

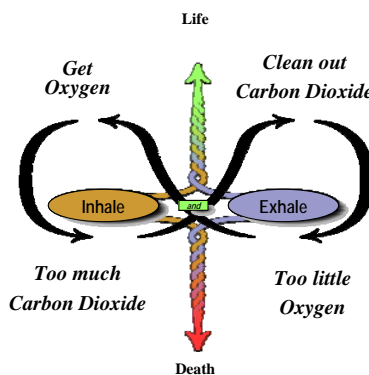
A Brief Overview Highlighting
Why Managing Polarities Is Key to Advancing Diversity and Inclusion

(Polarity Management® is based on the work of Barry Johnson, PhD and Polarity Management Associates)

They are called paradox, dilemma, and tensions. We refer to them as polarities; but whatever they are called, it has been documented that individuals and organizations that manage them well outperform those that don't. In this article, responses to common questions about two related bodies of work—polarity management and diversity and inclusion—are addressed. My intent is to introduce a construct that will support you in advancing the important work of diversity and inclusion by supplementing the way you think. I hope you find this helpful.

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What are polarities?



Is the opposite of the “greater purpose” the “lesser purpose?”

Polarities are competing values that need each other over time in order to achieve a greater purpose.

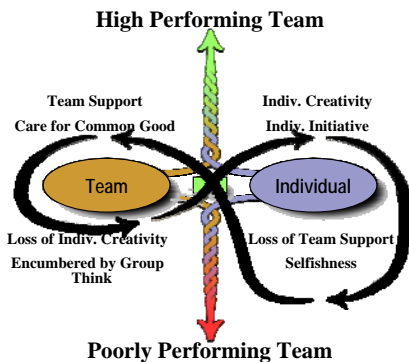
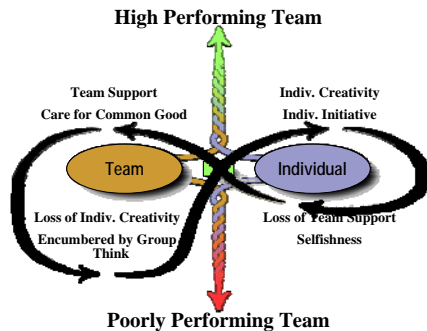
For example, inhaling and exhaling are competing values. Over time we need to do both in order to achieve the greater purpose of sustaining “life.” If we overdo one and neglect the other, we will die.

Another example is activity and rest. We need both in order to live a healthy life.

The competing values (inhaling and exhaling), (activity and rest) are called “poles”—hence the term “polarities.”

The opposite of the greater purpose is the “deeper fear.” In the “inhaling and exhaling” example, the deeper fear, “death” would occur if, over time, you focused on one pole and neglected the other.

Do we manage polarities naturally?



What does it mean to manage polarities well?

What are the benefits of managing polarities well?

Yes, we manage all polarities to some extent. However, we don't manage all polarities well. Some we instinctively manage well, like inhaling and exhaling. Some we manage poorly (or somewhere between well and poorly).

For example, in failing relationships one polarity that is often poorly managed is "self interest and the other's interest." In healthy relationships, this polarity is managed well.

Another example of a poorly managed polarity can be found in teams, where "individual uniqueness" is consistently sacrificed for the sake of "team identity." The result will be group think and a loss of individual creativity. If the reverse is true and team identity is sacrificed for the sake of individual uniqueness, the team will experience loss of team support and selfishness. In either case, the result over time will be a poorly performing team.

Since we don't instinctively manage all polarities well, it is helpful to:

1. Learn to recognize polarities when they show up
2. Answer the question, "Are we managing this polarity well, poorly, or somewhere in between?"
3. Learn how polarities work
4. Learn to manage polarities well

To manage a polarity well involves genuinely appreciating and giving quality focus and resources to both poles so the positive results from each pole can be experienced on an on-going basis and the greater purpose can be achieved.

Here is a point to remember: **Because success of one pole depends on the other, both poles (solutions) will always be critical to success.** The strategies used to reach the solutions may vary, but both solutions will remain critical.

The ability to manage polarities (whether intentionally or intuitively) will impact your long-term success or failure.

Some people are naturally gifted with the ability to recognize and manage polarities (though they may not

Why is Polarity Management® relevant to those who wish to do meaningful and authentic Diversity and Inclusion (D/I) work?

call it “managing polarities”). However, some polarities are obscure—disguised within the day-to-day opportunities and challenges we face. These polarities are the ones we are likely to misdiagnose and treat as problems. This misdiagnosis leads to a huge waste of time because no matter how many resources are dedicated to solving them, **polarities cannot be solved.**

The ability to identify and manage polarities:

1. Saves time and resources
2. Builds trust and reduces resistance to change
3. Accelerates achievement of the greater purpose
4. Sustains achievement of the greater purpose

D/I work is loaded with interdependent competing values—polarities. Because these competing values often show up as disruptive “tensions,” the natural tendency is to try to minimize or eliminate the tension, or failing that, manage through the tension by “agreeing to disagree.” A typical process involves:

- 1) Identifying the problem. (Where is this tension coming from and why?)
- 2) Identifying the desired solution.
- 3) Conducting a gap analysis to determine the difference between where we are and the desired solution.
- 4) Developing a strategy to get to a solution.

