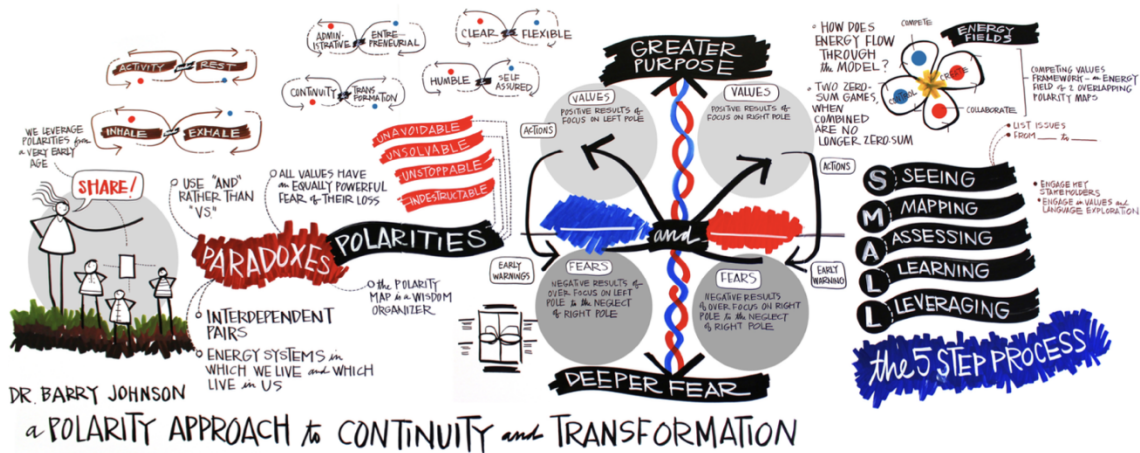


## MANAGING COMPLEXITY: NAVIGATING STRATEGIC PARADOXES IN ORGANIZATIONS, February 2016



Dr. Barry Johnson began his talk by asking members of the audience to imagine themselves as young children arguing with a sibling or peer over a toy. Through this example, he illustrates how the resolution to this conflict—the encouragement from a parent or teacher to share toys with a peer rather than steal or hoard them—is one of our earliest introductions to paradoxes and in his language, polarities. In this case, we are introduced to the polarity and tension that lies between “taking care of self” and “taking care of others.” He underscores that everyone spends their whole life negotiating polarities and the critical question becomes, “How can I become better at leveraging a phenomenon that I have been managing my whole life?”

### What is a polarity?

Dr. Johnson defines polarities as interdependent pairs of values, both of which are neutral or good, which comprise an interdependent energy system. The interdependence arises from the fact that all values have sister values as well as powerful fears of loss attached to them. For example, when we value something dearly, such as independence, our fear of losing our independence often drives us to reject its sister value of dependence. The interdependent energy systems created by polarities (“which we live in and which live in us”) can both create a virtuous cycle and elevate people to greater performance *and* create a vicious cycle and demotivate people to ineffective performance.

To clarify this definition, Dr. Johnson took members through the example of inhalation and exhalation as a polarity, illustrating how there is no either/or with inhaling and exhaling and there is instead always interdependence (both/and). In an interactive demonstration, he asks everyone to stand up and inhale and exhale normally, and then asks them to continue to inhale until one cannot anymore. He shows how the inhalation feels good at first and then begins to cause discomfort, like “hitting a wall,” which in turn triggers exhalation, a natural motion of self-correction. This self-correction, subsequently, feels good at first but also hits its limits if one were to continue to exhale beyond a certain point, which again triggers the self-correction of inhalation. In other words, this is a natural instance of “both/and” and interdependency between two opposing forces. The energy flow between these two poles is represented by the infinity symbol, showing an infinite flow from the positive side of one action (e.g. the relief of inhalation) to the negative side of the same action (e.g. the discomfort of too much inhalation), which then triggers a shift to the positive side of the opposite pole (e.g. the relief of exhalation) and flows to the downside of that same action (e.g. the discomfort of too much exhalation). Each polarity, as an energy system, is comprised of two forms of energy: yang energy (i.e. when the two poles converge in the moment of the shift from one to the other) and yin energy (where the two poles diverge after the shift has occurred).

Dr. Johnson notes that the shorter the cycle time of the shift between the two poles of a polarity, the more obvious it is to us that interdependency exists. In contrast, when the cycle time is longer, we find it more difficult to identify the interdependency, even when it exists. He uses the example of a revolution as a natural self-correction mechanism within any organizational system that has veered too far into one side of a polarity, regardless of however long it takes for a revolution to foment. Just as one cannot choose inhaling over exhaling, all polarities are unavoidable, irresolvable, and unstoppable. Also, a polarity only ends if the system in which it functions ceases to exist.

Lastly, in order to manage the complexity of polarities that arise in our lives and in the worlds in which we live, Dr. Johnson’s Polarity Map is a tool that members can use “a wisdom organizer.” He underscores that the wisdom contained within each map is drawn from the person and the organization constructing the map. The wisdom is always in your own life experience.

### Hitting the Limits

Creating a dynamic balance is what polarity management entails. When you shift your weight towards one pole, you set yourself in position to dynamically to shift back to the other pole in the natural, eventual process of self-correction. When you focus on one pole to the detriment of the other pole, you experience the downside of the pole you are overly-focusing

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on first and then in succession, experience the downside of the opposite pole, which is what we feared in the first place.

