Leverage Unsolvable Problems in Schools

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Outcomes

• Develop an awareness of existing tensions – called polarities – in leaders, groups, and organizations

• Recognize the potential of how these tensions can be tapped as a resource

• Apply the concepts and tools of Polarity Mapping™

While the Baldridge Criteria provides the “what,” the challenge remains, “how”? Many ongoing dilemmas can be described as polarities - two valued approaches to the same issue. Knowing how to balance two seemingly opposite yet intertwined ideals may seem impossible, but understanding there is way to leverage them can lead to new paths of excellence. Learn to recognize tensions to leverage unsolvable problems! Discover how to map polarities, minimize conflict, and supplement “either/or” thinking with “both/and”.

Introduction to Polarities

Polarities are chronic, ongoing tensions or dilemmas that are inherent in individuals, in groups, and in organizational systems such as schools. They are unavoidable, unstoppable, and unsolvable; they must have two correct viewpoints that are interdependent; and they must be leveraged using “both-and” thinking over a traditional “either-or” approach.

Polarity Thinking is a model that involves a set of principles and tools for recognizing and leveraging polarities in work and in life.

Some educational examples of polarities include views on both:

- taking care of self and taking care of others
- home commitments and work commitments
- autonomy and collaboration
- planning and action
- student responsibility for learning and teacher responsibility for student learning
- expulsion and alternative programs
- academic achievement and whole child achievement (Kise, 2013)
- measurement model for teacher evaluation and growth model for teacher evaluation (Kise, 2013)
- strict and flexible
- teaching reading strategies and choice reading (Kise, 2013)
- mastering math knowledge and mastering problem solving (Kise, 2013)
- math procedural understanding and math conceptual understanding
- focusing on our similarities and focusing on our differences

Some specific organizational examples for central office personnel and school boards include a focus on both:

- centralized coordination and decentralized buildings / initiatives
- school and community
- district autonomy and state control
- competing with others and collaborating with others
- data focus and people focus
- reduce cost and improve quality
- retain employees and hire new talent
- recognize the individual and recognize the team/school
- preserve the core and stimulate progress (Collins & Porras, 2005)
- technical change and adaptive change (Heifitz & Linsky, 2002)

Betty Achinstein (2002), writing about conflict among schoolteachers, notes that collaboration and consensus – critical elements in building school community – actually generate conflict. She found that by airing diverse perspectives in a collective setting and encouraging teachers to debate what and how to do schooling, schools generate new conflicts of their commitments in creating collaborative communities.
In what ways might conflict represent a polarity?

Conflict is a manifestation of interdependence; tensions between independence (autonomous individual) and interdependence (group, organization, etc.) are ever present. This inherent tension can be a source of productive energy, or it can lead to unproductive interactions and create an energy drain.

Groups that use tensions productively distinguish between affective and cognitive conflict. Affective conflict is personalized conflict and is detrimental to group energy and productivity. Cognitive conflict is conflict over ideas and approaches, and it is a hallmark of high-performing groups. Groups that engage in cognitive conflict critically examine ideas to sort out the best practices for student learning. Thus conflict becomes a resource (Amason, Thompson, Hochwater, & Harrison, 1995).

With the notion of polarities, Barry Johnson (1996) offers a set of principles, tools and structures for identifying and tapping into the natural tensions that are created as individuals and organizations attempt to engage in cognitive conflict. He identifies these tensions as “polarities to leverage” with supplemental thinking – not replacement thinking – of “problems to solve.” Polarities are interdependent pairs that need each other over time to achieve a higher purpose. As such, they are relentless issues that are unsolvable, unavoidable, and indestructible. Polarities also exist in a construct of a dynamic energy system that works in a predictable way and can be harnessed to reach the higher purpose.

Johnson asserts that when individuals, groups, and organizations distinguish between a “problem to solve” and a “polarity to leverage,” they can effectively deal with both. They can then celebrate and capitalize on diversity and convert resistance to change to a resource for a preferred and more sustainable future.

For leaders, some polarities to pay attention to are the truths of both:

- candor and diplomacy
- confidence and humility
- tight and loose (DuFour & Eaker, 1998)
- directive leadership and shared leadership
- grounded and visionary
- analysis and encouragement
- conditional respect and unconditional respect
- planning and implementation
- getting the job done and building relationships

Leaders, teams, and organizations must therefore ask this fundamental question when they are faced with a challenge: **Is this a problem to solve, or an ongoing polarity that we must manage well?**

Problems to solve are those that have one or more right answers that stand alone and often signaled by “either-or” thinking: the decision(s) and solution(s) are usually either right or wrong. For example, “How do you spell ____?” or “What should we include in our parent survey?”
In contrast, polarities to be leveraged are sets of seeming opposites that cannot function well alone: these dilemmas require “both-and” thinking. Because the two sides of a polarity are interdependent, you cannot choose one pole as a solution and ignore the other. When a polarity is inadvertently seen as a problem to solve – or one pole is empowered to the neglect of the other – a vicious downward cycle is created. The objective of leveraging polarities, then, is to liberate the best of both opposites while minimizing the limiting consequences of each.

