Partnerships Built on Differences and Commonalities
By Barry Johnson and Chandra Irvin

Pat: *"We need to gear up to meet our diverse clients' needs."*
Chris: *"Yes, but as long as we provide high quality common services to all clients, everyone will benefit."*
Pat: *"But common services don't respond to diverse needs and those communities and families who have those needs."*
Chris: *"But we don't have the time or money to develop particular services for every niche group. Basic services for everyone would be reduced."*

Organizations often have members with different points of view and different cultural perspectives. These different perspectives frequently evolve into difficult diversity issues that lead to chronic tension, power struggles, undermined relationships, frustration, feelings of inadequacy, and self-righteous indignation. At the heart of this dysfunction among caring, intelligent people is the inability to distinguish between a polarity (i.e., paradox, dilemma) which must be managed and a problem that can be solved. This article will help you distinguish between a polarity and a problem and give you some tips about how to manage a polarity when you find one.

So what's the difference between a problem and a polarity?

We ask three key questions to distinguish between problems and polarities: 1) Can this difficulty be solved? 2) Are the alternative solutions interdependent? 3) Is the difficulty inherently ongoing?

Problems can be solved. They can have one right solution or two or more independent solutions that are each "right." Problems are not ongoing. Once the right solution is implemented, the problem is resolved. **Polarities** cannot be solved and are inherently ongoing. They have two or more alternative solutions that are interdependent.

PROBLEMS
Here are examples of problems that can be solved.

- ✓ What route can we take from Washington, DC to Atlanta? (several independent alternative solutions)
- ✓ Are we going to hire new personnel this year? (one independent solution)
- ✓ What methods can we use to market our services to reach the English speaking and Spanish speaking populations? (several independent alternative solutions)

"Either/Or" Thinking – Essential, powerful, and not enough.

Either/or thinking, the basis for problem solving, is the process we use to eliminate some alternatives as "wrong" and identify others as "right" or "best." In all aspects of life, in all cultures, either/or thinking has helped us organize and measure our knowledge. Because of this obvious value, we have passed the skills associated with either/or thinking from one generation to the next. For example, we check our children's knowledge with such test questions as:
- Language – How do you spell cat?
- History – Who was the first president of the United States?
- Science – Why do apples fall down off trees rather than up?

A great percentage of the problems we give our children (tests) have one right answer. This is the most efficient way to test and will continue to be how it is done.

When Barry's grandson, Evan, spells cat C – A – T, two very important things happen:
1. He gets rewarded for solving the problem correctly and learns that the secret to success is to get a high percentage of right answers and to get them fast.
2. **He knows that those who disagree with him are wrong**. This is true with virtually all the problems he is given to solve in formal education.

Two other points are worth mentioning here:
1. Given the high percentage of problems Evan will solve in education which have a right or best answer, when he grows up he is likely to continue to address difficult issues by looking for the right or best

answer. When he thinks he has the right answer it will be natural for him to assume that those who disagree with him are wrong.

2. This either/or problem solving orientation is essential for teaching language, math, history, and science **and** it will not serve Evan well when he finds himself dealing with a polarity he and others must manage. Either/Or thinking is essential, powerful and not enough.

POLARITIES

A common polarity that we all manage is breathing. Breathing can be described as the tension between INHALING **and** EXHALING. It is a polarity because:

1) there is a natural tension between inhaling and exhaling (ongoing)
2) both sides are right (unsolvable)
3) both sides need each other over time (interdependent)

Let's look at the Inhale | Exhale polarity on the map below and examine how polarities look and work.

