

**Whole System Transformation Through a Polarity Lens:
An Idea Whose Time Has Come**

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Executive Summary

Increased rates of change are driving the need to respond to ever more complex problems. More and more situations are emerging where factions take different positions seemingly ‘at odds’ with one another. Nowhere is this more present than in the work of Whole System Transformation. This chapter describes an approach that can enhance all transformation work. **Regardless of the method you have chosen to use in your transformation effort, a Polarity Thinking approach will help you:**

- Accomplish the goals that you have set out to achieve;
- Accelerate the time that it takes you to achieve these goals; and
- Sustain the gains you have made over time.

Seeing transformation work through a Polarity Lens will enable you to address 5 common issues that often plague transformation efforts:

1. Resistance to change whether it stems from fear of the unknown, a desire to preserve the ways things have been done in the past, or concerns about the visions defined during the transformation process;
2. The complexity that comes with engaging multiple stakeholders with sometimes common, but often different needs and interests;
3. Conflict between groups who can’t seem to agree on why the transformation is needed, what changes need to be made, or how to make these changes;
4. Chronic Issues that keep showing up over and over again with no lasting resolution; and
5. Cross Cultural Issues that are becoming increasingly important as organizations continue to expand with operations spanning the globe.

Polarities are energy pairs that are interdependent. They can support one another in pursuit of a common purpose. Whether it’s breathing that requires both inhaling and exhaling to support life, providing both tough love and gentle love to create a healthy environment for a child growing up, or paying attention to both cost and quality for an organization to succeed, polarities show up in many aspects of our lives and work.

We believe that Transformation AND Continuity is the most fundamental polarity that needs to be leveraged in any transformation effort. **If you want radical Transformation, go after creating radical Continuity.** The firmer the ground people stand on from the certainty that comes along with Continuity, the more willing they are to take the leap of faith into the world of Transformation. Appreciative Inquiry, Future Search and other Whole System Transformation approaches include lessons learned from the past in crafting a collective future. However as a field overall, we believe there has been an over-focus on transformation and change and not as much time and attention on the continuity that comes with seeing the wisdom in “the way things have been done around here.” If we continue to choose this path, we run the risk of generating greater resistance, creating stuckness, waste, a burden to the bottom line, and an unnecessary irritant to those involved.

The chapter describes other key polarities in addition to Continuity *and* Transformation you can leverage during transformation efforts, a guide for how to unleash an organization’s

enormous supply of energy that's contained in these polarities, and offers a way to address some of the most challenging issues facing our organizations, nations and planet.

In the movie, Oh God with actor George Burns, when asked what it was like to be God, he replied, "It's great, except that I haven't figured out how to make one of anything."

Whole System Transformation Work Seen Through A Polarity Lens

Imagine your organization has a unique opportunity. Maybe you need to create a bold vision charting a new course for your future. Perhaps change is long overdue and you need to radically accelerate the pace of developing and delivering products and services to remain competitive in the marketplace. Strategy implementation, culture change, you name it. Whatever your situation, major changes are required in the way you do business. These times require a *transformation* in your organization. Incremental change around the edges won't get the job done. You must bring about fundamental changes in the thinking, behavior and results achieved by hundreds if not thousands of people. The task is daunting but you've got a great leadership team and you're up for the challenge.

You're in a meeting exploring this challenge when a question is raised: *"How are we going to get the rest of the organization's buy in to these new ways of working?"*

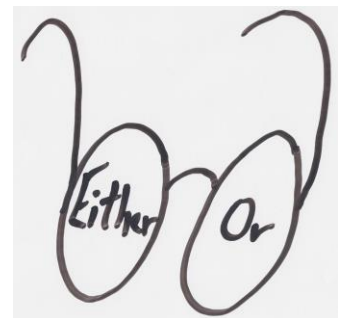
This isn't a new topic for your organization or any other. It's *the* age-old question when it comes to transformation.



Quickly the conversation focuses on the split between your leadership team and much of the rest of the organization. **Why is what is so clear to you not registering with so many others?** You've described today's "burning platform," an exciting vision for tomorrow, and a few key steps that will move the organization in the direction of that vision. And yet there are still people who want to continue doing their work as they always have. No sense of urgency. No desire to change. In Truth **the more you focus on transformation, the more others in the organization seem to hold on to the way things have been.**

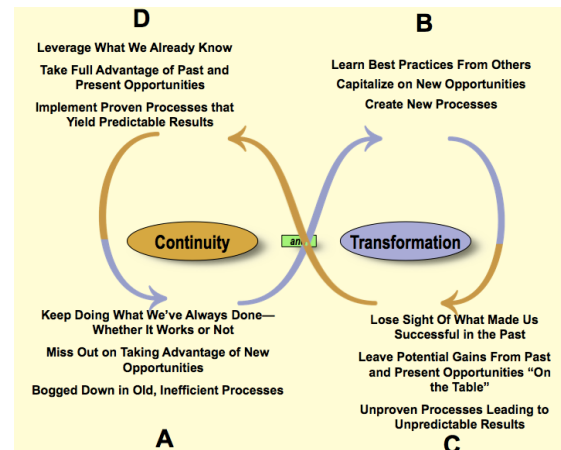
The "Either / Or" Transformation Lens: Seeing Only Part of the Picture

Looking through an "Either / Or" lens, your leadership team and much of the rest of your organization end up in one of two camps. The first camp knows that Transformation is the only path to the company's future success. Do it well and you can learn from others and implement best practices, capitalize on exciting new opportunities and create new processes needed so you can win in the marketplace. What are you and others in the organization focused on transformation worried about? Stay stuck in the past and you're on a slippery slope to keep doing what you've always done whether it's working or not, missing out on exciting new opportunities and not getting needed work done because you're bogged down in old, inefficient processes. **As leaders of the organization you are clear, committed and your energy is focused on one thing: the organization's greater good.** So build a "gap analysis" strategy to move from Point A (where we are now) to Point B (where we need to be in the future).



