-focus on the Survive pole, without consideration for the Develop pole, leads to an Inability to Prospect for Opportunities (-B). This, in turn, will have the organization seek out the benefits of the Develop pole; Prospect for Opportunities (+C). An over-focus on the Develop pole to the neglect of the Survive pole leads to the Inability to Cope with Dangers (-D). When an organization system becomes aware of this inability, it returns to seeking the benefits of the Survive pole (+A). This oscillating interdependency between Survive *And* Develop is then inherently part of the fundamental business of all human systems.

Figure 5: Survive *And* Develop, Integrating TMBC Perspectives



Steps 3 and 4) Assessing and Learning: Though identical to the previous Steps 3 and 4, this is worth repeating. It is important to measure the degree to which individuals and the system are experiencing a maximization of benefits of both poles (+A, +C Values) and minimizing the limitations (-B, -D Fears). This can occur through dialogue or, with more precision, by using the Polarity Assessment. In Learning, we make meaning of assessment results including factors that may be contributing to or mitigating high performance.

Step 5) TMBC Leveraging: Achieving and sustaining a “Robust System/Empowering” (Greater Purpose) and avoiding a “Weak System/Disempowering” (Deeper Fear) involves developing Action Steps and Early Warnings strategies:

- **Action Steps:** What are the Conscious Choice Responses by TMBC Relationship Roles for empowering Survive (to cope) *And* Develop (to prospect), including leveraging strategies for *Developing, Integrating, Fixing, and Validating*?
- **Early Warnings:** What will key stakeholders track to help ensure blind/reflexive responses don’t lead to disempowering outcomes for Survive *And* Develop?

Or-thinking Without *And*-thinking: Getting Hooked and Stuck by Power *Or* Love

Exploring weak systems and disempowering outcomes through a polarity lens begins by looking at the root source – misapplying the *Or*-thinking competency to

polarities that require *And*-thinking. *Figures 7 and 8* show how leaders, teams and organization systems get hooked and stuck as they over-focus – or “choose between” – *either* Power Process *Or* Love Process. Both figures illustrate Reality 51 from Volume One, “A powerful value/fear diagonal when combined with *Or*-thinking gets us “hooked” by a false choice between the poles. We become blind to the other value/fear diagonal and over-tolerate the downside of our valued pole. We then get “stuck” there – unable to access the upside of the pole that is feared.”⁶

How Key Stakeholders Get Hooked and Stuck by Power

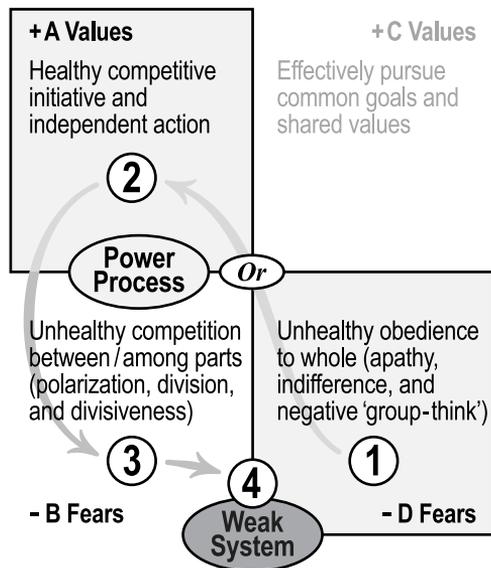
In *Figure 7*, you have an organization that recognizes that there is an “Unhealthy obedience to the whole” (1), and sees employees becoming apathetic, indifferent, and giving into group-think (-D Fears). Overall, there is a sense of disempowerment and a Weak System (4). *Or*-thinking is a seductive setup as it provides a “solution” that seems obvious; *either* have unhealthy obedience to the whole, *Or* have healthy competition.

Key Stakeholders rally around the Power Process and use incentives and recognition to promote healthy competitive initiatives and independent action (2). This “solution” can become so appealing, it might even be embedded in the “Value Pillars” of the organization or competency models; we Value Independent Action!

