

Change in Flow: How Critical Incidents Transform Organisations

Editors: Nancy Wallis and Maria Spindler

Nancy Wallis and Maria Spindler

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Brian Emerson and Nancy Wallis

Creating Rhythm in Blues: Using Polarity Management to Harness the Flow in Paradoxical Tensions

*“The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement,
but the opposite of a profound truth may well be another profound truth.”*

Niels Bohr, physicist

Abstract

The ability to make sense of paradox seems to be a vital aspect of the leadership transformation needed at this time in business organizations, and appears, from our international experience, to be a place where organizational leadership teams often get stuck. However, while many scholars talk about the need for leaders to be able to deal effectively with paradox or harness the power of the ‘and’, few provide the practical methods that help leaders actually do so. This paper demonstrates how polarity thinking can help leaders use both-and thinking to see the world more robustly and create the collective reality and the multifaceted solutions required for today’s complex challenges. Drawing upon a past consulting engagement involving a senior team with conflicting perspectives and caught in a destructive tension, we discuss how polarity wisdom can enhance flow in leadership development.

Keywords: polarity thinking, paradox, leadership development, executive team development

1 Purpose

The most difficult organizational and global challenges are paradoxical—rife with conflicting realities and viewpoints (Smith & Lewis, 2012). For example, do we focus on what’s best for employees or what’s best for the balance sheet?

Do we use our natural resources or conserve our natural resources? Do I, as a leader, do what's best for my team or what's best for the organization?

The ability to make sense of paradox seems to be a vital aspect of the leadership transformation needed at this time in business organizations, and appears, from our international experience, to be a place where organizational leadership teams often get stuck (Kegan, 1994; Cook-Greuter, 2004). However, while many scholars talk about the need for leaders to be able to deal effectively with paradox (Van de Ven & Poole, 1988; Lewis, 2000), or harness the power of the “and” (Collins, 2001), few provide the practical methods that help leaders actually do so. This paper demonstrates how polarity thinking (Johnson, 1992) can help leaders use both-and thinking to see the world more robustly and create the collective reality and the multifaceted solutions required for today's complex challenges.

Drawing upon a past consulting engagement involving a senior team with conflicting perspectives and caught in a destructive tension, we discuss how polarity wisdom can enhance flow in leadership development. Although they had achieved much past success, the team was viewed negatively by many key managers in subordinate positions, had poor interpersonal relationships, and was impacting the organization with its negative morale—all of which were affecting recent results. Leadership teams such as this can benefit from a way to make sense of paradox that allows them to reexamine and leverage the potential gold lurking in the conflicting realities held by the team's members.

This paper introduces participants to a practical tool for helping leaders, and the teams of which they are a part, see beyond their own perspective and step into the flow of a collective reality needed in today's organizations and our world. We will use the polarity maps and specifics from this client engagement to discuss ways in which leaders and their teams can move from a place of destructive tension and stuck-ness into one of creative tension and flow.

2 Description of the Case

We were retained in 2014 to support the senior leadership team of a for-profit hospital in the United States in its intention to extend its leadership capacity in order to change the hospital culture to one of increased collaboration and goodwill. This hospital, a stand-alone, 300-bed, for-profit entity with 1,800 employees including registry nurses, typically operated with an 85-95 % patient census and served a population primarily dependent on it for emergency, medical-surgical, and ICU services. The hospital had recently renovated its heliport, qualifying it to serve as a triage center well poised to serve those individuals in vehicle or recreational accidents, given its location outside a major metropolitan area.

The senior leadership team was led by the President and CEO who, among other responsibilities, oversaw execution of the hospital's three-year strategic plan. The CFO was expected to guide the team in meeting its financial plan and the COO focused on overall operational excellence and meeting the U.S. health care reform-driven goals for increased accountability by institutional providers. The CIO oversaw the information technology strategy and execution, including implementation of a digital record. The CNO was accountable for the nursing staff delivering quality care and the VP of Development led initiatives such as the design and build of a new medical tower for physician and administrative offices. While these senior leaders generally performed professionally together and had achieved significant continued success in meeting challenging annual performance objectives, they were challenged to improve both patient and staff satisfaction scores as measured by national standards and shared on public scorecards. It was generally agreed that the level of contention between certain executives made it more difficult for the senior team to improve satisfaction scores and achieve the challenging objectives of the three-year plan. The situation had reached a new level of strain as key objectives, such as implementing the digital (paperless) patient record and the related IT upgrades, further taxed the hospital staff, who were already stretched thin by the number and intensity of

mission-critical initiatives on top of rigorous demands for meeting everyday quality and financial targets.

