

# IS YOUR ORGANIZATION'S ENERGY WORKING FOR YOU OR AGAINST YOU?

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*Robert "Jake" Jacobs*

**I** imagine your organization has a unique opportunity. If you move fast, you can enter a new market before your competitors even knows it exists. You're in a meeting exploring this challenge when a question is raised: "Should we focus more on centralizing or decentralizing to gain a foothold in this new market?"

## The "Either / Or" Lens: Seeing Only Part of the Picture

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Looking through an "Either / Or" lens, people in the meeting quickly join one of two camps. One group of people in the meeting believes it's best to centralize operations. Do it well and you can standardize processes, deliver consistent quality in products and services, and share best practices across the organization. What are they worried about? Decentralize things too much and you're on a slippery slope to inefficient processes, inconsistent quality products and services, and local leaders more committed to their own success than the success of the overall organization. These people are clear, committed and their energy is focused on one thing: the organization's greater good.

But another group in the room sees things differently. They argue that decentralizing is the way to go. Follow this path they say and you can create new and better ways of working, innovative products and services, and stoke the fires of entrepreneurial initiative. What's their

worst-case scenario? Centralize things too much and you're stuck with micro-management, "me too" products and services, and tied up in bureaucratic red tape. This group cares as much as the first about doing what's best for the organization.

People who need to collaborate end up in conflict. Each holds a common – though flawed – assumption of the other: "If I'm right, then you must be wrong." The stronger the case one group makes, the deeper the other digs in its heels.

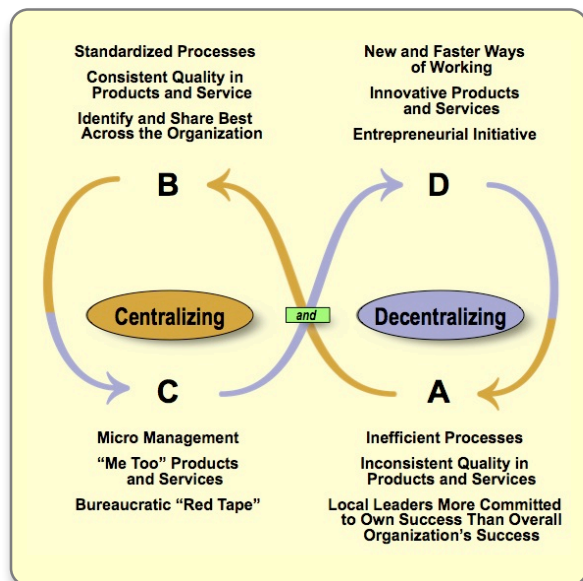
Two groups. One goal. Two solutions. Which one is right? They both are. The problem is that each of them is only half-right. Centralizing and decentralizing is not a problem that can be solved from an "Either / Or" mindset. It's a polarity that needs to be leveraged from a "Both / And" point of view.

*"SHOULD WE BE  
CENTRALIZING OR  
DECENTRALIZING?"*

*"YES"*

## The “Both / And” Lens: Seeing the Whole Picture

Let’s tell the same story, this time through a “Both / And” lens. You decide to decentralize decision making so that people can create new and faster ways of working. Local leaders invent new and faster ways of working, getting their businesses up and running before competitors can establish a presence in the marketplace. You gain valuable exposure, new customers, and the business quickly expands. Everything appears to be on track...until you realize it isn’t.



The decentralized decision-making that served you well in entering these new markets has resulted in inefficient processes, inconsistent quality, and redundant systems. What had been celebrated as local leaders’ freedom to operate is now perceived as these same leaders being more committed to their own success than that of the overall organization (A). What can help put your organization back on track? Identify and share best practices across the organization, standardize processes

and ensure consistent quality in products and services (B). This response is strategic, yet it isn’t the only strategic thing to do.

Paradoxically, centralizing is not sustainable without also paying attention to decentralizing. Centralize without enough focus at the same time on decentralizing and you’ll find yourself in the downside of Centralizing alone (C) – micro management, “me to” products and bureaucratic “red tape.” Now you have created another set of problems that need to be solved. The solution to these problems is to once again decentralize decision-making so local leaders can regain a competitive advantage (D).

And so it goes...today’s solution becoming tomorrow’s problem. The harder you try to fix each of these problems, the bigger they get. The more each group is committed to the organization’s success, the more energy ends up working against you in your organization.

*YOUR ORGANIZATION’S  
GREATEST DREAMS  
AND MOST CHRONIC  
PROBLEMS HAVE AT LEAST  
ONE THING IN COMMON:  
A FEW KEY UNDERLYING  
POLARITIES*

## Leverage Polarities and Get The Energy in Your Organization Working For You

How do you break this vicious cycle of energy working against you? Stop treating this challenge as a problem to solve and start to leverage it as a polarity.

Polarities are interdependent pairs that can support one another in pursuit of a common purpose. They can also undermine each other if seen as an either/or problem to solve. Like centralizing and decentralizing, both are needed for sustained organizational success.

The answer to “Should we be centralizing or decentralizing?” is “Yes.” Find ways to get people’s energy for each pole, or point of view, working together and you create a virtuous cycle of energy working for you in your organization.

Once you do, you can design an organization that leverages the benefits of Centralizing (B) AND Decentralizing (D) and minimizes the costs of over-focusing on either pole (C and A). Neither Centralizing nor Decentralizing is sustainable without the other over time. Intentionally pay attention to both and you increase performance and gain a competitive advantage over any organization that sees one pole or the other as a solution to a problem.