In the second camp, others are resisting the needed changes. They argue that keeping things as they've always been is the way to go. Follow this path they say and you can leverage what we already know, take full advantage of past and present opportunities, and implement proven processes that lead to predictable results. What's their worst-case scenario? **Transform things too much to the neglect of continuity and we'll lose sight of what made us successful in the past, leave potential gains from past and present opportunities "on the table," and end up with unproven processes leading to unpredictable results.**

Figure 1



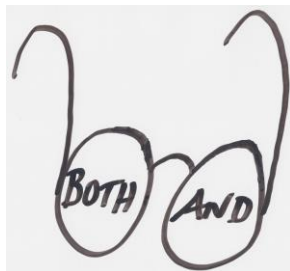
There is a *natural tension* between these two camps. This tension can deliver a **virtuous cycle** of increasingly better results over time – if well navigated from a “both/and” mindset. If, however, it is seen from an “either/or” perspective, the natural tension will easily become a **vicious cycle** in which everyone and the system loses.

In this case, people who need to collaborate end up in conflict. Each holds a common – though flawed – assumption of the other: “If I’m right, then you must be wrong.” **The stronger the case one group makes, the deeper the other digs in its heels.**

Two groups. One goal. Two solutions. Which one is right? They both are. **The problem is that each of them is only half-right.** Transformation AND Continuity is not a problem that can be solved from an “Either / Or” mindset. It’s a polarity that needs to be leveraged from a “Both / And” point of view.

The “Both / And” Lens: Seeing the Whole Picture

Let’s tell the same story, this time through a “Both / And” lens. You decide that transformation is the way to go. As change agents, you can see that if you keep doing what you’re doing, you’ll keep getting what you’ve always gotten. And that’s no longer good enough. You’ve been missing out on new market opportunities and new ways of working that are needed to compete in today’s ever-changing world. (A) (see Figure 1)



As the transformation effort gathers momentum, new – and better – ways of working begin to take hold throughout the organization. You begin succeeding in every way, integrating the “best of the best” from other organizations both inside and outside your industry. New customers, new products and new services are the order of the day. Your business quickly expands everything appears to be on track...until you realize it isn't. (B)

The transformation effort is strategic, yet it isn't the only strategic thing to do.

Paradoxically, transformation is not sustainable without also paying attention to continuity. Focus too much on new ways of working without enough focus at the same time on continuity and you'll find yourself in the downside of Transformation alone (C) – losing sight of what made you successful in the past, leaving potential gains “on the table,” and stumbling by following unproven practices that lead to unpredictable results. Now you have created another set of problems that need to be solved. The solution to these problems is to once again get back to what you've always done best, what's made you an industry leader for years. Leverage what you already know, take full advantage of past and present opportunities, and implement proven processes that lead to predictable results (D).

And so it goes...today's solution becoming tomorrow's problem. This is what we call the all too common “rubber band effect” that plagues so many transformation efforts. Things seem to be moving in the right direction and yet over time, it becomes harder and harder for these transformative changes to stick. The harder you try to fix each of these problems, the bigger they get. *The more each group is committed to the organization's success, the more energy ends up working against you in your organization.* **What you go after with the greatest persistence ends up creating the greatest resistance in others.**

Exasperated you ask yourself, “Why do we keep running into this same problem over and over again?”

If this scenario is familiar, you are an ideal candidate for supplementing your change strategy with a Polarity Lens and employing the Polarity Assessment for Continuity and Transformation approach.

Follow the counsel below and improve the achievability, speed, and sustainability of all your transformation work

Tap Polarities: Get The Energy in Your Transformation Effort Working For You

How do you break this vicious cycle of energy working against you?

Begin seeing your transformation work through a Polarity Lens

Truth #1: If you want radical transformation, you need to create equally radical continuity.

Polarities are interdependent pairs that can support one another in pursuit of a common purpose. They can also undermine each other if seen as an either/or problem to solve. **Polarities at their essence are unavoidable, unsolvable, unstoppable and indestructible.** Most importantly, they can be leveraged for a greater good. Like Transformation AND Continuity, both poles, or points of view, are needed for sustained organizational success.

Truth #2:
If you stop treating transformation work as a problem to solve you will be more successful by starting to leverage the energy of the Transformation AND Continuity polarity.

The answer to “Should we be transforming or building on the best from our past and present?” is “Yes.” Find ways to get people's energy for each pole, or point of view, working together and you create a virtuous cycle of energy working for the Transformation effort in your organization.

Once you do, you can tap this polarity by designing an effort that leverages the benefits of Transformation (B) and Continuity (D) and minimizes the costs of over-focusing

on either pole (C and A). *Neither Transformation nor Continuity is sustainable without the other over time.* Intentionally leverage both and you increase performance and gain a competitive advantage over any organization that sees one pole or the other as a solution to a problem. **A Polarity Lens supplements a traditional “gap analysis”** approach of moving from Point A to Point B by including wisdom from the entire Polarity Map in your planning and implementation for the future.

Truth #3: Leverage the benefits of both poles over time and you'll enjoy an unlimited supply of organizational energy working for you and what you're trying to achieve.

There are many other polarities baked into the work of transformation. Do you struggle with the challenges of delivering short-term results and investing in long-term development at the same time? How do you engage people in creating their own future while ensuring there is clear direction that provides the parameters within which they can work? Do you pay more attention to setting the right strategy or making sure you have smart tactics?

Over-focus on any one of these choices to the relative exclusion of the other too long and you'll undermine your success.

Truth #4: The fewer the people holding a pole or the less power they have in the organization, the more you need to listen to what they have to say.

When you're leveraging polarities well, the game changes. **Your biggest troublemakers become critical resources.** Think of it this way: they're paying attention to something you're not -- something you need to pay attention to in order to succeed. Majorities don't rule when it comes to leveraging polarities. The collective wisdom of all stakeholders is needed.