Getting Hooked lies here; the actions *did* move the organization from a problem toward their perceived solution. But the *narrative was incomplete*, and the solution became another setup. As the organization focused only on competitive initiatives and independence, unhealthy competition between and among the parts started to show up (-B Fears). The resulting polarization, division and divisiveness (3) brings them full circle; disempowerment and a Weak System (4).

Now they’re stuck. They’ve embedded Independent Action (1) into the corporate “Value Pillars”, and caused an implicit or explicit disdain/fear of Unhealthy obedience to the whole (1), effectively sidelining common goals and shared values (+C Values). Herein lies the paradoxical twist; the organization will not only feel the down sides of Power Process (3), but will *also* start to embody what they

Figure 7: Hooked and Stuck in Power Processes



⁶ Johnson, Barry. *And: Making a Difference by Leveraging Polarity, Paradox or Dilemma. Volume One: Foundations.* HRD Press, 2020.

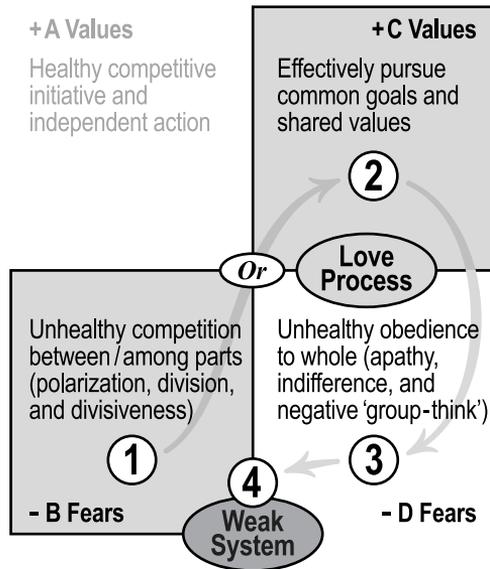
originally feared from the very beginning apathy, indifference and negative ‘group think’ (1) – as employees feel disempowered inside a polarized, divided and weak system (4). Has this ever been your experience?

How Key Stakeholders Get Hooked and Stuck by Love

A run through *Figure 8* shows the results of another organizational setup; you *either* have unhealthy competition, *Or* you have common goals.

(1) The organization feels there is unhealthy competition between and among the parts. (2) A “charge!” is led toward the pursuit of common goals and “Shared Values” becomes a corporate slogan reinforced with competency models, incentives, and reward programs. (3) The over-emphasis on having common goals and values lead to an unhealthy obedience to the whole. The lack of seeing the benefits (+A Values) associated with independent action and fear of returning to unhealthy competition (1) keeps Key Stakeholders from moving toward healthy competition and the system becomes disempowered and weak (4). Have you ever seen this happen?

Figure 8: Hooked and Stuck in Love Processes



As seen in *Figure 7* and *Figure 8*, when dealing with a polarity, misapplying *Or*-thinking is the root source of becoming stuck in the disempowering fears of the preferred pole (-B Fears). In an ironic twist, you *also* end up with the negative consequences of the unseen or ignored pole (-D Fears) so you inhabit the down sides of both. *And*-thinking is antidotal and a necessary process for empowerment.

Summary

This chapter explored the Key Stakeholder engagement intersections in Oshry and Johnson’s work that supports systems in leveraging interdependent challenges *And* opportunities. Oshry’s examination of disempowering and empowering conditions was viewed through the 5-Step S.M.A.L.L. process for two inherent polarities. Lastly, Key Stakeholder disempowerment through the misapplication of *Or*-thinking was identified.

A deep bow of gratitude to “Barrys” Oshry and Johnson for supporting this chapter, for the grandness of their hearts/minds, and for each living-out their theories.

About Cliff Kayser – www.polaritypartnerships.com/certified-polarity-practitioners