

Dunow Polarity Management Book Report

I often wonder what the world would be like without conflict. What if we could all see and support other perspectives, honor one another and exist together in perfect harmony? I have suspected for some time that my vision of utopia would not come to fruition in my lifetime; yet, as I reflect on Polarity Management (Johnson, 1996), I can see the irony that in all applications: intrapersonal, interpersonal and professional, if well managed, conflict can lead to harmony.

Johnson outlines a way we can dynamically work with the chaos of opposing forces, to manage a better balance. These concepts and the need for polarity management are evident in the case of SmithKline Beecham (SKB) in the book *The Paradox of Control in Organizations* (Streatfield, 2001) as well as supported in many of the reference articles in our class on leading organizational change. In this book report, I will describe Johnson's approach to polarity management and correlate some of the key elements from the resources provided in our class. I believe Polarity Management is an excellent tool for anyone needing to manage an ongoing conflict.

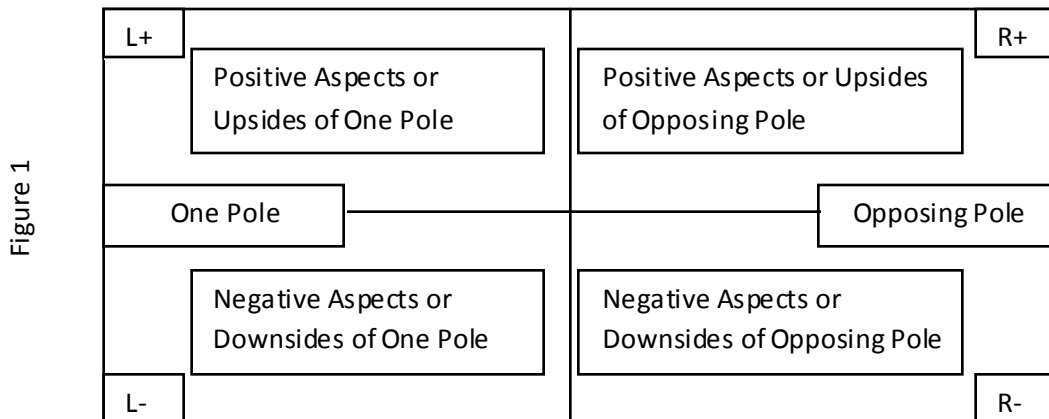
Johnson clearly has a vision, as well as experience and expertise in change management and group dynamics. His book on this revolutionary concept is very useful and practical. He conveys a comprehensive approach to polarity management by means of in-depth explanations, visual aids, case examples and chapter summaries. His message is focused on identifying the polarity of the conflict which is clearly described without any ambiguity or idealism. I felt he could have elaborated more on the practical actions steps needed to stay on the upside of polarity management. I did appreciate his candor as he explains that polarity management is not a complete solution for all problems, it is merely a solution for otherwise unsolvable problems.

The first four chapters discuss the problem of problem solving. We tend to think of problems as situations that need to be fixed or solved by one answer. Similar to Marshak's (1994, p. 67-69) description of an interdependent holistic orientation and monoism where "all is one", Johnson describes polarity management as a "both/and" approach vs. the traditional power struggle over an "either/or"

Dunow Polarity Management Book Report

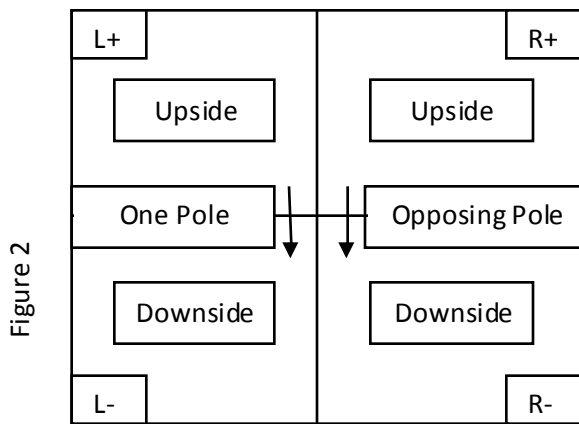
right answer (Johnson, 1996, p. 45). Johnson suggests that problems, which are not solved by either opposing solution alone, may actually be dilemmas to manage, as both opposing yet interdependent poles need to be managed together on an ongoing basis.

Johnson (1996, pp. 4-5) describes each opposing pole as having an upside and a down side. He suggests that these quadrants (Figure 1) are first mapped out in order to begin the process of effectively manage the polarity. In the left upper (L+) quadrant the positive aspects of one pole are identified. In the left lower (L-) quadrant the negative aspects of this solution are identified. In the right upper (R+) quadrant the positive aspects of the opposing pole are identified and finally in the right lower (R-) quadrant the negative aspects of the opposing pole are identified.