Schools are living paradoxes (i.e. polarities) rife with chronic, competing truths. As dynamical systems of both energy and information, they give simultaneous attention to both tasks and relationships. The principles and tools of Polarity Thinking support individuals and groups to support collaborative communities in capitalizing on diversity and engaging in cognitive conflict to release energy and productivity.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problems to Solve</th>
<th>Polyraties to Leverage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Static:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Dynamic:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Rational and technical in nature</td>
<td>- Involve interdependent pairs and multiple sets of interdependent pairs</td>
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<td>- Involve decisions between or alternatives or among multiple alternatives</td>
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<td><strong>They are not ongoing:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Energy is ongoing:</strong></td>
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<td>- You can decide and move on</td>
<td>- There is no endpoint as long as the system is functioning</td>
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<tr>
<td>- There is an endpoint</td>
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<tr>
<td>They are solvable by making a choice among alternatives</td>
<td>You cannot solve polarities by making a choice. Doing so is unsustainable.</td>
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<td><strong>Independent Alternatives:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Interdependent Alternatives:</strong></td>
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<td>- Choices can stand alone</td>
<td>- Poles cannot stand alone</td>
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<td>- For a solution to work, there is no need to include an alternative</td>
<td>- The alternative views need each other over time to optimize the situation</td>
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<td><strong>Benefits:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Benefits:</strong></td>
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<td>- Decisions can be swift and efficient</td>
<td>- Save time by identifying difficulties that can only be leveraged and not solved</td>
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<td>- Clear and final answers</td>
<td>- Accelerate change by seeing accuracy and completeness</td>
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<td>- Enjoy sense of accomplishment</td>
<td>- Sustain desired change and avoid vicious cycles</td>
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<td>- Move on to new opportunities and challenges</td>
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<td><strong>Examples:</strong>&lt;br&gt;Should we promote Jay?&lt;br&gt;What should I include on my quiz?&lt;br&gt;Should we invest in new busses?&lt;br&gt;What events prompted World War I?&lt;br&gt;Which insurance company is best?</td>
<td><strong>Examples:</strong>&lt;br&gt;Retain Employees &amp; Hire New Talent&lt;br&gt;Candor &amp; Diplomacy&lt;br&gt;Short Term &amp; Long Term&lt;br&gt;Competition &amp; Cooperation&lt;br&gt;Cost &amp; Quality</td>
</tr>
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**Treating a polarity as if it were a problem to solve:** (1) reduces the attainability, (2) slows down the process by increasing resistance, and (3) even if the resistance is overcome, the change is inherently unstable.
Key Points

Our preferences / choices reflect our _______________ and _______________.

Some choices are easy: we readily identify their value. Other choices are difficult. This creates a dilemma or _______________.

The tension reflects an appreciation of both sets of _______________ and _______________.

You feel tension because the choice is a _______________ _______________.

All polarities contain two points of view which are absolutely true AND they are part of a pair of truths that need each other over time.

Respect the tension and _______________ it.

Forcing others to come to your point of view is likely to create feelings of _______________, _______________, etc. Behaviors that accompany these feelings are often counterproductive.

When the “power” position “wins” in a polarity situation, failure is _______________. The _______________ of the “power” pole will result.

When dealing with the polarity, the smaller the _______________ _______________, the more important it is to pay attention to that voice and the truth it represents.

Every change effort is part of a polarity energy system. If you want to _______________ failure of a change effort, tie it to _______________ _______________ of a polarity. If you want success, tie it to both poles.
A Third Thing

Often we are caught between two things. Should I do this – or should I do that? A choice between two things is not a choice. It becomes a fight between right and wrong. A polarity is created and we are stuck. Usually neither one is good or bad, but we polarize them because of our pain and not being able to make a definite choice. This one forever, we want to say and be done with it. But then a nagging voice inside says, No not that one. And we are pulled into the fray again.

This contention can go on for years.

We need a third thing, a way to step out of the conundrum. We don’t realize it, but this third thing is fertilized and fueled by the energy of the other two. So don’t despair. It is by taking on the struggle that something new can come out of it. It is our human effort and yearning, our care, that made us into the struggle to begin with. Be careful not to lay an idea of goodness over your struggle. Keep it alive and raw.

The third thing that will arise is unique, individual – and real. It has to be, because it will change something for you from the roots up.

The True Secret Life of Writing: Connecting Life with Language (2013)
Natalie Goldberg