The CEO was committed to the senior team working collaboratively and effectively together to meet these challenges. And while he enjoyed a fair amount of success negotiating conflict resolution and navigating ongoing tensions in the group, the tenor of some of the leaders' relationships hadn't escaped the notice of the rest of the hospital management who reported to them. And so tensions occasionally turned into management stand-offs, poor quality of decisions leading to avoidable and costly rework, and staff taking sides behind their senior leaders, with predictable impacts on the quality of their work. Several senior executives had participated in coaching and other developmental activities to improve dyadic relationships and the collective team's effectiveness, and while some success was realized (Wallis, 2013), there remained an opportunity for increased leadership effectiveness given the system-wide influence of the senior team's typical working interactions.

We were engaged to assist the senior leadership team to understand itself better and to identify ways in which it could work through its deep and sometimes acrimonious ways of relating. Each executive understood the cost to the system of the lack of a united executive team, and each one seemed committed to working together more effectively. Working with the CEO and the senior team, we designed a leadership development intervention which followed these steps: (a) interview 20 stakeholders including the executives themselves, other key managers, and a few hospital consultants fully engaged with long-term assignments; (b) use the interview data to identify key polarities at play within the team and the system; (c) use these polarities to design and implement a 360-degree evaluation of the senior leadership team and of each executive team member by 45 managers; (d) conduct individual executive debriefs for the leader-specific portion of the 360-degree evaluation; and (e) design and execute a two-day off-site meeting where the senior leaders considered the team portion of the 360-degree feedback, shared salient portions of their individual feedback as they were comfortable, and

worked together to create a renewed, more committed and collaborative way forward. Before we discuss the team's breakthrough to new agreements and commitments together, we offer background on polarity thinking to make clear how this approach supported significant inter-independent developmental shifts within the senior leadership team.

3 Essentials of Polarity Thinking

Polarities are interdependent, seemingly contradictory states (poles) that must coexist over time for success to occur. These phenomena, such as Exertion::Rest, Stability::Change, Plan::Do, and Focus on Part::Focus on Whole, are an "inevitable, endemic, and perpetual" (Handy 1994, p.12) part of human life and the organizations of which we are a part. Johnson's (1992) theory of polarity management is one way to make sense of these paradoxical tensions and the benefits they can provide.

Central to the theory is the concept of flow between two poles of a paradox. This can be difficult for many to understand because English, like many other languages, is not able to capture the interconnectedness and complementarity of polarities (Kegan, 1994), which implies neither hierarchy nor opposition, but instead refers to a state of continuous flow without anything coming first or second. Understanding this dynamic motion is the key to unlocking the "enlightening potential" (Lewis, 2000, p. 763) inherent in all polarities.

It is when we attempt to stop the flow of energy and focus solely on one pole to the exclusion of the other that we run into trouble (e.g., when an organization's sole focus is on differentiation, with no focus on integration). This is best demonstrated by Johnson's (1992) concept of upsides and downsides. According to the theory of polarity management, focus on one pole to the exclusion of the other will initially yield benefits, or upsides, to a system. However, if one attempts to stop the inherent movement core to the complementarity, and continues to over-focus on that pole to the exclusion of the other, the system will experience the downsides of that pole. The discomfort

associated with this phenomenon then creates the desire to move towards the upsides of the opposite pole—thus creating the movement central to the theory of polarities.

This phenomenon of moving between the poles and experiencing the positives and negatives of each has been noted by other scholars. Lewis (2000) notes that individuals overreact to the inherent tensions of a paradox “by focusing on one pole, thereby sparking a stronger pull from its opposite” (p. 768) which, according to Schumacher (1977) creates a motion “like a pendulum from one opposite to the other [creating a] feeling that now ‘the problem has been solved’” (p. 127). However, as demonstrated by Leonard-Barton’s work (1992), over-focusing on one pole (e.g., perfecting core capabilities) creates downsides (e.g., rigidity) that inhibit an organization from embracing the upsides of the other pole (e.g., innovating new technologies). This description of the phenomenon helps explain what happens when dealing with a polarity, but, as pointed out previously, it does not address how the knowledge can be used to assist in the sense-making of individuals and/or organizations.