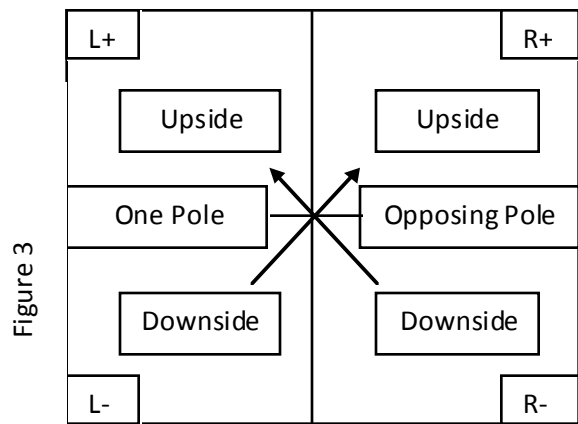


(Adapted from Johnson, 1996, p. 17)

When polarities are not effectively managed, there is a focus on one polarity, while neglecting the other. Johnson coins this phenomenon as the “Polarity Two-Step” (Johnson, 1996, p. 11). When this happens, it is inevitable that the dynamic will slip into the negative aspects or downside of the existing polarity (Figure 2). This encourages a change in focus to the opposing polarity, in an attempt to create a more positive experience (Figure 3). The focus on this aspect will continue until the downside of this aspect (Figure 2) is experienced and the flip-flopping or two-step dance continues.



(Adapted from Johnson, 1996, p. 15)



(Adapted from Johnson, 1996, p. 15)

Successful polarity management requires an unveiling of the complete picture: the upsides and the downsides of each polarity. Johnson distinguishes the difference between accuracy of information and completeness of the whole picture (Johnson, 1996, pp. 43-50); it is accurate to say there is a downside and an upside to each pole, but it is incomplete to ignore any of the four quadrants. This type of complete thinking takes some discipline. We must let go of our limited perceptions of one pole in order to see the aspects existing in the opposing pole. The resulting success may be linked to the concepts of appreciative inquiry, whereas the experience of wholeness is attributed to “bring about the best in people, teams and organizations” (Whitney and Cooperrider, nd p. 14).

Seeing the complete picture is the first step towards managing the polarity. From there planning and acting to focus on the upsides of both poles, will allow for the best of both worlds. These steps, which are outlined later in this paper, will also prevent slipping or staying in the negative aspects of either pole. Successful polarity management will result in the “best of both opposites while avoiding the limits of each” (Johnson, 1996, p. xviii).

The fifth chapter explains the two opposing forces in managing a polarity: the Crusaders and the Tradition Bearers (Johnson, 1996, pp. 55-77). The crusaders are the movers and the shakers; they drive the change as they see the upside of the opposing pole and the downside of the existing pole. In terms of Appreciative Inquiry, Crusaders see what the problems are (Hammon, 1996, p. 6). The tradition

Dunow Polarity Management Book Report

bearers, on the other hand, resist change as they see the upside of the existing pole and the downside of the opposing pole. In terms of Appreciative Inquiry, they see what is working (Hammond, 1996, p. 7). Pulling these two forces together to work towards flushing out the four quadrants of each pole gives a more whole and complete picture. Valuing these differences is regarded as one of the assumptions of Appreciative Inquiry (Hammond, 1996, p. 21); whereas, the two traditionally opposing forces can synergistically create the most positive outcomes.

Johnson uses communication as a means to tear down the wall between the opposites in order to build a bridge (p. 66). Streatfield (2001, Bookmark 1934) also attributes participation in diverse conversations as a key to the transformative process. An effective means of communication begins with gaining buy in from the opposition. The crusader begins to build the bridge with the tradition-bearer by eliciting the upside to the existing pole. This perspective is consistent with the concept of and the downside of the opposing pole from the tradition bearer. Once the tradition bearer is engaged, the concept of polarity management can be further explored by the crusaders perspective by examining the upside of the opposing pole and the downside of the existing pole (p.67). The tradition bearer can build a bridge by exploring the upside of the opposing pole and the downside of the existing pole with the crusader. Once buy in from the crusader is achieved, the conversation can then move to the downside of the opposing pole and the upside of the existing pole (p.70). These tactics will reduce resistance, gain a complete perspective and allow the players to work towards a more balanced approach to managing their polarity.

The sixth chapter dissected the process of determining whether the situation at hand is a polarity to manage or simply a problem to solve. Johnson simply discerns polarities to manage from problems to solve by asking two questions:

1. "Is the difficulty ongoing?" Problems are solved. Polarities do not have a clear endpoint and need to be managed on an ongoing basis. (Johnson, 1996, p. 82-84)

Dunow Polarity Management Book Report

2. “Are there two poles which are interdependent?” Solutions can result in success on their own. Polarities require the integration of it’s opposite to be successfully managed. (Johnson, 1996, pp. 82-84)

Johnson (1996. p. 89) further distinguishes polarities from three distinct types of problems that can be solved: mystery problems, either/or decision and continuum problems.