A Polarity Lens builds on and supplements:

- Problem Solving and
- Gap Analysis and
- Positive Thinking and
- Event based interventions

The Rich History and Exciting Future of Polarities

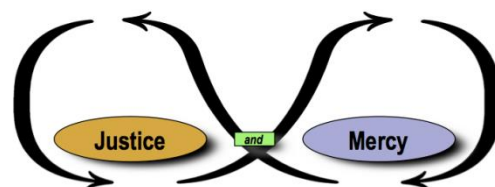
The Ancient Wisdom in Polarities

There has been an interest in the phenomena of interdependency for a long time. The clearest focus has been on interdependent pairs. It shows up earliest within faith communities. For example, within the 5,000+ year old Hindu tradition, there is the God, Ardha Nari, who is half masculine AND half feminine. Both are seen as essential. Hinduism acknowledges the difference and the interdependence of the two aspects of Ardha Nari.

Truth #5: Polarities are not new in your life. Polarities have been a source of curiosity, fascination, and a foundation for wisdom for thousands of years. Polarity energy is at play within this ancient wisdom

Another example earlier, is the double message about God within the four thousand year-old Jewish tradition:

On the one hand, Yahweh holds us accountable for our actions, defined as Justice. On the other hand, Yahweh is a source of unconditional love, defined as Mercy. (see Figure 2) Well, which is it?



Justice OR Mercy? The answer is, Yes. **Both are essential and they need each other.**

If we look at the 2,500 year old tradition of Taoism, Yin AND Yang **are two interdependent energies making one integrated energy system.** The message from Taoism is clear: we need both. Life comes from and is enhanced by combining the two.

Within Buddhism Justice and Mercy shows up as “An all loving God AND Karma.”

Within the two thousand year old Christian tradition, there is a reaffirmation of Justice AND Mercy. It is often called Law AND Grace. The wisdom continues. Within the 1,500-year-old tradition of Islam, the polarity of Justice AND Mercy is again reaffirmed as a central belief. This fits with the overlapping roots for Islam, Judaism and Christianity.

The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.

-F. Scott Fitzgerald

Polarities Have Been “Re-Discovered” Within Business

Truth #7: Polarities are entirely predictable. They behave the same way every time, all the time.

In the last 50 years, business has been paying more and more attention to “AND” thinking as a necessary addition to “OR” thinking. In the literature it goes by various names like, Paradox, Dilemma, or Tensions. The proposed solutions range from buzzwords such as **resilience, agility, mindfulness** and the like, **each an outcome of engaging in polarity thinking.** Business is paying attention because it is clear that Polarity Thinking provides a competitive advantage. There are 19 books in the appendix that support one or both of two messages:

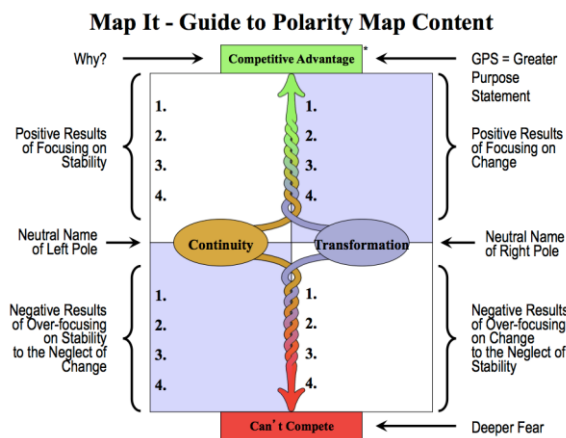
The language might be paradox, dilemma, tensions, or the genius of the “AND,” but we are all talking about the same thing: interdependent pairs in which the polarity energy system is at play.

Truth #8: Sustainably high performing organizations can transform well, in part, because they have created systems and processes that help them leverage some polarities well

Polarities are very predictable. They behave the same way every time, all the time. Using a Polarity Map makes it easy to translate the above truths into practical actions that will make a difference in your transformation work. Here are the key elements of a Polarity Map:

The Polarity Map: Anatomy of A Wisdom Organizer for Transformation Work

Figure 3



Truth #9: Highly effective transformational leaders are effective, in part, because their experience, intuition, and developed wisdom have led to them leveraging some polarities well

they capture that same picture but as one frame within the larger movie of an organization's ongoing life *over time*.

Some see a Polarity Map as another of the many 2 x 2 matrixes found in articles and books on creating effective organizations. It's that and much more. A SWOT analysis, one of the most popular of these 2 x 2's is a "snapshot" of current conditions in an organization, an accurate picture *at a particular point in time*. Since Polarity Maps include how an organization oscillates between poles,

Greater Purpose Statement. Also known as the "GPS," (coined by John Scherer) the Greater Purpose Statement acts as a North Star for your Polarity work. (see Figure 3). The GPS answers the question of **why to bother intentionally leveraging a particular polarity**. The first answer is "*To get the upsides of both poles.*" What is the benefit of getting the upsides of both poles? Something valued by both those who prefer the left pole and those who prefer the right pole – a Greater Purpose both sides can agree to. The GPS ensures an agreement without concessions. Instead of discovering common ground as an intersection of different groups' interests, the Polarity Map creates a larger common ground that includes views from all key stakeholders. The more those favoring each pole "win" by holding their ground, the more everyone "wins" by the map (and its upside benefits) becoming larger. In the example below (see Figure 4) the Greater Purpose Statement of leveraging the Providing Direction AND Inviting Participation polarity is to arrive at Smart Decisions and More Commitment in the organization.

