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Practicing OD— Applying Polarity Thinking to Complex Societal Issues

By Chief Greg Mullen,
Margaret Seidler,
Jake Jacobs, and
Chandra Irvin

We are at a pivotal moment in our country as it relates to police trust and legitimacy. To do nothing is not an option; to engage in a journey that has been challenging, risky, and has the potential to inform generations to come has been our responsibility and honor.

—Police Chief Greg Mullen,
City of Charleston, SC

We experience the tension and conflict existing in complex systems all around us—companies, governments, families, and communities. In this case study, we explore the application of Polarity Thinking to a community tension in Charleston, South Carolina—a tension that is sadly present in most cities and towns across America. We italicize the many polarities we leveraged throughout this work.

Purpose

The project was designed to leverage a number of polarities:

- » Bring together all parts of the community AND foster engagement and civil dialogue in support of a common Greater Purpose.

- » This Greater Purpose was to further strengthen and broaden collaboration between the city of Charleston police AND the citizens they serve.
- » Two key societal values (also called a Polarity) guided our work: Public Safety AND Individual Rights.
- » Our intent was to help citizens see the whole picture AND recognize that the two poles are interconnected, needed and with expected tension.
- » Moving from reactive to proactive lessens damaging and harmful reactions between police AND the community and creates sustainable positive relationships between police AND the community.

The Process

The Illumination Project process unfolded over a twelve-month period in five phases, each aimed at best leveraging the polarities to achieve the Greater Purpose.

Phase 1:

Planning and Developing the Project

We identified a project plan and built a strong client and consultant relationship. We also identified the core polarities below

and drafted maps for them with our consulting team and primary client, the Chief of Police. In doing so we wanted to test our assumption that these polarities would be central to the work ahead that would engage police and citizens in improving their relationship. They passed the test.

Core Polarities Leveraged in This Phase;

- » Public Safety AND Civil Liberties
- » Respect for Law AND Respect for People

Merely inviting this diverse group was only an ante that allowed us to “stay at the table.” We needed to design activities and facilitate conversations where everyone had an opportunity for their voice to be heard. This was an intentional leveraging of the Listening AND Talking polarity—an essential one for this effort since so many had been allowed to say so little, as many people of color in the city had felt marginalized by society for so long.

Phase 2: Developing the Steering Group

The Steering Group consisted of 22 members, a diverse group of key community stakeholders from neighborhoods, businesses, education, faith-based organizations, community activists, law enforcement, media, and others. Literally we were working with a multirarity of 22 when we defined the poles as points of view of those in the Group. Each had their unique experience with police and citizens that shaped their perceptions. While it was possibly easier to reduce the complexity by withholding a few invitations, we would do so at our own peril. Leave a stakeholder out of a process like this and you will likely find yourself surprised by a polarity emerging later in the process that you wished you had been aware of earlier.

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Phase 3: Engaging the Community

“Listening Sessions” were the heartbeat of the Illumination Project. This name is a good example of polarities needing to be understood in context. Plenty of

talking—and talking over each other—had happened for quite a while. The focus of the Listening Sessions was learning and at this point, that was best done through a focus on listening. We held 33 Listening Sessions throughout the community, reaching over 850 residents, both adults and youths. The sessions generated more than 2200 ideas for strategic planning purposes, nearly evenly split between actions police could take and citizens could take to improve their relationship, with trust and legitimacy. The strategic plan that culminated from these efforts resulted in the 86 strategies in the plan, 66 that came directly from Listening Session input. There was a lot of emotion and energy that were part and parcel of the Listening Sessions. These “head and heart” meetings were supplemented with a third spiritual pole in the process through faith-based prayer gatherings at different houses of worship. Rotating the prayer gatherings shined a light on another important multirarity: the different faiths with members who were also citizens of

the city. One strategy we made good use of throughout the project was highlighting polarities for participants both when we had designed them into the process AND when they naturally emerged from the work. Though formal Polarity Thinking training was done for facilitators for the Listening Sessions and the Steering Group, every person connected to the project received ongoing lessons in applying this powerful paradigm.

Polarity Thinking is a foundation for positive change and was explained to the Steering Group and at each Listening Session.

Phase 4: Evaluating the Project

The College of Charleston’s Joseph P. Riley, Jr., Center for Livable Communities, our research partner, conducted a baseline assessment of citizen and police perceptions of each other. Questions for the assessment were derived from a set of polarities identified by the Steering Group and Chief as being central to the citizen and police relationship. A lesson we learned was that where we looked to take advantage of the polarity paradigm, it always added value by ensuring we didn’t get caught in an either/or mindset when, if we looked deeper, there were underlying polarities. While there is always a call for “Action” in efforts like this one, we realized that is only one pole. The easiest other pole to define would be “Planning.” We found that framing Planning broadly enabled us to include the research work that will be so vital to testing our hypothesis that applying a polarity-based approach to complex societal issues is a promising path to pursue.

Phase 5: Providing a Model for the Rest of the Nation

While there is, and needs to remain a strong focus on work being done in Charleston, the city alone is only one pole—the other is the entire country. With police and citizen tragedies appearing on the news at all, let alone as frequently as they have, success in Charleston is

far short of what is needed. This polarity was foreseen at the inception of the Illumination Project, so much so that providing a national model was in the very first list of measures of success.

Conclusion

We were faced with a multitude of points of view and positions held passionately by a wide variety of stakeholders. Our bringing a polarity lens to these situations made it easier for others (and ourselves) to affirm the differences (poles) and discover common goals (Greater Purpose Statement). In addition to the polarities described above those below enabled us to create virtuous circles of increased trust, a deeper understanding of legitimate, respectful police authority and citizen responsibility to do their part in creating a safe city.

We have been honored to work on this project and to use a Polarity Lens to do so. Many more people in Charleston are familiar with Polarity Thinking, to their benefit AND the benefit of the city as a whole.

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Gregory G. Mullen has served as the city of Charleston, SC’s Chief of Police since 2006 and has embraced Polarity Thinking™ for the past six years to create a safe and supportive community. In 2016, he became the first ever Honorary Polarities-in-Practice Master. He can be reached at mulleng@charleston-sc.gov.

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All of the authors are Masters in Polarity Thinking.