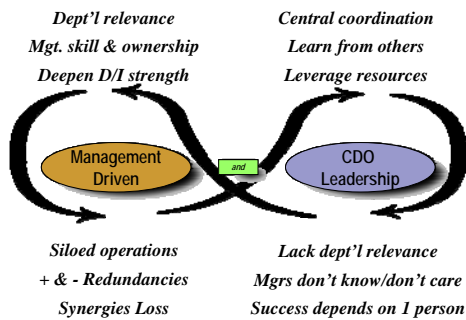
This process works fine when problem solving. It will even appear brilliant when first applied to a polarity; **and it is not enough.** Here’s why.

Since polarities have two necessary solutions, going after only one solution will undermine your ability to achieve your greater purpose.

When you see your problem as “stale ideas,” you will see innovation and change as the great solution. It will be—for the moment. But that solution will soon become the problem when all of that change becomes chaos. It is better to see change and stability as solutions.

The **same principles apply to polarities in diversity.** Sooner or later it becomes clear that the preferred solution is not enough. The “new” solution soon

becomes the problem and the s/hero responsible for leading that new diversity initiative becomes the villain. Diversity will be perceived as just another passing fancy or nice, but irrelevant, activities and strategies. Let's look at a common example.



Kennedy, a seasoned Chief Diversity Officer (CDO), enthusiastically took on the challenge of "working herself out of a job" by equipping leaders and department managers with processes and skills to manage diversity/inclusion independently. It was a daunting undertaking but when she resigned the position everyone agreed that Kennedy had succeeded. She was congratulated and cited for being strategic and noble. For 16 months, this proud legacy gave her great satisfaction. Then her colleague Chris announced to her that the organization was in search of a new CDO.

Over lunch Chris explained that soon after Kennedy left, the leaders realized the department managers were operating in silos, good processes as well as mistakes were being duplicated, resources were not being leveraged and opportunities to create synergies were missed. The CEO and Senior VP of HR had decided a new CDO was needed to centralize and coordinate efforts.

When the new CDO arrived, many of Kennedy's processes were abandoned in favor of new centralized corporate initiatives. Now, four years after Kenney's departure, she has learned that the CDO who replaced her is burned out and in the job market. The organization is looking for a successor who can equip managers to take ownership and accountability for diversity and inclusion.

It is not surprising that, though these leaders were sincere in their efforts to support diversity and inclusion, they were seen by those living through these pendulum swings as wishy-washy, incompetent or insincere. They are not insincere, but they did misdiagnose the challenges. Instead of seeing them as interdependent approaches to a diversity issue, they saw them as separate problems. The important thing for managers to do in this case is to appreciate the merits of both centralized and decentralized accountability for managing D/I and develop a long-term plan to capitalize on both of these approaches.

There are unknown numbers of polarities which are relevant to D/I leaders. Here are just a few examples:

- Develop Financial ROI and Develop "Trust" Accounts
- Conditional Respect and Unconditional Respect
- Systems and Processes and Behaviors
- Management Engagement and Leadership Engagement
- Developing Talent and Utilizing Talent

What are some key polarities for D/I leaders to manage?

Mental Engagement and Emotional Engagement
Consistency and Flexibility
Political Correctness and Honesty
Accountability and Leniency
Organization's D/I Goals and Manager's D/I Goals

Should we plan to manage every polarity we identify at once?

No. Focus on the few that will have the most significant impact on your organization. You and your stakeholders will be best able to identify the few that are most important.

Is there a process for managing polarities?

Yes. There is a 6-Step Process.

1. Define the Issue
2. Identify key stakeholders
3. Build a polarity map
4. Understand how polarities work
5. Assess how well this polarity is working
6. Develop a plan and early warnings to manage this polarity

Is the assessment quantitative or qualitative?

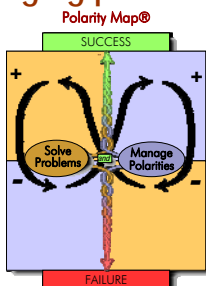
This decision is up to you. It can be quantitative, qualitative or both. When an in-depth assessment is not possible, a trend assessment can be helpful.

Once you have figured out what it takes to manage polarities is that it?

Managing polarities is an ongoing process. Imagine what would happen if you stopped exhaling.

Managing some polarities requires more effort than others, but just as "inhaling and exhaling" comes naturally, managing polarities can become more instinctive with practice. The more people in your organization who understand the process, the easier it will become.

Is managing polarities a panacea?



No. Some issues are problems or opportunities that simply need to be addressed. Polarity Management® should be applied when competing values are interdependent. Learning how to distinguish between problems and polarities will help you decide which issues are problems that need to be solved and which are polarities that need to be managed.