Truth #10: The more complex the issue, the more stakeholders involved, the easier your life will be by publicly mapping the poles present

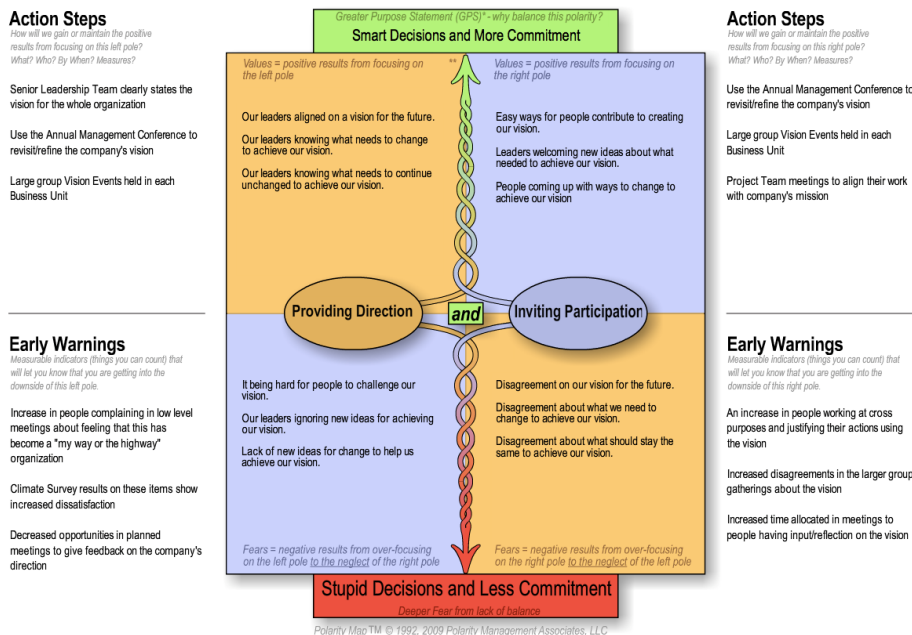
Deeper Fear. Another answer to the question, "*Why leverage this polarity well?*" is **to avoid the downsides of both poles**. What is a deeper fear to avoid under both downsides? This is the negative opposite of the "Greater Purpose Statement." For example, the negative opposite of the GPS, "Smart Decisions and More Commitment" could be "Stupid Decisions and Less Commitment." This is the deeper consequence from either downside of the Providing Direction and Inviting Participation polarity.

Two Poles. Poles in a map must be either positive or neutral in how they are worded. You can test whether you've passed this test by asking, "*Would people who hold either pole be proud to be associated with the word you have chosen for their pole?*" For example if you "hung out" more on the left pole in the map below, would you resonate more with the term "Providing Direction" or "Controlling Others?" If you preferred the left pole, you'd likely opt for "Providing Direction" since it is more neutral or even positive when compared to "Controlling Others." **If you're not sure whether you have a neutral term check with some key stakeholders who prefer that pole.** They'll set you straight right away!

Two Upside Quadrants. Items in the two upside quadrants of a Polarity Map answer the question, "*What are the positive results we can expect to achieve by focusing on each pole?*" It's important to get a broad cross-section of key stakeholders to have input on these quadrants that can impact and could be impacted by how well a polarity is leveraged in your transformation work. In our example polarity, good direction leads to aligned leaders around

a common vision. Solid participation gets you easy ways for people to contribute to creating this vision.

Figure 4



Two Downside Quadrants. You capture the negative results of over-focusing on a pole in each of the two downside quadrants. For example, over-focusing on Direction to the relative exclusion of Participation will lead to it being hard for people to challenge the vision, leaders ignoring new ideas to achieve the vision or even a lack of ideas in the first place. Over-focusing on Participation creates its own problems. You may have so much participation that it's difficult to find alignment on a vision, disagreements about what

needs to change to achieve the vision, or debates about what should stay the same to achieve the vision.

Action Steps. Action Steps are real, achievable actions you are already taking or could begin taking that will help you gain or maintain the upsides of each pole. **When leveraging polarities these "dual action steps" help you pay attention to both poles.** Leaders clearly stating the vision for the rest of the organization is a sure way to create alignment in that team. Using an annual conference as the platform for others in the organization to get their oar in the water on this important image of the future is sure to leverage the benefits of the Participation pole.

Early Warnings. Early Warnings help you avoid getting caught in the downside of either pole. **They are measurable indicators that you are starting to experience the downsides of a pole.** It's easiest when you identify Early Warnings that you can count, those that may be increasing or decreasing over time. Sometimes it's helpful to think of who might know you are beginning to experience the downsides of a particular pole. People who favor the opposite pole are most likely the first ones to notice an over-focus on their less preferred pole. Complaints at lower levels that the organization has become a "My way or the highway" operation is an Early Warning of over-focusing on the Direction pole. An increase in people working at cross-purposes despite believing they are acting in line with the vision may be an early indicator that there is an over-focus on Participation to the relative exclusion of Direction – not enough alignment to ensure that people are able to collaborate well in working together.

Navigating Your Way Through Key Polarities in All Transformational Work

Truth #11: Organizations that swing between transformation efforts such as centralizing and decentralizing every few years have missed the mark when it comes to polarities. They are just shifting from pole to pole without leveraging the energy in either.

There are some additional polarities to pay attention to in transformation work in addition to Transformation AND Continuity (see Table X). Some Polarities to Pay Attention to in Transformation Work. We describe four of these in detail below:

“The Organization’s Interests” and “Individual Employee Interests”

A common question asked during transformation efforts is “*What’s in it for me?*” People want to see how a change will affect them. What will be required from them in the future? Will they be capable of fulfilling these needs? From a polarity point of view this is a predictable question.

Leaders and other change agents have spent time already thinking through “what’s in it” for the organization. However an over-focus on what’s in it for the organization can create resistance from individuals. **These are questions that are best answered together with an appreciation for how answers to one impact the other.** For instance, a major insurance company was seeking greater efficiency across the board. They decided on a top down strategy and to push the changes from headquarters for the betterment of the organization. While senior members of the organization did their best to support the transformation efforts, they were quickly made the enemies of the employees as they implemented increasingly unpopular decisions. They lost their role clarity, credibility and became overridden with guilt. As a consequence, during a major transition that required a handoff of vital data between new employees and 'elders' of the corporation, there was a mass mutiny, resulting in withhold of information, brain drain and ill will. This approach to change, without due attention to positive contributions of the past, set the organization back years in efficiencies. Too much focus on the new (transformation) and not enough on 'how things have been done around here' (continuity).

