Polarity Management ™
Working With Dilemmas
Beena S. Vilas

Imagine, a meeting of the top twenty people in a two thousand employee company. They are here to chart the company's direction and strategy for the next five years. Imagine, (for illustration purposes) that one key element they have to decide about, is whether they are going to be an 'inhaling' or 'exhaling'- yes, as in 'breathing in' or 'breathing out' - organization. (Please bear with this metaphor). After some heavy discussion and negotiation, they decide that 'inhaling' is definitely the wave of the future. A vocal 'exhale' minority says it is a big mistake, but reluctantly join the unified effort. As people start turning blue with lack of oxygen, the exhale minority says: "We told you so!". A shake up at the top in the interest of survival follows, and an 'exhaler' is put in charge to rescue the operation (until people start turning pale, of course, when it swings again.….and again, ad infinitum).

This does appear to be a no-brainer, doesn't it? No one can simply choose whether to inhale or exhale – it is not a problem that can be solved by choosing one of two life sustaining activities: we need to do *both* to survive.

I wonder what it is then that predisposes mankind to set up either/or choices when both choices represent values necessary for sustenance? Thus, it is not fair to treat personal, organizational and international polarities as if they are problems to be solved.

In management thinking, it is currently popular to move from individual to team, from competition to collaboration, from centralization to decentralization, from directive management to participative management, and from focus-on-task to focus- on-customer. These trends would be better understood as 'polarities' to be harmonized, rather than 'problems' to be solved by choosing one *over* other.

The concept of polarities is very ancient: the first recorded depictions of yin/yang appeared in the fourth century B.C., and ideas about harmonizing and transcending duality emerged in the Hindu psyche, around the same time. Both these approaches anticipated the contemporary concerns in psychology with gestalt, binary constructs, figure-ground relationships and open systems theory.

What are polarities, and what is Polarity Management ?

Polarities are defined as sets of interdependent opposites that cannot function well independently for long, and need each other for optimal results over time. So what distinguishes *polarities* from problems, is that they are ongoing; there is no end point; they are not solvable; they are interdependent alternatives which cannot stand alone without resulting in some dysfunctionality over time.

"The on-going, natural tension between the poles can be destructive and debilitating or can be managed, and channeled into a creative synergy that leads to superior outcomes", says Dr. Barry Johnson, of Polarity Management Associates based in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and the originator of the model and tools described as Polarity Management (PM). He describes a paradoxical relationship between poles because although they are on opposite sides, they are part of the same whole. To 'gain and maintain the benefits of one pole, you must also pursue the benefits of the other' says Dr. Johnson. In his book, *"Polarity Management – Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems",** he presents a new way of thinking through contradictions, that can enable individuals and groups to work better with the dynamic tensions that are the very nature of reality.

PM is a methodology that aims to augment human problem solving skills with a set of tools and principles that enable us to harmonize the polarities and paradoxes that haunt us, whose resolution appears to be elusive, resulting in chronic conflicts – both intrapersonal and interpersonal, as well as organizational.

How do Polarities work?

The first dimension of this understanding is that all polarities contain two points of view. Each point of view is not only correct, but needs to tap the other point of view for the system to sustain itself over time. Also, every point of view contains a combination of a *value* and a *fear*. The stronger the emotional attachment to a value, the greater will be the fear of its loss, as they are proportional.

For example, if one party strongly values individual autonomy and responsibility, a corollary fear is likely to be the fear of restrictions and a loss of freedom. This value/fear system keeps the party holding on to its point of view and prevents them from looking at the positive benefits of having rules and structure. The reality is that both structure and autonomy are required for the individual and system to be successful over time.
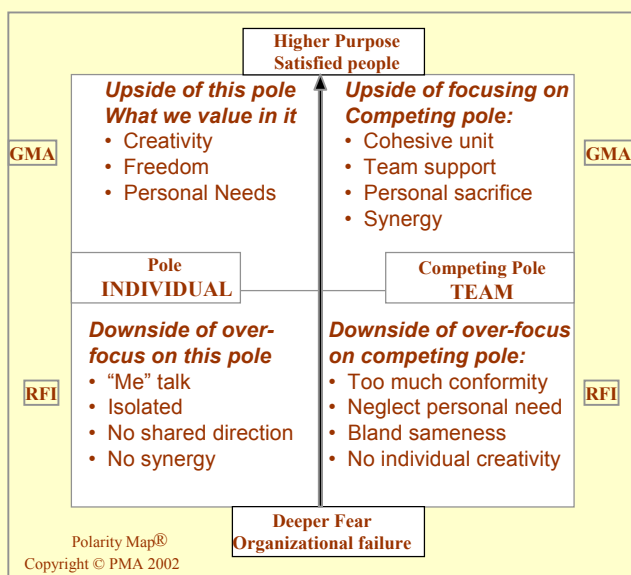
The PM perspective allows a better understanding of resistance and change processes, because it involves seeing a more complete picture of the situation, and respecting the wisdom of those who resist our "solutions" for change.