### A Note About Language

Polarities are *not necessarily* any two seeming polar opposites (e.g. black or white) or two sides of a particular debate (e.g. the earth is flat or round). For instance, “black” and “white” are often talked about as polar opposites, but do not comprise a polarity because neither color depends on the existence of the other (e.g. more whiteness does not lead to less blackness, or vice versa). He cautions us to be mindful of how polarities appear in the literature and to notice when the term is being used to flag a true interdependent, irresolvable pair of values and when it is, instead, being used to name two sides of a resolvable argument. He also encourages us to use “and” instead of “versus” when naming interdependent pairs. This use of language helps to break us from the habit of constructing false choices between the poles of a polarity.

### Leadership Polarities

Organizations and leaders who manage polarities outperform organizations and leaders who don’t. Examples of effective leadership, even those from our own personal experiences, tend to showcase individuals who manage and leverage polarities effectively.

In leveraging polarities, our goals are to minimize the downsides of each pole and to maximize the benefits or upsides of each pole. Some examples of polarities include: Clear::flexible; Self-Assured::Humble; Administrative::Entrepreneurial (drawing from Mary’s research); Decentralize Parts::Centralize Whole; Continuity::Transformation; Collaborate::Compete; Control::Create

For the last example, the question when trying to leverage the polarity becomes: how does one both control and create? How does one both collaborate and compete? In every system, no matter how complex, there are problems to solve and polarities to manage. Dr. Johnson also mentioned that there are “multarities,” which are interdependencies between more than two forces. He also encouraged members to notice that the more complex a situation is, the more fruitful it is to find patterns within the complexity to make it more manageable.

### Establishing a Polarities Organizational Culture

Organizations that leverage polarities will a) achieve their preferred futures faster and more sustainably, b) develop polarity-leveraging cultures, and c) enhance the quality of life on the planet. Dr. Johnson emphasized that it is not enough for an organization to establish a

taskforce or executive group that understands polarities while no one else in the organization does. It is imperative to establish a culture that conspires to leverage polarities.

The Competing Values Framework, a framework that was covered during the last LILA gathering, is a model that also contains polarities and accounts for the flow of energy through its model. Within the CVF, there are two simultaneous polarities at work and that have the potential to be leveraged: create & control, and collaborate & compete. According to Dr. Johnson, any organizational framework or model that does not outline or make sense of an interdependent energy system has limited practical use.

### How do we leverage polarities?

Leveraging polarities entails maximizing the upsides of each pole and minimizing the downsides of each pole. Importantly, when we treat a polarity to leverage as a problem to solve, it tends to result in dysfunction. The critical component of the Polarity Map, which allows people to leverage the power of a polarity, is the space to identify action steps to maximize the upsides of both poles and identify early warning signs that indicate the emergence of overstates in the downsides of each pole.

### 5-Step Process of Managing Polarities



Dr. Johnson has developed a 5-Step process to leverage polarities that integrates the Polarity Map and the Polarity Approach for Continuity and Transformation. This SMALL model contains 5 steps:

According to Dr. Johnson, the process of building a polarity map is a “values and language clarifying process.” It is important, in the process of building a polarity map, that one should engage one’s stakeholders and incorporate their thoughts into the map. Also, it is

important to note that you can feel free to change your map anytime.

### Where are we headed?

Dr. Johnson closed this session with the exercise on p.4 of the workbook. Members were told to partner with someone who was from a different organization. The exercise requires the participant to list the essential issues present within your organization (e.g. what are the most exciting possibilities? What are the most difficult, chronic problems?). Then, with this list, one must construct one “From \_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_” statement.

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Dr. Johnson warned that often, initial “from-to” statements show up usually as a GAP analyses—i.e. identifying the desire to move from a place that *isn't good* towards something that is *better*. He underscored that when something is positioned as moving from “bad” to “good” or “bad” to “better,” one is highlighting only a diagonal of a polarity (i.e. downside of one pole and the upside of the other pole) rather than the full polarity, which encompasses both upsides and downsides of two poles. This then still leaves you with the task of naming the two poles. He notes that the two poles of any polarity should always have neutral or positive connotations.

### Guiding Ideas

Polarities as interdependent pairs of values, both of which are neutral or good, which comprise an interdependent energy system. The interdependence arises from the fact that all values have sister values as well as powerful fears of loss attached to them. The Polarity Map is a “wisdom organizer” and is a tool that allows you to find patterns within a complex world.

### Key Takeaways

- Polarities are *not necessarily* any two seeming polar opposites (e.g. black or white) or two sides of a particular debate (e.g. the earth is flat or round). For instance, “black” and “white” are often talked about as polar opposites, but do not comprise a polarity because neither color depends on the existence of the other (e.g. more whiteness does not lead to less blackness, or vice versa).
- Leveraging polarities entails maximizing the upsides of each pole and minimizing the downsides of each pole.
- When we treat a polarity to leverage as a problem to solve, we tend to end up facing dysfunction
- The process of building a polarity map is a “values and language clarifying process”
- When something is positioned as moving from “bad” to “good” or “bad” to “better,” one is highlighting only a diagonal of a polarity (i.e. downside of one pole and the upside of the other pole) rather than the full polarity, which encompasses both upsides and downsides of two poles. This then still leaves you with the task of naming the two poles.