

The Path of Contemplative Dialogue: Engaging Collective Awareness

Contemplative Dialogue: Polarity Management

*The following guide is part four of a series of processes that accompany the Contemplative Dialogue Manual, **the Path of Contemplative Dialogue: Engaging Collective Awareness** developed by Steven Wirth, Founder of the Centre for Contemplative Dialogue.*

Part Four: Polarities

In part three of the Contemplative Dialogue Series, the life stance of being nondefended in lieu of a defended stance was explored. This counter-cultural practice invites one to be nonviolent and inclusive; to tell the truth with compassion; to combine advocacy and inquiry; and to support free and informed choice. Building on part three, part four focuses on polarities. Polarities are the dilemmas in our life that have no ready solution or either/or answers. The issues are interdependent or they are issues that hold a 'both/and' perspective.

Understanding Polarities

Engaging in contemplative dialogue, staying at the table of difficult conversations, allowing ourselves to be formed and transformed is an intentional choice especially during these times of transition within our church, world and communities. When in transition, we naturally default to 'low level awareness' which manifests itself in we-they thinking; loss of trust; ritual correctness, and intoxicating righteousness to name a few characteristics. To engage in a transformative and contemplative dialogue, we have to slow down and take a long loving look at reality. In this place of awareness, we begin to see our assumptions and to see the both/and operative in our lives. The both/and are the polarities we hold.

Barry Johnson¹, an organizational consultant, who developed the concept of Polarity Management gives us two questions for determining whether a difficult issue is a problem to be solved or a polarity that needs to be managed or held.

1. Is the issue ongoing, that is, 'a dilemma' which ends through the application of a solution? If yes, it suggests a problem. For example: I am hungry, by eating lunch I am no longer hungry.

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¹Johnson, Barry: Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems, HRD Press Inc., 1992 – polaritymanagement.com

2. Are the opposite points of view in the dilemma interdependent or ongoing? If yes, it suggests a polarity. For example: leaders need to be conservative for stability and revolutionary for change.

In life, we frequently encounter values that are interdependent. They need one another in order to fully function or to come to their fullest potential. These differing perspectives or neutral poles are held in trust while a deeper or broader truth than either one of the poles can hold by itself is made manifest. Some examples of polarities are:

- Contemplation and action
- Work and leisure
- Personal needs and communal/family needs
- Independence and interdependence

Polarities exist when there is a necessary movement between the two neutral poles, which in combination create a quality of life both poles ultimately desire and that keeps away the poles' greatest fear.

Practice

Pause and identify polarities common in your everyday life.

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Managing Polarities

Key to dealing with polarities is to learn how to manage them and not get trapped in either/or thinking. It involves focusing on the positive factors of each point of view (neutral pole); understanding the downsides of each perspective (neutral pole); and not allowing the negative factors to control our decisions and actions. For example: Consider work and leisure. Both are neutral poles that reflect preferred values. To manage this polarity, ask yourself what would a reasonable person say are the benefits of work? What would a reasonable person say are the benefits of leisure?

Benefits to work:

- Produces goods
- Generates revenue
- Provides service to others

Benefits to leisure:

- Frees one for creative activity
- Helps one restore themselves energetically
- Provides time for others; for building relationships

Next ask yourself: What would a reasonable person say are the negative aspects of work if a person is too focused on it?

Negative aspects of work:

- Addictive
- Fosters greed
- Separates people from their family and community

Negative aspects of leisure:

- Generates laziness
- Fosters lack of responsibility
- Perpetuates entitlement

Polarity management calls us to see the positive side of each of the neutral poles and to sustain them in their strengths. We need to be familiar with the shadow or over-extended sides of each pole so that we can see when one pole is slipping into its shadow side and call the person or group back to its strength.

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Creating a Polarity Map

To effectively manage the polarities in our lives, we need to slow down in order to be aware of them. Then it is helpful to map them on a polarity grid so that we can see the strengths and downsides of each pole. This allows us to ask ourselves, how can we keep the two poles in their position of strength? What do both poles really desire? What is the downside of each pole if you over emphasize it? What do the two poles really fear?

Review the following polarity map and then create one using a polarity of your choice.