Polarity Management Map™
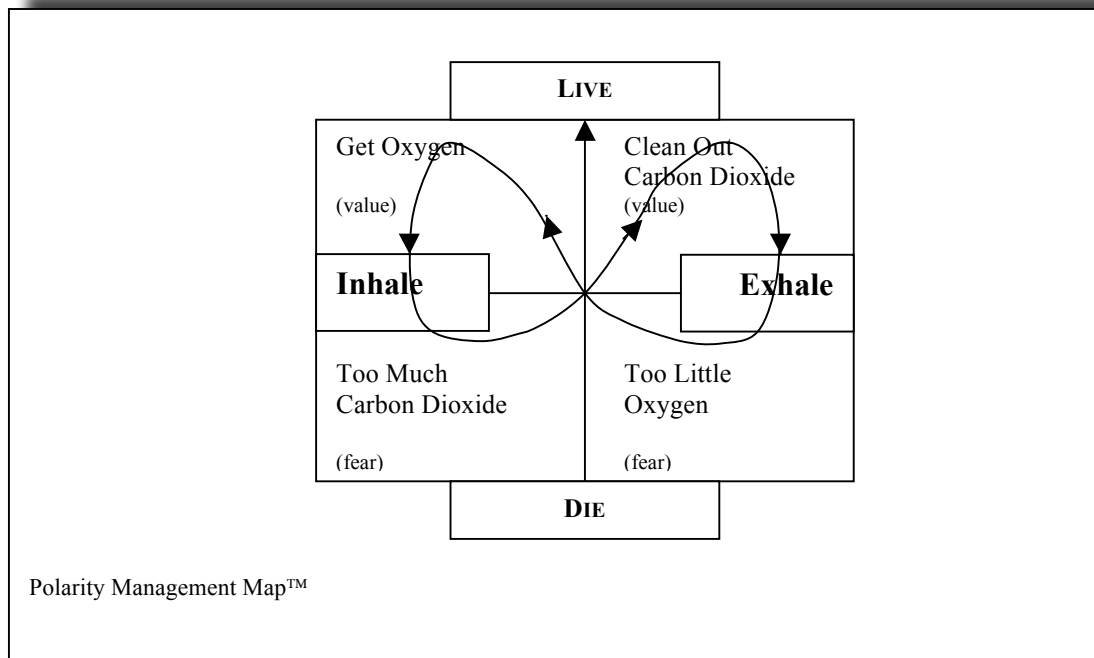
✓ A polarity map has a right and a left half, which are called the two poles. Each pole has a box for a neutral name of the pole, which is located at the end of the middle horizontal line. In this case the two poles are named "Inhale" and "Exhale."

✓ Each pole has an upside, which contains the positive results of focusing on that pole. It reflects the values associated with that pole.

✓ Each pole also has a downside, which results from over-focusing on that pole and neglecting the opposite pole. The downside represents the fears associated with that pole.

✓ Each polarity map also has a box at the top which contains the "higher purpose" which answers the question, "Why should I/we manage this polarity well?" In the above map, the higher purpose is "Live."

✓ There is also a box at the bottom of the map, which contains the "deeper fear" (Die) which will be the net result if the polarity is managed poorly.
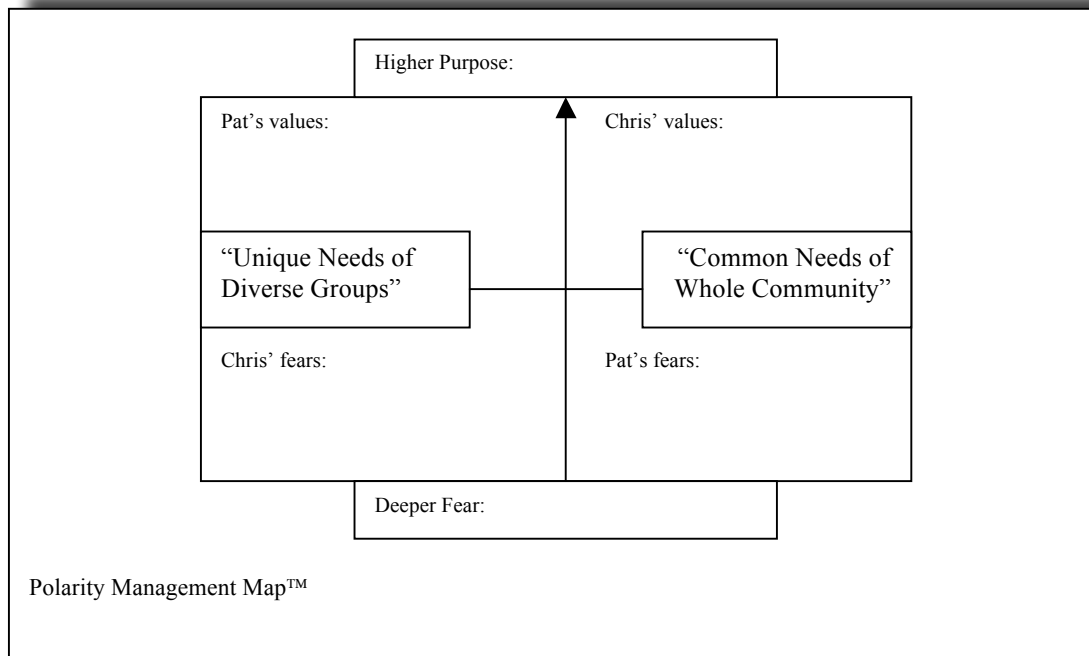
✓ The arrow running through the four main quadrants helps us understand the movie – how the picture changes over time. The process of flowing through the quadrants of a polarity looks like an infinity loop. This is a good symbol because polarities are inherently unsolvable and therefore must be managed on an ongoing basis.

