

Successful Teams Using the Polarity Process

The Polarity Pathways Group (PPG)

Working with polarities is a powerful approach to tapping the potential of teams. When polarities are skillfully engaged, leaders are able to generate results that were previously not possible. Individuals and teams are able to create from the dynamic tension of differences and are able to work successfully together in ways that reach far beyond current problem-solving models.

The polarity approach enables:

- New Ways of Seeing
- Creative Leaps
- Next Level Results

WHAT IS A POLARITY?

The world as we know it is made up of contrasting forces. Simply put, a polarity is a set of opposites - one pole would be meaningless without the other: light and dark, in and out, yin and yang. They can take the form of opposing points of view, apparent contradictions, or situations that appear paradoxical in nature. While our culture is used to either/or thinking, the polarity approach reorients us to thinking both/and.... and beyond.

Move the Unmovable

Polarity is a powerful perspective and when applied skillfully, helps teams get unstuck and move to new levels. The reason the polarity approach is so powerful is that polarities are always present *and* they are unsolvable by nature - in order to move forward, they have to be engaged. They are the underlying reason those tough issues haven't responded to other "treatments". The lens of polarity reveals the often unseen dynamics that cause dysfunction, paralysis, conflict or at the very least, keep teams from reaching their potential.

The Pathway of Polarity as a Process

When engaging with an individual, team, organization or relationship the general polarity process is the same. Here we will be focusing on teams. It is important to note that working with polarity is useful no matter what stage of development a team is at – but it does not replace the basics. Things like having a clear vision, infrastructure, roles and responsibilities are all still important.

How do you consciously employ polarity in any situation? Whether you begin with choosing to engage polarity because you want to take a team to the next level or because they are stuck or you choose to work with polarity as a practice to reach and maintain excellence, it doesn't matter. You begin with observation.



Successful Teams Using the Polarity Process

The Polarity Pathways Group (PPG)

Once we have put our observer glasses on, we begin the polarity process. Here it is in abbreviated form:

- Name it
- Claim it
- Feel it
- Hold it
- Engage it

We will briefly review what these mean and then apply them in a case study.

NAME IT

Here are some clues that polarity is present. The team is stuck, feels “foggy,” there is confusion, antagonism, tension, arguments, resistance, poor results. Or the team is faced with a challenge that feels impossible.

Look to find both poles by first looking for what you can see and then identifying its opposite. It may be easier to see what the team is attached to or it may be easier to see what the team is resisting. Either way, you can begin to identify the polarity. Name one pole, then name its opposite.

Sometimes one pole is so deeply resisted that no one in the situation even can name it. An outside observer may help identify what is going on.

CLAIM IT

Get agreement that the polarity you have named is, in fact, operating and get agreement to engage in the polarity process in order to move forward. The process will almost always involve some discomfort, so it is important to have agreement up front.

FEEL IT

The heart of the polarity process is embracing the opposite pole. Identify and make a fairly exhaustive list the advantages of the thing that is being resisted. Relax into what it feels like to accept the opposite pole fully. Sometimes it is helpful to act it out physically. For example, if attachment is to order and the opposite pole is chaos, maybe move chaotically for a while, or write ideas down in no particular order and without following the lines.



Successful Teams Using the Polarity Process

The Polarity Pathways Group (PPG)

Do not yield to the temptation to race through this step. This is where there is likely to be discomfort and awkwardness. Stay here until the resistance begins to dissolve and the team really feels the potential gift in the opposite.

HOLD IT

Hold with acceptance any trigger that is present. The pole jumping urge will probably arise. The team may start to think that if they are not all this (e.g. all order, all task) then they have to be all that (e.g. all chaos, all process.) Having temporarily embodied the opposite pole, they now need to hold both as possibilities without judgment.

This step may take place quickly or may take some time. The important thing is to resist resolving the tension by jumping to one pole or the other AND to resist the temptation to create some sort of weakened compromise. Such “homogenization” of the poles of a polarity usually takes all the life and energy out of the situation, and this is definitely not the goal.