***An Interesting Idea:** In creating your transformation plans put this “Organizational Interests” and “Individual Interests” polarity on a Map and invite key stakeholders to work together in completing the map. They’ll gain greater insight into each other’s needs while at the same time gaining a deeper appreciation of the challenges and issues facing the larger organization.*

Conditional Respect and Unconditional Respect

Transformation efforts mean change for everyone in an organization. People earn respect in organizations based on performance and what they contribute to the greater good. Promotions, pay raises, and career development opportunities are tied to this type of “conditional respect.” People also deserve “unconditional respect” for being members of the organization – regardless of their performance or contribution. **During times of transformation when people feel most vulnerable is**

Common Transformation Polarities

- Transformation AND Continuity
- Company Interests AND Employee Interests
- Conditional Respect AND Unconditional Respect
- Logic AND Emotion
- Short Term AND Long Term
- Past/Present AND Present/Future
- Participative Decisions and Directive Decisions
- Event AND Process

when they most need to experience unconditional respect. For instance in a large group meeting facilitated by one of the authors, two hours was spent talking about whether the leadership team would say hello in the hallways to employees. Given the challenges facing the business, a wave and brief greeting in the hallway seemed to be the least of their worries. Seen through a Polarity Lens, this seemingly inconsequential sticking point takes on new meaning. An over-focus on conditional respect had gotten this leadership team in trouble. Leverage both of these poles during transformation work and you'll stack the odds in your favor of creating sustained success.

***An Interesting Idea:** Create a list of Action Steps for each pole of this Conditional Respect and Unconditional Respect polarity as part of your transformation effort. In what ways will people need to earn the respect they gain through performance on the transformation? Are there targets for timing, scope of needed changes, or quality of deliverables? How will people be rewarded for achieving these targets? On the other pole, what can people count on from the organization regardless of their performance? When will they receive information regarding changes that are required? What support will they receive as they go about the business of transforming their work and how they do it? Make this map a public conversation. Bring it out during meetings related to the transformation and mark it up with new ideas generated during these conversations.*

Logic and Emotion

There are important contributions that both logic and emotion play in a transformation effort. Proposed changes need to make sense given the organization's current situation, environment and other realities. A good bit of time and energy is typically devoted to get the "case for change" clear. An equal amount of time needs to be devoted to the emotional impact of the transformation, the other pole of this polarity. For people involved in transformation work this is an important element of their experience – how they feel about the transformation and what it means for them at a very personal level. **Mapping polarities at its essence is a language and values clarification process.** The upsides of a Polarity Map describe the values people associate with each pole – what they care about, what they are vested in. The downsides are defined as Fears that people have about over-focusing on each pole. This language in Polarity Thinking is intentional. Effective transformation cares for both the logical and emotional aspects of change. In one case, a tribal government that ran a successful casino operation found cause to reallocate significant resources away from government services to prop up a new hotel on the property. According to Indian cultural tradition, they met regularly in large group 'talk back' sessions and followed a formula of an emotionally intelligent organization: 1) Consider who will be affected by the changes; 2) Inquire about the needs of those affected; 3) Communicate realities, empathy and intention to include; and, 4) Engage those affected in their own solution.

***An Interesting Idea:** Pull together a group of interested and affected parties to your transformation work. Even in large group meetings of several thousand there are others in the organization who are not in the room when this work is being done. Find those people and invite them into a conversation about the transformation effort. Don't worry about a map this time. Just start a dialogue about what value there is for people about focusing on getting the logic right in the transformation effort. For example, what are the benefits of*

making sure the rationale for the change work is solid? Now look to the downsides: what risks do you run by over-focusing on the logical part of the plans to the relative exclusion of people's emotions? Next move to the upsides of the emotional pole. This is typically a topic not as often broached in transformation work. What are the "upsides" of paying attention to people's emotions as you work your way through your effort and what are the potential "downsides" you risk experiencing if you over-focus on emotions to the relative exclusion of logic. Having this same conversation with a series of small groups will get word out in the system that you're paying attention to both poles of this critical transformational polarity.

Short Term AND Long Term

Transformation efforts must be based on a long-term view. A vision has to stretch the organization over time, challenging people to do what they may not have previously thought possible. That's the nature of transformational work. Yet there is a common refrain during major change efforts to get "quick wins" on the scoreboard. The bigger the transformation the more quick wins you need to count among your early victories. That's the nature of polarity work. As much as you focus on the long term, you need to focus on the short term. Intuitively we know we need to focus on both to succeed. **Progress in the short term builds momentum for the longer haul. Holding the long-term vision amidst the daily struggles and hassles of transformation work helps people stay aligned and focused on the prize.** For instance in two mining companies merging their organizations required a dual focus on the short and long term. They set up "synergy capture" teams to achieve and track improved returns on investment linked to the merger – returns that began to be accumulate starting on Day 1 of the new organization's existence. There were cost savings to be gained through intercompany sales of raw materials, combined ERP system implementations and a whole host of other new ways of doing business. At the same time, leaders of both organizations focused on creating a shared culture and future vision that would become the solid foundation of the new organization for years to come. The merger would be seen as a failure by investors if the short-term wins were not achieved. Without a long term view that included creating the vision, values and culture of the new organization, short term wins would be all they had to show for their efforts.

An Interesting Idea: *Though we know it's important to pay attention to the Short Term and Long Term in transformation efforts, how do we know when we have over-focused on one to the relative exclusion of the other? That's where the Polarity Map's Early Warnings can add value. Think of them as an insurance policy protecting you against the downsides of each pole. Might you be too focused on the long term? If so, one Early Warning might be people beginning to complain about the transformation effort being too much work with too little reward. Could you be running the risk of being too pre-occupied with short-term wins? In that case you'll soon hear people talking about how all the work they are doing isn't worth it – they've lost sight of the larger goals of your transformation work. Make a list of things you would hear, see or feel yourself if your effort veered too far toward the short term or long term. Who would notice this over-focusing first? What would they be saying that would give you a clue that trouble could be around the corner? You have metrics to track progress in your effort. Create some to measure whether you're dipping into the downsides of this critical transformation polarity. Make it the norm in the organization to use the*

words, “Do you think we are getting into the downside of this pole and how do we self-correct without losing the benefits of this pole?”