Example: **Order and Flexible**

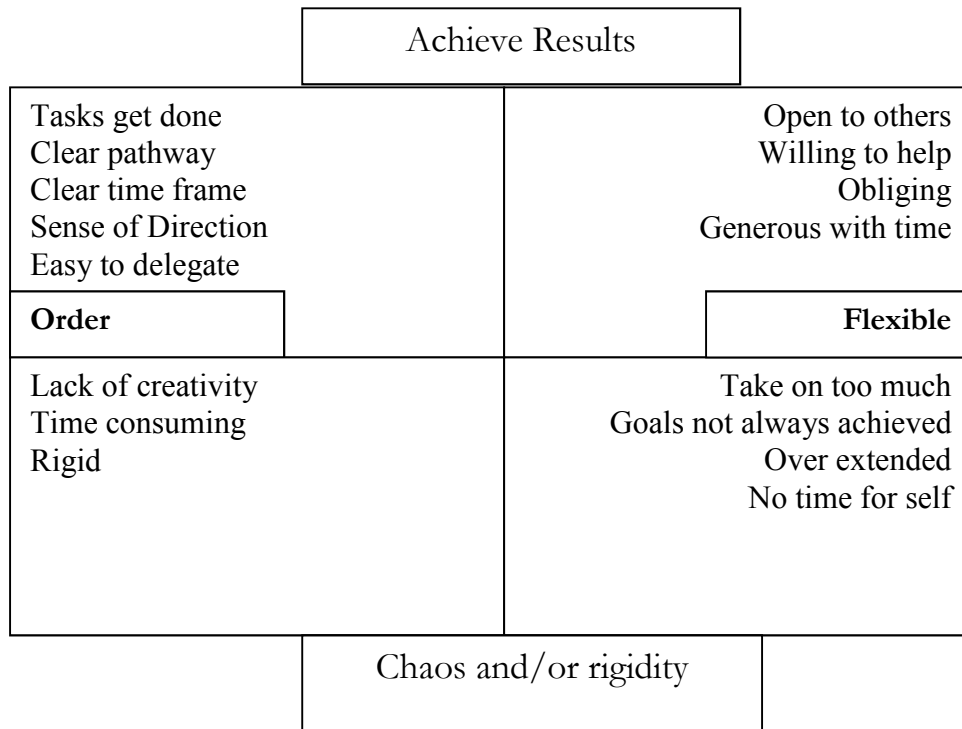
Step 1: Fill in the two neutral poles in the small boxes in the middle of the polarity map.

Step 2: List in the boxes above each neutral pole the positive aspects of the pole.

Step 3: List in the boxes below each neutral pole the negative aspects of the pole if over extended.

Step 4: Ask yourself, what do both poles desire? Put your response in the small box above the positive aspects of each pole.

Step 5: Ask yourself, what do both poles fear? Put your response in the small box below the negative aspects of each pole.



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Practice:

Following the directions noted above, create a polarity map on the form provided with this guide. Use one of the polarities that is a part of your everyday life.

Conclusion:

When we are experiencing a polarity, caught in our preferred value, we can take on two behaviors. They are **crusading and tradition-bearing**. 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. Our challenge is to change the conversation with one another. A polarity conversation starts with one person initiating the conversation by speaking to the fact that both are experiencing tension around a dilemma that is really a polarity. Then the initiator needs to speak to the gift (strength) of the other person's preferred value, stating the fear or concern they believe that person holds. Then the initiator speaks to her own positives and her fears (which is the downside of the other neutral pole). This communication path helps us recognize and discuss differing perspectives. It helps us see better the full panorama of an issue and to understand different views. It opens the way so that members of the community can enter respectful dialogue about the nature of the dilemma they are facing and helps them see all views so that they can develop effective strategies for sustaining the strength of both poles thereby leading to their deepest desires.

Like all skill development, to become proficient in dealing with polarities and hosting healthy dialogue with people holding different values that are interdependent with yours one needs lots of practice. Start with simple polarities and with people you trust. As your skill matures, the practice will enable you to stay at the table where impasse and difficult conversations prevail.

For more information on this foundational piece to Contemplative Dialogue read pages 26-28: *Polarity Management* in the Contemplative Dialogue Manual.

At the close of your gathering, reflection on this quote from Martin Luther King, Jr.:

Help us to see the enemy's point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves. From his view we may indeed see the basic weakness of our condition, and if we are mature, we may learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers who are called the opposition

- ML. King, Jr.

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