

A Different Approach to "Unsolvable" Problems

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Today's libraries increasingly face dilemmas that seem unsolvable. Because we in libraries are problem-solvers at heart, we tend to treat all of the difficult issues we encounter as *problems*, maybe even problems with *best* solutions, and we feel frustrated when we cannot solve them. Dr. Barry Johnson, in his book *Polarity Management* challenges us to consider whether some of our seemingly unsolvable problems are actually "polarities," which can not be solved, but may be effectively managed.[\[1\]](#)

This approach assumes that we can manage many apparent organizational problems by achieving a balance between the upsides of two opposite points of view while minimizing the downsides of each. Ideally, this mode of management results in a fluid ability to shift appropriately from one point of view to the other and/or to hold both in mind at once.

Johnson gives us two questions for determining whether a difficult issue is a *problem* to be solved or a *polarity* that needs to be managed.

* Is the issue ongoing? A dilemma which can have an end through the application of a solution suggests a problem, while an ongoing dilemma suggests a polarity.

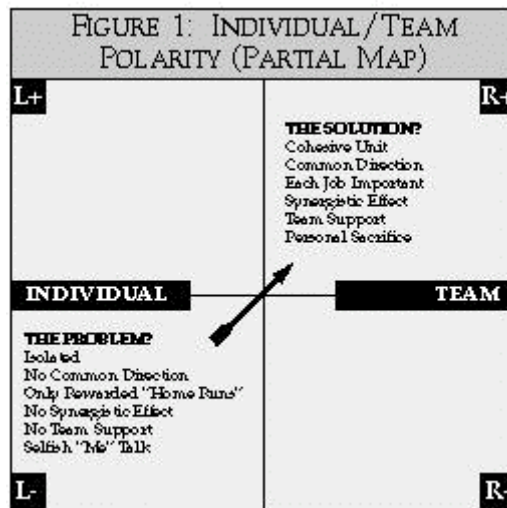
* Are the dilemma's opposite points of view interdependent? If there is interdependency between each of the primary perspectives on the issue, then it is a potential polarity.

A polarity, therefore, is a dilemma that is ongoing and in which opposite points of view are interdependent. In libraries, this could be illustrated by issues associated with dilemmas such as quality vs. productivity or individual vs. team management.

The Polarity Management (TM) Model

We can identify the elements of a dilemma by viewing them through Johnson's polarity model (see accompanying figures). First, we need to determine what the opposite points of view, or poles, are. For instance, in the illustrated example, the poles might be described as "individual" and "team." In the polarity map, the upsides of each point of view are listed in the upper quadrants and downsides in the lower quadrants. The illustrations describe the pull many organizations feel when thinking about accomplishing work through individuals and through teams. Different groups may be advocating for one or the other method of work. It is a polarity because the individual and team environments are interdependent, and because the dilemma--in this case, tensions between advocates for each method--are ongoing.

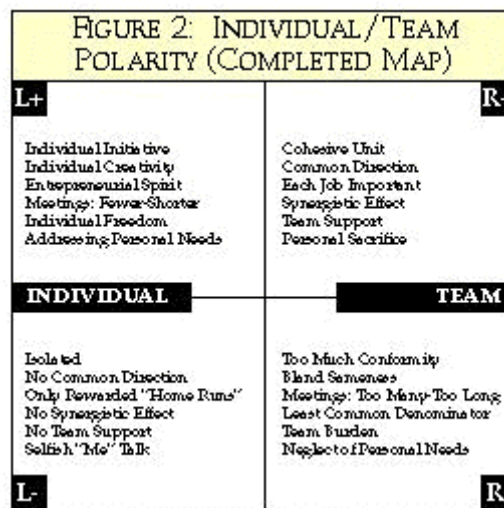
Listed in the lower left hand corner of **Figure 1** (L-) are the downsides of focusing on the individual in the workplace. These are the characteristics that lead some in the organization to describe the situation as a problem. Observing, anticipating, or feeling these downside factors allows some to point out that the solution is to move to the opposite positive pole, or the upper right hand corner (R+), where all the benefits of working in teams are listed. But there are downsides to working in teams, which will be pointed out by the defenders of the "individual" pole. These individuals will also point out that the answer to the downside of teams (R-) resides in the positive or upper left hand quadrant of the model (L+).



[Individual/Team Polarity](#)

The completed map of the dilemma in **Figure 2** shows the two poles with their respective up and downsides. Efforts to solve the issue will fail, because this is an ongoing dilemma to be managed, as opposed to a problem to be solved.

Effective management of a polarity involves focusing on the positive factors of each point of view, understanding the downsides, and not allowing the negative factors to control decisions and actions.



[Individual/Team Polarity](#)

Crusading and Tradition-Bearing

Johnson goes on to describe the interpersonal and organizational dynamic which attempts to drive movement from one pole to another. *Crusading* is the activity people engage in when they want to make things better by moving away from the downside of one pole to the upside of the opposite pole.

Tradition-Bearing is the activity people engage in to defend the upside of the status quo and to point out the necessity of avoiding the downside of the opposite point of view.

Both Crusaders and Tradition-Bearers attempt to persuade others by asserting that the situation is a problem to be solved. The best solution they suggest is to migrate to the opposite pole, away from the

pole they describe as problematic or negative for the organization. This can cause rifts and misunderstandings based on old win/lose habits and the inability to hold two views at once or, at the very least, to shift fluidly from one pole to the other.

Adding New Perspectives Through Dialogue

Polarity Management(TM) will not make our world simpler. Nor will it relieve us of the difficulty of making critical decisions. Johnson himself describes it as just one tool among many. OMS has found that polarity mapping is one tool that helps people recognize and discuss differing perspectives to see better the full panorama of an issue and understand different views. In this regard, it is like William Perry's description of a "committed relativist" (see previous article). The true value of such analytical tools is to provide members of an organization with a way to enter into a dialogue about the nature of a dilemma and to consider all views in developing effective strategies.

[1] *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvble Problems*, by Barry Johnson. HRD Press: Amherst, MA, 1996. Polarity Mangement is a trademark of Polarity Management Associates, LLC, Grand Rapids, MI 49508. The trademark, model, and underlying theory are used in this article with the express written permission of Polarity Management Associates, LLC.

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