The elegance of polarity management lies in the use of a polarity map (Johnson, 1992) that identifies the upsides and downsides of each pole along with the higher-achieved state reached when flow between the interdependent opposites is achieved. Figure 1 shows a scaled-down polarity map for Exertion::Rest, chosen because it is a paradox inherent to all human life and therefore easily generalizable. The upsides are listed in the boxes above their respective poles while the downsides are listed below. It is important to note that while the upsides and downsides in polarities may appear generalizable, they should be regarded as specific to each individual and how they make meaning of the dialectic.

The Exertion::Rest polarity map demonstrates the flow of energy in the paradox and highlights several important phenomena. First, if an individual focuses on one pole (Exertion) to the exclusion of the other (Rest), they will experience (in the short term) the upsides of the pole on which they focus

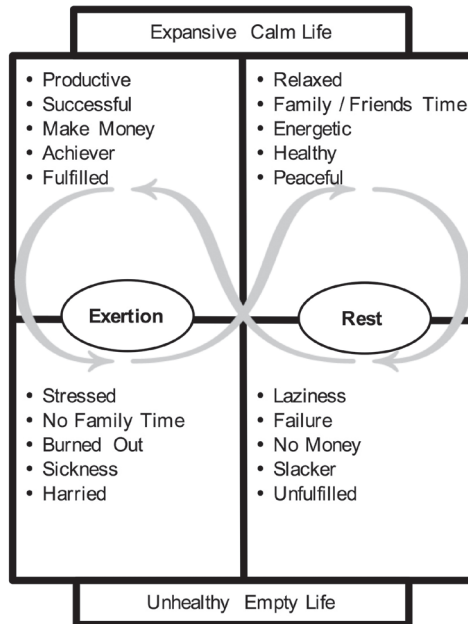


Figure 1: A Polarity Map of Exertion::Rest

(in this case: productive, successful, make money, etc.). If they do not focus attention on the other pole (Rest) they will soon experience the downsides of the pole on which they are over focusing (stress, burn out, and perhaps sickness). When this happens, the solution to “the problem” seems to be one or more of the upsides of the opposite pole (relaxation, energy, and health), which creates the attraction and energy to generate the movement towards the opposite pole. However, the opposite pole is only part of the answer. If the individual begins to over-focus on the new pole (Rest) to the exclusion of the other (Exertion) they will then start to experience the downsides of that pole (laziness, failure, no money) which in turn increases the attraction to the upsides of the opposite pole.

When an individual is able successfully to navigate and create flow between the two interdependent states, they begin to experience an upward lift that leads to the greater benefits of the upsides of each pole. However, if an individual does not manage the situation effectively, they can be caught in a spiral in which they experience the downsides of both poles.

A key component of polarity thinking important to the understanding of this case is the notion of individuals giving preference to one pole and seeing themselves in opposition to those who hold the other pole. When an individual prefers one pole over the other, they value the upsides of that pole, and dislike (and may even demonize) the downsides of the opposite pole. They then begin to see those who prefer the opposite pole in terms of the downsides of that pole, thus creating a potentially unproductive situation (Emerson, 2013). When they become attached to a pole and do not see the interdependence of “the other,” they can become resistant and entrenched in their view and get caught in an either-or mentality that inhibits flow in the system.

Thus it was in the client system described below. The team was stuck. Individuals had taken sides, lines had been drawn, and negativity pervaded almost every aspect of the team dynamic. Through the process of mapping several polarities in which the team was embroiled, there is evidence to suggest that flow returned and a transformation occurred.

4 Polarity Wisdom as a Source of Flow

Returning to our case, in preparation for the leadership development workshop, we conducted an individual debrief of each executive’s 360 evaluation so that they could bring to the workshop their insight about their unique contribution to and potential for greater contribution toward the senior team’s improved functioning. We also designed learning activities for the workshop based on the results of our interviews and 360 evaluation findings. We guided the team through exercises that helped them understand

the perspectives each other held regarding the tensions they experienced as they struggled to make sense of the polarities they were enacting.