The creative payoff comes from holding the tension until wholly new possibilities appear.

ENGAGE IT

Choose a course of action and/or a way of being from the broader perspective that finally emerges to create a Third Way place between the poles, a new possibility that you could not have imagined before.

This is where the creative magic enters. Neither of the previously identified poles is negated. And they are not blended into something lifeless. Instead, breakthroughs occur, ways of moving forward that continue to honor the entire polarity.



Successful Teams Using the Polarity Process

The Polarity Pathways Group (PPG)

A CASE STUDY OF POLARITY IN ACTION

Jessica was a VP of a global firm. She ran a tight ship and she and her team were highly regarded. After interviewing Jessica, members of her team and a sampling of clients, it didn't take long to figure out that the team was valued more as doers than business partners. It was also apparent how attached the team members were to the success their approach had brought them.

The reality, however, was that the company and the industry were facing a challenge and the team knew they needed to change... but they felt stuck. How were they going to do this when they were already working at capacity?

Here is how the Polarity Process played out.

NAME IT

After coaching Jessica and gathering perspectives from the team members and business partners we landed on working primarily with the polarity of strategic (seeing the bigger picture) and tactical (taking specific actions.) This resonated deeply with everyone – so we knew we were in the ballpark.

CLAIM IT

The team was asked to go willingly towards embracing both poles. “Nice idea,” they said, “but how realistic is it?”

Have you ever heard the phrase, “just say ‘Yes’ – the How will follow?” The next step became creating alignment around this as a vision of sorts – a target to embrace. They were willing and in fact eager to look here, but not confident.

FEEL IT

While the team did feel confident about their tactical ability, they needed to believe that they could stretch into and strengthen their strategic muscles. Their strategic muscle had to be understood AND experienced in a meaningful way to “activate” both sides of the polarity. Just knowing what the opposite pole is isn't enough. It has to be embodied.

We assessed the strategic capacity of each individual and the team as a whole. They discovered that strategic was not just about the ability to set strategy but about stepping back and thinking broader, more holistically and critically in order to make conscious choices and take aligned action.

As it turned out, Jessica and the team did have strategic capacity. They simply were not exercising the muscle and it had atrophied.



Successful Teams Using the Polarity Process

The Polarity Pathways Group (PPG)

We brought the team together for a few days and began to create the “what” and “how” of feeling both strategic and tactical. We started referring to it as “strategically tactical.” This resulted in a revised vision statement for their organization, renaming the group to include “strategy” in the title, and identifying the specific structures and behaviors that would support this new perspective and direction for both individuals and the team.

Yet, there was another important hurdle - how to deal with a deep attachment to their self-image and value as doers *extraordinaire*? They came up with their own new mantra. It had expanded from “Yes, we can” to “We can say ‘No’ when it’s for the sake of a bigger Yes!”

HOLD IT

This is the place where engaging both poles generates wholly new approaches that we call a “Third Way.”

There is a natural tendency, even a strong temptation, to try to resolve the tension— settle into a comfortable new place with only a spattering of the benefits. Teams feel drawn to go back to how they were or to jump to being the opposite. Much more is available if the creative tension is consciously engaged and held. This team had implemented some particular structures to support this, but Jessica had an additional important role to play.

ENGAGE IT

Jessica hired us in an ongoing advisory relationship with an emphasis on polarity. She understood the importance of keeping the lens of “strategically tactical” alive and the need to pay attention to the natural tendency for new attachments to form such as “We’re not being doers any more.”

The idea is first to stretch and relax into the opposite pole – over-calibrate in a way – but then to stay conscious of the intention to create from the whole rather than pole jump.

A year later, the team is viewed as having made tremendous leaps as a critical partner to the business. Individuals in the group who were viewed as “not having a strategic bone in their body” are hailed as miracles. The team has regular strategy sessions and “spaghetti” meetings (a structure that arose out of another polarity, order and chaos.) Jessica was promoted and the team is buzzing.

We have an ongoing relationship with this client and the journey continues. There is always the next place to look!