How is PM relevant to business success?

James Collins and Jerry Porras, in their book "*Built to Last*"**, identified 18 "visionary" companies and set out to determine what was special about them. To get on the list, a company had to be world famous, have a stellar brand image, and be at least 50 years old. The authors summarized what distinguished 18 'gold medal' companies that had outperformed the stock market from 1926 – 1990 by a factor of 15! One out of the four key attributes of the gold companies was: "Embrace the genius of the AND". Another key attribute: "Preserve the core, AND stimulate progress". Both these attributes spell out the fundamental tenet of Polarity Management – both/and thinking is needed for success. On the evidence, those organizations that intuitively manage polarities well out- perform those that don't.

Using PM concepts and skills, strategic teams can discover the basis of resistance in any situation, and understand polar preferences in order to work with it to maximize the synergy of both points of view.   Change leaders and development teams can learn to value and provide structure for opposing viewpoints

A shift in mindset from seeing all difficulties as problems to solve to a mindset that recognizes some difficulties as polarities to manage is a powerful change intervention available today. If we learn to manage our polarities, opposition becomes a valued resource, and we significantly reduce the cost of resistance to change and development efforts.

Beena Vilas, currently based in Florida, is a certified Learning Coach with LIM and has been an OD consultant for many years. A British Council scholar from India, she has specific expertise in Action Reflection Learning, Whole-system change, Leadership Development, PM and teaching Conceptual Thinking and Innovation

EVENTS

JUNE 17-18, 2002: Dr Barry Johnson will facilitate a two-day session on Polarity Management in Boca Raton, Florida. For registration and information: call 561-966-9523 or send an email: beena.vilas@limglobal.net

JUNE 20-21, 2002: Isabel Rimanoczy and Beena Vilas will facilitate a two-day ARL Coaching Skills Workshop in Washington DC. For registration and information: call 954-315-4583 or send an email: info@LIMglobal.net

* Polarity Management – Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems, by Dr. Barry Johnson, published 1992, 1996 - HRD Press
** Built to Last – Successful Habits of Visionary Companies, by James C Collins and Jerry I Porras, published 1997 - Harperbusiness

How can PM be applied in real situations?

The first step is to distinguish a problem to be solved from a polarity to be harmonized. Problems are those that can be solved with resources, can be dealt with by an *either/or* choice, where the solutions can stand alone and do not require the necessary opposite for long term success. Polarities are on-going, never solvable, and require a shift of emphasis between *interdependent opposites*.

Once this is made clear, the next step is to build the polarity map. The map has four quadrants, created by the upsides and downsides of the two poles that need to be harmonized. Once the quadrants have been thought through in the relevant situation, actions to gain and maintain both upsides (GMA) are recorded.   Red Flag Indicators (RFI) are articulated that will help to acknowledge movement into the downsides.   The Higher Purpose is the answer to the question: "Why balance this polarity?". The Deeper Fear is what we are trying to avoid – ie what will happen as a result of the lack of balance.

The Polarity Map

Higher Purpose / Satisfied people

	Upside of this pole — What we value in it	Upside of focusing on Competing pole:	
GMA	• Creativity • Freedom • Personal Needs	• Cohesive unit • Team support • Personal sacrifice • Synergy	GMA

Pole INDIVIDUAL — **Competing Pole TEAM**

	Downside of over-focus on this pole	Downside of over-focus on competing pole:	
RFI	• "Me" talk • Isolated • No shared direction • No synergy	• Too much conformity • Neglect personal need • Bland sameness • No individual creativity	RFI

Deeper Fear / Organizational failure

Polarity Map® Copyright © PMA 2002

The basic idea is to work with each quadrant of each pole so that the majority of our time is spent in the positive quadrants (of course some of the time will go in dealing with the downsides). The downsides appear only when the pole in question is overemphasized - to the exclusion of the opposite pole, and must be seen in relation to the context and the situation.