The team selected two polarities to explore more deeply. The first polarity was that of having a focus on fiscal excellence and a focus on delivering quality health care services in a quality culture where employees felt valued and engaged. This was an enormous source of tension as the CFO had a long, award-winning career as a health care finance executive and a solid track record of keeping the hospital profitable since bringing it back from bankruptcy at the beginning of his tenure. The specter of financial hardship seemed to hover like a dark cloud over the senior team. This seemed to bolster his quite static, black-and-white approach to the complex financial challenges the team had to resolve. The CEO was perplexed at the CFO's seeming inability to view the budget and overall financial strategy in broader terms. Through using the polarity map Fiscal Focus::Quality/Employee/Service (see Fig. 2), the senior team was able to move beyond this limited approach to being able to evaluate sophisticated options for complex challenges such as the need to trim millions of dollars from the budget without negatively impacting delivery of its mission.

The team constructed the polarity map Fiscal Focus::Quality/Employee/Service Focus (see Fig. 2), identifying the upsides of each pole. It was clear to them that they wanted to seek ways to enhance their ability to deliver on their fiscal responsibilities while delivering high quality health care including results assessed by national hospital patient and staff satisfaction scores. The senior team discovered how to approach its financial challenges with more collaboration and complexity by letting the CFO know they each felt they too carried the responsibility for the hospital's financial success, and that it was not only resting on his shoulders. They allowed him to be the expert and to see that they were encountering problems that required a broader and more complex understanding of possible alternatives. One of the breakthrough moments occurred when the CFO sighed, "I no longer have to be wrong!" meaning he no longer had to play solo in the role of enforcer of the next stringent financial decisions. A spirit of inter-independence was

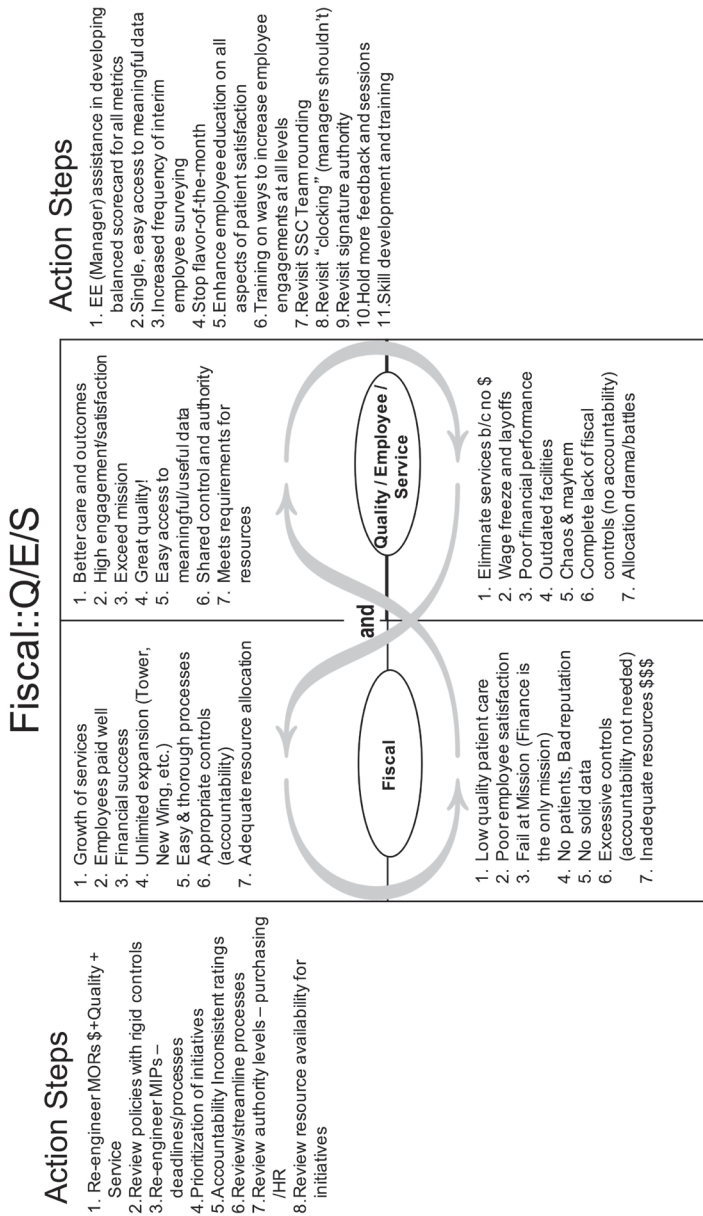


Figure 2: A Polarity Map of Fiscal Focus::Quality/Employee/Service Focus

palpable as he gradually assumed a more reflective, collaborative approach and as the other senior leaders committed to collectively identifying, framing, and proposing alternative solutions to the most challenging budget issues.