- Mystery problems simply require a solution that has not yet been identified. The problem is not ongoing, nor is the solution dependent on its opposite. Once the solution is discovered, the problem is solved. For example, how can I remove the red wine stain from my carpet? I simply need to do a little research to find a solution.
- Either/or decisions simply require a choice. The difficulty is not ongoing. Once the decision is made the problem is solved. For example are you going to buy a white or a red car? The two poles are not interdependent on each other. The white car doesn’t depend on the red car to be successful.
- Continuum problems are ongoing and can often be hard to distinguish from polarities to manage. However, there are not two interdependent poles. If the car purchasing question is whether to buy a really great car or not, it may rely on whether I have enough money. I may start off buying a car that I can afford and upgrade as I save more money. The problem is ongoing, as each purchase is a decision and a problem solved in itself. Therefore, this is still a problem vs. a dilemma as once the decision is made there is no more problem to solve, until I have more money and can make another choice.

Polarities are ongoing problems and they have interdependent poles. They require constant attention to stay balanced on the upside of each pole while avoiding the downside of either pole.

Johnson (1996, pp. 135-137) outlines five action steps in successful polarity management as follows:

- “Identify the polarity” – Identify the dilemma before the problem gets out of hand.
- “Describe the whole polarity” – Identify the four quadrants: the upside and downside of each pole.

Dunow Polarity Management Book Report

- “Diagnose critical elements” – In which quadrant is the situation currently? Who is crusading and who is tradition bearing
- “Predict problems” – How will the team overcome resistance?
- “Prescribe guidelines for action” – What are the crusader and Tradition-Bearing roles, communication systems and what actions can be taken if the dilemma slips into the downside of either pole.

Once engaged in the steps to polarity management, one can use what Johnson (1996, pp. 114) summarizes his five key points to a well managed a polarity to check on your success with the process.

They are as follows:

- “Knowing when you have a polarity to manage rather than a problem to solve.”
- “Knowing there is an upside and downside to each pole.”
- “Sensitivity to the downsides as they are experienced.”
- “A willingness to shift poles as needed.”
- “Knowing how to talk to your opposite and mediate between opposites.”

The last half of the book presented several concepts as supplemental cases, which give depth to the understanding of polarity management. As evidenced in several accounts of the SmithKline Beecham experience the concept of polarity management is practical and useful. The premise of Streatfield’s (2001, Bookmark 2607) message in the paradox of control is that we are simultaneously “in control and ‘not in control’”. Johnson (1966, pp. 183-197) dedicates an in depth chapter on the autocratic vs. participatory management styles.

Another supplemental chapter that I found interesting offered an understanding of fear as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Johnson (1996, pp. 156-157) describes the “One Pole Myth” as follows: “if you stay on one pole, you will get the upside and downside of that pole while avoiding the downside of the opposite pole.” This is not true. In regards to polarity management, if either pole is neglected, the

Dunow Polarity Management Book Report

downsides of both poles are experienced. The fear of stepping into the opposing pole will inevitably lead to the experience of what is feared.

The polarity management scenario we can all identify with is the balance of stress and tranquility (Johnson, 1996, p. 204). If we don't take time to relax we may experience the downside of stress: distress. At some point this situation will require more relaxation time or stagnation. If we fall into a pattern of stagnation, this can lead to the slipping into the downside of relaxation, which is boredom and unchallenging, non-stimulating inactivity. At some point there will be a tendency to look for stimulating challenges (stress). Acting-out and couch potato-like inactivity are signs of a poorly managed polarity we may all identify with.

The greatest take away message I received from this book, which is consistent with the teachings of this course is that we need to stop thinking that every problem has a solution; we need to manage the unsolvable problems. This work doesn't stop when we decide on a solution; the work becomes an ever vigilant process to recognize and adjust to the changing environment and needs of those involved. It initially feels as if this is an insurmountable task, but I suspect as one gains experience with this concept it becomes a natural way of being.

Dunow Polarity Management Book Report

Works Cited

Hammond, S.A., (1996), *The thin book of appreciative inquiry*. Bend, OR: Thin Book

Johnson, B., (1996). *Polarity management*. Amherst, MA: HRD Press, Inc.

Marshak, R.J., (1994), The tao of change. *OD Practitioner*, 26(2), 18-26 (Course Pack Chapter 5 pp. 59-75).

Streatfield, P.J., (2001). *The paradox of control in organizations*. New York: Routledge, ebook: Mobipocket.com

Whitney, D., Cooperrider, D. L., (nd), The appreciative inquiry summit: an emerging methodology for whole system positive change. *OD Practitioner*, nd.