How Polarity Thinking Can Supplement Your Transformation Work

You can use Polarity Thinking to supplement any transformation work you do, including the approaches described throughout this book. ***It is not a replacement for ways you work now. It is an addition to them.***

Figure 5 shows a process that will enable you to leverage polarity energy to further enhance all transformation work you do, whether it revolves around cross cultural issues, mergers, interdepartmental conflict or any number of other areas where major changes are needed. Supplementing your transformation efforts with polarity work will improve what you achieve, how fast you accomplish it, and how long you sustain these gains over time:

Achievability: Ensure people are paying attention to poles they naturally favor and you will become more effective in bringing about significant change. Think of it this way: if you’re dealing with polarities (and all shifts “from” Point A “to” Point B have embedded polarities) the conversation changes. **Instead of pitting people against each other who have different positions on a particular issue you’ll be encouraging each of them to hold their “poles” and include the other pole.** In doing so, they will best leverage the energy in both poles.

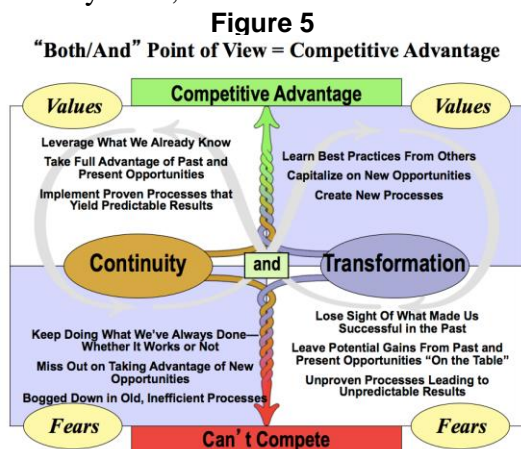
Truth #12: Like gravity, polarities act on you whether you believe in them or not.

Speed: Resistance typically acts as a friction coefficient in transformation work. The higher the

I believe that the central leadership attribute is the ability to manage polarity.

-Peter Koestenbaum

resistance, the slower goes your effort. Polarity Thinking adopts a different mindset when it comes to resistance. **Instead of seeing it as something to be overcome, gotten around or through, Polarity Thinking sees the wisdom in resistance.** Transformation work becomes emotional because it taps into people’s values and fears. We want to hold onto what we value and avoid what we fear. When caught in an “either/or” mindset there can be only winners and losers, values cared for and fears realized. With a “both/and” mindset all values or upsides can be leveraged and all fears or downsides minimized. A polarity-based perspective enables everyone to see the whole picture (see Figure 5). Seeing through a Polarity Lens, resistance becomes something to welcome, listen to, understand,



and incorporate into the transformation work you are doing. ***Make resistance your friend instead of foe and you’ll see your transformation efforts pick up pace.***

Sustainability: Polarities are indestructible. They have been part of organizations’ earliest makeup and continue to exert their influence over decisions and

Truth #13: If you want to guarantee the sustainability of your transformation work, tie it to both poles of a polarity .

actions taken today. If you want to guarantee the sustainability of your transformation work tie it to both poles of a polarity.

Leveraging the Energy in All Polarities: Seeing, Mapping and Transforming

Including Key Stakeholders

All stakeholders impacted by or who can impact a polarity need to be included in identifying, creating and leveraging it.

The map – and each word in it – need to work for all stakeholders. (see Figure 6) **There is no such thing as “wordsmithing” when it comes to Polarity Maps. The words count. All of them.** Take the time to make sure you have all key stakeholders with you as you develop a map and you’ll be sure to have them with you when it comes time to leverage it.

Seeing

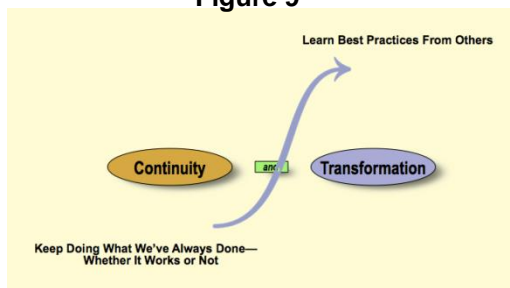
Truth #14: Since polarities behave the same way every time, all the time, learn how to leverage the energy in one and you will know how to leverage the energy in all of them.

As you begin working with polarity energy you’ll want to focus on those polarities that will have the greatest positive impact in your transformation work. (see Figure 7). **Follow the energy in your transformation work and you’ll find polarities you can leverage.** Are some people excited about a new

opportunity, or others concerned this same path might lead down a dead end? These are all signs of underlying polarities. Invite your key stakeholders into these dialogues with you. They’ll likely add items to the map that had not occurred to you and engaging them early will help make sure they are on side when it comes time for implementation.

An Interesting Idea: See if you can frame the changes needed in a “From ____ To ____” statement. Your “From→To” Statement might be from a downside of one pole to the upside of another such as “We keep doing what we’ve always done – whether it’s worked or not (see Figure 8). If your “From→To” Statement has two neutral or positive terms like “Continuity” and “Transformation” you’ve likely identified a polarity from pole to pole (see Figure 9)

Figure 9



Mapping

Once you have identified the highest leverage polarities that will impact your transformation efforts, it’s time to “map it” by filling in all four quadrants of the Polarity