If centralizing and decentralizing isn’t your organization’s issue, pick another one. Do you struggle with the challenges of delivering short-term results and investing in long-term development at the same time? How do you make big changes and provide the continuity people need to implement them? Do you pay more attention to setting the right strategy or making sure you have smart tactics? Over-focus on any one of these choices to the relative exclusion of the other too long and you’ll undermine your success. Seek the benefits of both over time and you’ll enjoy an unlimited supply of organizational energy working for you and what you’re trying to achieve.

When you’re taking advantage of polarity energy, the game changes. Your biggest troublemakers become critical resources. Think of it this way: they’re paying attention to something you’re not -- something you need to

pay attention to if you want to succeed. Majorities don’t rule when it comes to polarities. The fewer the people holding a pole, the more you need to listen to what they have to say.

*THE RESEARCH IS CLEAR...  
ORGANIZATIONS THAT  
KNOW HOW TO LEVERAGE  
THE ENERGY IN POLARITIES  
OUT-PERFORM THOSE  
THAT DON’T*

### **The Polarity Approach to Continuity and Transformation (The PACT)**

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Leveraging a few key polarities well will get you out of the game of facing chronic problems with no good answer. The PACT is a step-by-step guide to *Seeing, Mapping, Assessing, Learning* and *Leveraging* the energy in key polarities for your organization.

The PACT has a dual purpose:

**To support you in becoming a more successful organization – right now and over time.**

The PACT builds on what you’ve accomplished in the past and prepares you to be even more successful in the future. You define success, be it numbers on the bottom line, behavior that reflects the culture you want to create, how people feel or any other measures that matter to you. The PACT will help you get things done – better, faster and more sustainably. Over time, you will gain more and more of the benefits of leveraging

key polarities well and pay for fewer and fewer of the costs of leveraging them poorly.

**To increase your organization's ability to leverage the power of polarities.**

All polarities work the same way, every time, all the time. Understand how to take advantage of the energy in one well and you know how to take advantage of the energy in all of them well.

- **Seeing polarities** means recognizing when one or more are significantly impacting the work you're doing.
- **Mapping polarities** means identifying the "upsides" and "downsides" of each pole, what you will achieve by leveraging it well, what will happen if you leverage it poorly.
- **Assessing polarities** means gathering input from all key stakeholders about how well you are leveraging the energy in them.
- **Learning about polarities** means understanding your assessment results. How well are you leveraging the energy in your strategic polarities and where are there opportunities to further improve this performance?
- **Leveraging polarities** means making decisions and taking actions over time that will enable you to get the energy in these polarities working for you instead of against you.

This 5 Step Process is aimed squarely at helping you achieve your organization's mission. To achieve your organization's mission you might need to improve your bottom line, implement your strategic plan, insure profitable growth or be a place where people love to work. Leveraging polarities well will make you more effective in achieving each of these outcomes.

**Common Organizational Polarities**

- Centralized Coordination AND Decentralized Initiatives
- Recognize the Individual AND Recognize the Team
- Reduce Cost AND Improve Quality
- Competing with Others AND Collaborating with Others
- Stability AND Change
- Celebrating Our Differences AND Celebrating Our Commonalities
- Care for My Part of the Organization AND Care for the Whole Organization
- Showing Respect for Every Person AND Showing Respect Based on Performance
- Getting the Job Done (task) AND Building Relationships
- Taking Care of the Organization AND Taking Care of the Customer
- Work AND Home

**The 5 Step "SMALL" Process Polarity Approach to Continuity and Transformation**

**Step 1 – Seeing**

The Polarity Assessment is about leveraging polarities that will have the greatest positive impact in achieving your organization's strategy. In this first step you will explore how polarities can help you better understand issues and opportunities you're facing right now – both those inside and outside your organization.

## **Step 2 – Mapping**

In this second step, you'll build polarity maps for each of the key polarities you identified as being most important to your organization. You'll identify what you are currently doing and what you plan to be doing in relation to going after the upsides associated with your polarities. You'll quantify some early warning signals that can alert you when you are beginning to experience the downsides of a polarity so you can course correct. The items you include in your maps automatically get converted into your assessment instrument. You'll also begin planning how you'll analyze and communicate your results and recommendations to the rest of the organization.

## **Step 3 – Assessing**

In this third step you will engage a broad base of key stakeholders to assess how well you are currently leveraging your organization's key polarities. People participating in the process will log onto our secure web site and complete the assessment. Once the assessment period is closed, your results are available immediately.

## **Step 4 – Learning**

The purpose of this fourth step is to understand the results from your assessment so you can make smart decisions about how to leverage your key polarities better in the future.

There are four questions you'll explore in this Step:

- What are our assessment results?
- What do they tell us about how we have been leveraging these key polarities to date?
- Why do we believe we achieved the results we did?
- What new ideas do we have about how to leverage these polarities better in the future?

## **Step 5 – Leveraging**

This fifth step is where your assessment work comes together and stays together. You'll agree on Action Steps and Early Warnings that will help you leverage the power of your organization's key polarities. You'll put plans in place for how to build on what you're already doing well, improve on what you want to do better, track your progress and course correct over time. You'll explore more ways and places where you can apply Polarity Thinking© to add value in your organization. All of these plans will be integrated into a Continuity and Transformation Road Map that provides clear direction to your organization's sustained success.

The research is clear. An ever-growing number of books, articles and best practices in strategy, culture, leadership, and organization performance say the same thing -- organizations that know how to get the energy in polarities working for them instead of against them out perform those that don't.

Apply our 5 Step "SMALL" process and you'll move further, faster toward your preferred future – whatever that may be.

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