The team also decided to work with the Department Focus::Hospital Focus polarity map (see Fig. 3) given their experience of competing with one another as leaders of departments vying for resources and political capital. They acknowledged the contention among themselves due to the pressure they experienced as they struggled as more or less separate departments to meet their targets on the three-year strategic plan. Certain executives had interpersonal relationship histories that also contributed to the tension experienced between the department “silos” (their term, used quite frequently). Some had known each other when they worked together at previous hospitals, and each had a unique relationship with the CEO. They joked that the last one in the CEO’s office prevailed on any given decision. While there was little evidence to support this, there was a pervasive sense of the importance of “playing politics” effectively as part of what it took to succeed in one’s executive role.

The senior team used this polarity map to identify the upsides and downsides of each pole, focusing on departments and on the hospital. As Figure 3 suggests, it wasn’t working for each of them to focus on their own department and get the upsides there, e.g. strong employee development, as doing so did not allow them as a team to reap the benefits of focusing on the hospital, e.g. successfully to complete challenging enterprise goals. After they completed the upsides and downsides of each pole, they identified action steps they could take to support getting more of the upsides and fewer of the downsides of each pole. This was near the close of the second day of the workshop, and the team took these two maps as action items to complete and implement.

Departments::Hospital

Action Steps

1. Empower silos by revising restrictive processes and re-visit authority levels for approval
2. Enlist input from directors/managers
3. Communicate – more transparent outputs from SSC and increase visibility of leaders in departments
4. Invite self-declared silos to SSC to explain initiatives/needs/barriers (nursing uniform issue)
5. Mechanism for sharing of ideas, silo developments. How do we show up different?
6. Names change – re-engineer names (SLT, LT, not SSC) Brand. Input and background work.

Action Steps

1. Prioritize initiatives
2. Broaden input to SSC
3. Define levels of decision-making, then communicate decisions.
4. Leadership development and training
5. Communicate discussions, updates, Minutes from SSC
6. Round table – state of SSC, follow-ups Input for change
7. PMO – clarification
8. Manager/director orientation manual training
9. Add Accountability step/s]

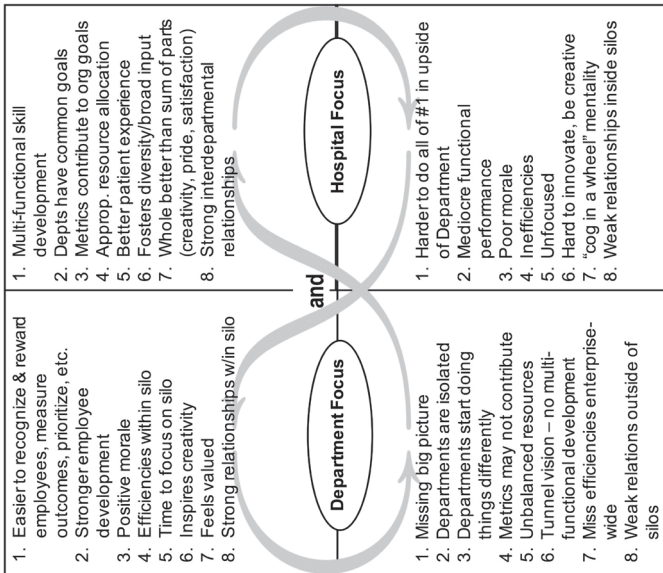


Figure 3: A Polarity Map of Department Focus::Hospital Focus

5 Summary

Our experience with this case supports the notion that the use of polarity maps as a sensemaking tool can help teams navigate paradox and harness a creative tension that leads to richer communication, higher morale, better results, and stronger relationships (Emerson, 2013). Increased flow is likely when leaders no longer feel they need to defend their position as they come to see the benefits of approaching the challenge as two interdependent states that must be managed.

It is impossible to create the collective realities needed to solve today's complex problems if leaders do not have the skill to think from a both-and perspective. Although easy to say, it is difficult to teach leaders practical ways of doing so, and research shows that left to their own devices they will fail at holding multiple perspectives (Kegan, 1991). This paper describes a practical tool for helping leaders and the teams of which they are a part see beyond their own perspective and step into the collective reality that makes it possible to develop solutions to the dilemmas facing our organizations and our world. Both-and thinking requires an investment of time and purposeful consideration, and may be just the undertaking Emily Dickinson had in mind when she wrote, "Truth must dazzle gradually or every man be blind."

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