Figure 6

Leveraging Polarity Energy Systems

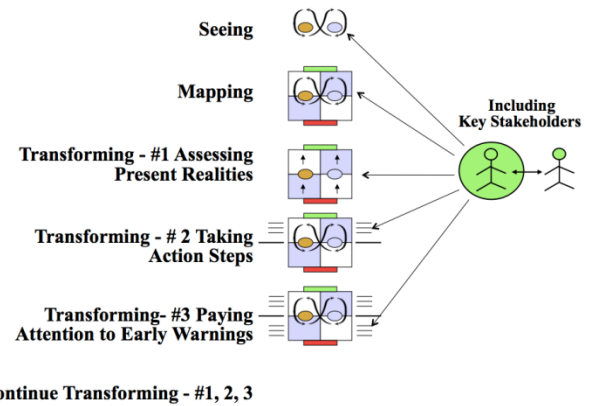


Figure 7
Seeing

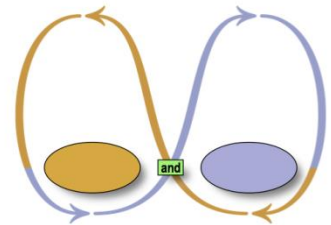
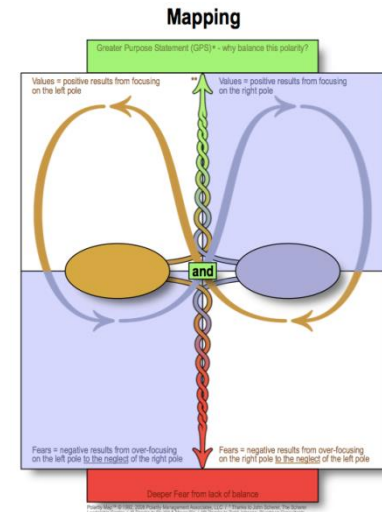


Figure 8



Figure 10

Map and identifying your Greater Purpose Statement and Deeper Fear (see Figure 10). Begin by entering content into the two “upsides” of the map. We begin with the upsides because they speak to what key stakeholders value. **Starting with this positive energy of what is wanted helps affirm each stakeholders’ desires.** After capturing the benefits of leveraging the polarity well, shift to completing the “downsides” or costs of over-focusing on each pole to the relative exclusion of the other. **It’s harder for people to articulate the values of their less preferred pole and fears others may have of over-focusing on their preferred pole.** That’s when it’s most important to ensure everyone is listening well – especially to those who bring a different point of view to the table. You also need to complete your “GPS” and Deeper Fear during your mapping. Sometimes it is easiest to identify these early in the process as a way to make sure everyone is on the same page. In some cases, you may want to hold off on identifying these until you have the information from the quadrants to inform your thinking.

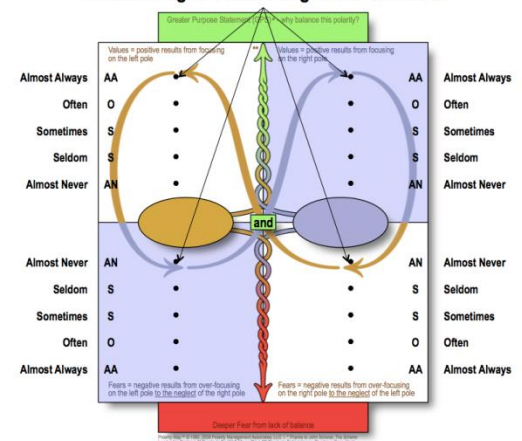


Transforming #1: Assessing Present Realities

Assessing a polarity tells you how well you are leveraging the energy in it. (See Figure 11) You can do a quick assessment of any Polarity Map. Use the map on the left as a guide. Mark an “X” along the line through the center of each pole for each of the four quadrants that best gauges to what extent you have seen or experienced the “upsides” and “downsides” contained in a map over some period of time – say the last few weeks or months. Then connect the “X’s” with an infinity loop to see how well you are leveraging this polarity you have identified as critical to your transformation effort’s success. Space at the top of the infinity loops represents opportunities to gain more of the

Figure 11

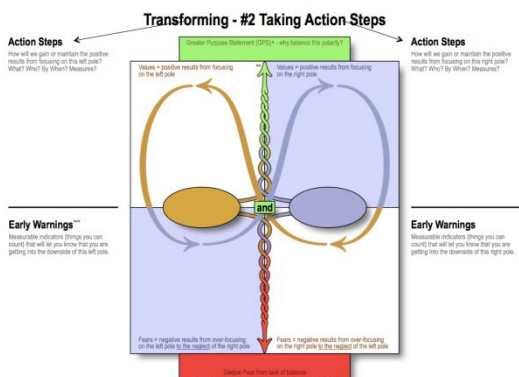
Transforming - # 1 Assessing Present Realities



Transforming #2: Taking Action Steps

Action Steps will help you gain and maintain the upside benefits of your critical transformation polarities. (See Figure 12) As with any action planning, the more specific and tangible your actions, the more likely they will be implemented well. In looking at polarities that will influence your entire transformation effort you will often find that an “Action Step” can be as small as a to do on one person’s list or a major project requiring significant organizational resources. The

Figure 12



who find fault with an organization's vision are known by a number of names including not team players, resisters, troublemakers, and folks who just plain won't get on board. From a Polarity perspective we see there is wisdom in their resistance. Think of their cautions as risk mitigators – they are paying attention to what might go wrong when everyone is excited about what's going to go right in your Transformation effort. Once you move through Steps 1 and 2 of the Getting Unstuck process you can move to Step 3, inviting others to help in crafting a vision for the future. Once they have been heard and valued view they'll be more than ready to look at creating a common and compelling future vision. Step 4 is critical – it's a revisit of what is right and good about the current organization. Skipping this step makes it easy for others to see your listening to them as manipulative or just paying lip service to get their support before you go out and do what you had been planning all along. The fifth and final step is to return to your Greatest Purpose Statement to remind all key stakeholders of the common prize you all care about achieving. found

Polarity Thinking and Transformation: An Idea Whose Time Has Come

Transformation work has never been more needed in our organizations, nations and planet as it is now. Rapid technology advances for organizations, the battles for democracy in many

Truth #15: Polarities are a force in nature. They are indestructible. Any polarity that you identify will be a solid base on which to build a sustainable transformation effort and sustainable organization

nations, the ripple effects in international financial markets from national fiscal policies, and the continued threats facing the planet from global warming all require transformational change. **A Polarity approach to these issues means not only finding a place for differing views to be heard but also each party realizing how essential others are to success in the long term.** There are two truths in every polarity, both are accurate and neither is complete. The “both / and” mindset of Polarity Thinking is a needed to supplement the “either / or” approach that is essential to effective problem solving.