The map provides a snapshot of how all polarities look. The infinity loop helps us understand how they work. In this example, we INHALE to get oxygen. The oxygen turns to carbon dioxide. As soon as we start to get carbon dioxide, we EXHALE to release the carbon dioxide. Then we INHALE to get more oxygen. This natural ebb and flow continues until we die.

The same dynamics that apply to the simple, yet complex process of breathing has applications for personal, interpersonal, and organization polarities. The conversation between Pat and Chris at the beginning of this article is a good example.

Pat and Chris find themselves in opposition. Pat wants to focus on the unique needs of diverse client groups. Chris wants to focus on the common needs of the whole community. They both feel like they are right. In this case, not only are Pat and Chris right, each of their solutions is dependent on the other solution if the issue is to be addressed effectively over time. In other words the issue is not solvable by choosing one solution over the other. If either side wins, both will soon lose. Like breathing, by focusing on one side (pole) for too long, they will get the negatives associated with that side. This will lead to a health or human service system that is functioning far below its potential.

Pat and Chris have a *polarity to manage*. The polarity in this case can be described as a tension between addressing the "Unique Needs of Diverse Groups" and addressing the "Common Needs of the Whole Community." Based on the conversation, how would you complete the polarity map below? (Note: You can compare your map with others at the upcoming conference.)

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                    ┌─────────────────────────┐
                    │ Higher Purpose:         │
        ┌───────────┼──────────▲──────────────┼──────────────┐
        │ Pat's values:        │   Chris' values:            │
        │                      │                             │
        │   ┌──────────────────┴──┐   ┌──────────────────────┐
        │   │ "Unique Needs of    │   │  "Common Needs of    │
        │   │ Diverse Groups"     ├───┤  Whole Community"    │
        │   └─────────────────────┘   └──────────────────────┘
        │ Chris' fears:            Pat's fears:               │
        │                      │                             │
        └───────────┬──────────┼──────────────┬──────────────┘
                    │ Deeper Fear:            │
                    └─────────────────────────┘

Polarity Management Map™
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Diversity issues are loaded with polarities. When they are addressed from an either/or mindset, they are made more difficult. At the same time, not all issues are polarities to manage. Some are problems to solve. *Both/and thinking is essential, powerful and not enough.* We need either/or thinking for either/or problems.

Why A Correct Diagnosis is Important

Let's look now at what happens when a polarity is incorrectly diagnosed and what happens when it is correctly diagnosed.

1) If you have a polarity and treat it as a problem to solve:
    - You will generate significant and unnecessary resistance to your "solution."
    - "Communicating more clearly" will only result in greater resistance.
    - A power struggle will occur. The most powerful pole will win and the organization will lose because the most powerful pole is overemphasized.
    - Whatever is pursued as the winning "solution" will later become the "problem." This is the source of the "swinging pendulum" in organizations.
    - People will be more and more frustrated because the "problem" never gets solved. This is not due to lack of investment or willingness to solve it. It is due to the nature of polarities. They are inherently unavoidable and unsolvable.

2) When you have a polarity and recognize it, there are a number of things that you know:
    - Both sides are right and need each other over time.
    - Opposition becomes a resource as the other side's values and fears help you fill out the map.
    - Because you know what the polarity looks like and how it works, you can manage it better over time.
    - The smaller your opposition, the more you need to listen to them.
    - It is essential to empower both poles.
    - Power is not a zero sum gain.

It is possible to manage a polarity well by getting a lot of the upsides of both poles while minimizing the downside of each. In order to manage a polarity well, it is important to:
    1. Recognize that it is a polarity
    2. Chart the polarity on a map in order to see the whole picture
    3. Understand how polarities work
    4. Work with others to create ways you can get the upsides of both poles
    5. Identify how you will know that you have gotten into the downside of a pole so you can self-correct.

Conclusion

Problems and polarities – they are similar, yet they are very different. Both represent difficulties that have the potential, if left unattended, to damage relationships and impede performance. Yet, problems and polarities must be handled differently. It is a worthwhile skill, therefore, to be able to distinguish between them. Once the distinction is made, it is useful to have problem solving skills and polarity management skills to respond effectively to each.

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