Moving the needle just a little with the scope and scale of these needed changes won't be enough to make the needed differences. Polarity Thinking supplements all transformation work no matter your model, practices or situation. It makes your goals more achievable, the pace of change faster, and your gains more sustainable. Supplement your transformation work with a Polarity Thinking Lens and make your best contribution for the people in your organization, your clients and the world in which we live.

Let us stop trying to be the best in the world and move toward being the best for the world.

Richard Barrett

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References for Implementing Polarity Thinking – Below are recent books that provide application and examples of Polarity Thinking in action

1. Anderson, Kathy. Polarity Coaching: Coaching People and Managing Polarities. Amherst: HRD Press, 2010. *Seven case studies showing coaching applications and how to use the polarity map as a wisdom organizer and action planning tool*
2. Johnson, Barry, Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems. Amherst: HRD Press, 1994. *Johnson shares a number of case examples in which the shift from seeing an issue as a problem to solve to managing it as a polarity added real value for individual leaders and for organizations.*
3. Johnson, Barry & Roy M. Oswald. Managing Polarities in Congregations: Eight Keys for Thriving Faith Communities. Alban Institute: 2009. *Eight key polarities common to faith communities, well defined and with suggestions for how to manage them.*
4. Seidler, Margaret. Power Surge: A Conduit for Enlightened Leadership. Amherst: HRD Press, 2008. *Seidler has the most extensive list of values pairs available. This book provides the “how to” in helping leaders supplement their strengths and keep them from becoming vulnerabilities.*
5. Schuman, Amy, Stacy Stutz, John L. Ward. Family Business as Paradox. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010. *Applies polarity management to the paradoxes of family run businesses.*

References on Polarities as important - Several books have been written that indicate leaders and organizations that manage polarities/dilemmas/paradox well outperform those that don't.

Below is a short, annotated list of books with this theme:

1. Collins, James C. and Jerry I. Porras. Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.
Authors identify the "Genius of the 'AND'" as a central variable that distinguished the "Gold" companies from the "Silver" companies. The whole book is based on managing the polarity of “Preserve the Core & Stimulate Progress.” This could also be seen as the generic Stability & Change polarity.
2. Collins, Jim. Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.
The “Genius of the ‘And’” continues as an important variable in this book and is identified as a key characteristic of leaders moving companies from Good to Great. There are 10 polarities identified as central to becoming a level 5 leader.

3. Dodd, Dominic and Ken Favaro. The Three Tensions: Winning the Struggle to Perform Without Compromise. John Wiley and Sons, 2007. *Authors interview executives from 200 companies and identify 3 important tensions (polarities) central to their organization's effectiveness: Profitability & Growth; Today & Tomorrow; and, The Whole & Its Parts.*
4. de Wit, Bob and Ron Meyer. Strategy Synthesis: Resolving Strategy Paradoxes to Create Competitive Advantage. London: Thomson, 1999.
de Wit and Meyer identify 10 paradoxes (polarities) which are at the heart of strategic management.
5. Elsner, Richard and Bridget Farrands. Lost in Transition: How Business Leaders Can Successfully Take Charge In New Roles, London: Marshall Cavendish Limited, 2006.
Authors identify 8 tensions (polarities) which, when managed well, contribute significantly to being successful in new jobs.
6. Fletcher, Jerry and Kelle Olwyler. Paradoxical Thinking: How to Profit From Your Contradictions. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1997.
"After more than fifteen years of studying thousands of detailed examples of people performing at their best, Fletcher and Olwyler have found that individuals are always paradoxical when performing optimally and that each person has a particular combination of contradictory and paradoxical (polarity) qualities that work together to produce that person's best work."
7. Hammett, Peter, Unbalanced Influence: Recognizing and Resolving the Impact of Myth and Paradox in Executive Performance. Davies-Black Publishing, 2007.
Ten year of executive research indicates the importance of paradox in executive performance.
8. Hampden-Turner, Charles. Charting the Corporate Mind: Graphic Solutions to Business Conflicts. New York: The Free Press, 1990.
Charles Hampden-Turner has written several books on the advantage of managing dilemmas in which his research shows that those companies that manage key dilemmas well outperform those that don't.
9. Hampden-Turner, Charles and Alfons Trompenaars. The Seven Cultures of Capitalism: Value Systems for Creating Wealth in the United States, Japan, Germany, France, Britain, Sweden, and The Netherlands. New York: Doubleday, 1993.
10. ---. Building Cross-Cultural Competence: How to Create Wealth from Conflicting Values. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2000.
Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars identify 6 dilemmas (polarities) which must be managed to support cross-cultural competence.
11. Handy, Charles. The Age of Paradox. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1994.

Handy builds on his earlier work, The Age of Unreason, to assert the balancing of paradoxes (polarities) at the heart not just of effective personal and organizational life, but of our survival as a world community.

12. Hickman, Craig R. Mind of a Manager Soul of a Leader. New York: John Wylie & Sons, 1990.

Support for the benefits of paradoxical thinking also show up in Hickman's book the title of which is a fundamental polarity in leadership.

13. Hofstede, Geert. Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations Across Nations. London: Sage Publications, Ltd., 2001.

Hofstede identifies 5 dimensions (polarities) of national culture to help us tap national differences as a resource.

14. Johnston, Charles M. Necessary Wisdom: Meeting the Challenge of a New Cultural Maturity. Seattle: ICD Press, 1991.

Johnston identifies 5 key polarity domains within culture and asserts the importance of understanding and bridging polarities. Managing polarities are at the heart of wisdom and cultural maturity and how we "must learn to think and act if our future is to be a healthy one."

15. Martin, Roger. The Opposable Mind: How Successful Leaders Win Through Integrative Thinking. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2007.