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## *Escape from Flatland: Using Polarity Management to Coach Organizational Leaders from a Higher Perspective*

Patricia G. Beach and Jennifer Joyce

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# Escape from Flatland: Using Polarity Management to Coach Organizational Leaders from a Higher Perspective

Patricia G. Beach and Jennifer Joyce

*Coaching organizational leaders tends to focus on tackling challenges through traditional problem solving methods. Polarity Management is a practice that differentiates a problem to solve from a polarity to manage. This distinction provides more robust thinking about how to resolve challenges and increases the likelihood of arriving at solutions that support both near and long-term personal and organizational success. This article introduces the benefits of using an awareness of polarities and an understanding of polarity management as a foundational component of coaching support for organizational leaders. Resources and practical approaches on how to build the competency of polarity management are also provided.*

Organizational leaders are often pulled into a tug of war. Frequently that battle is perceived as a win-lose proposition and can sound something like this:

“Why don’t they get it? If we don’t take a few risks and innovate we’ll die.”

“Sales constantly over promises and then claims we are under delivering. When will Sales learn they can’t give away the farm?”

“Our meetings run so long. I’ve tried to implement more structure but it’s not appreciated. I guess I’ll just have to roll over and do it their way.”

Welcome to Flatland. Flatlanders work hard to solve problems using *either/or* thinking. Flatlanders can only navigate using reckoning that points in one direction, towards what is ‘right’ and away from what is “wrong.” When Flatlanders hit a bump, all they can do is go around it or stall out, not knowing where to head next. What Flatlanders fail to understand is the fact that often the problem that they are working so hard to solve (by finding the correct answer) really isn’t a problem at all; instead it is a polarity.

As a coach, when we bring an awareness of the distinction known as a *polarity* to organizational leaders, we provide an escape from Flatland by adding another dimension to our thinking. Furthermore, when coaching includes a set of distinctions known

as *polarity management*, we give organizational leaders one of the most powerful tools to navigate to success in the real 3D world. Leaders with polarity management skills become Mountaineers that climb to a higher vantage point to chart a path to their objectives, minimizing meanders around dips and obstacles. From this higher perspective Mountaineers can see how far they've come and where they are headed next. Once an escape from Flatland is mastered, there is no going back. A quantum leap in thinking has occurred. A new paradigm has emerged that greatly improves the leader's odds of navigating his organization to both short and long-term overall prosperity.

As seasoned coaches, we find that polarity management is the most important asset we bring to our work. Knowing the distinction of polarity management completely reshapes the exploration of the challenge at hand, how challenges are framed and how resolutions are communicated. New creative options become accessible which result in sustainable outcomes that are well supported by all. When we ask organizational leaders what they have valued most about their coaching, we most often hear "polarity management." We've observed growth in the leaders who have learned how to apply polarity management. They are less caught up in power struggles, more able to lower resistance to change and have the ability to productively engage both allies and opponents in co-creating robust solutions. Breakthroughs happen in all areas of their leadership and on all levels of their accountability, from leading themselves, to their teams, to their organizations as a whole.

Recently, polarity management helped Charlotte, the head of a business unit of a large biotech company, with her escape from Flatland. Charlotte wanted coaching to help her sort through the daunting process of leading a large reorganization project to improve manufacturing capacity across multiple sites. Charlotte was frustrated because she faced fear and resistance to the many reorganization changes proposed. While she was sympathetic to those that might be facing losses of jobs or responsibilities, she also felt heavy pressure from external competitors and corporate management. If the division's reorganization did not create significant new efficiencies, the entire enterprise might not only fail to thrive, they might not survive at all.

Starting in Flatland, Charlotte regarded supporters of change as inherently good allies and resistors to change as "laggards" who were inherently bad adversaries. While she was aware of the downsides of change, she was reticent to openly discuss it, for fear it might give the laggards more ammunition that would slow the proposed changes down.

The first step was to help Charlotte identify the key polarities that needed to be managed in any successful reorganization effort. A key polarity that impacts all reorganization projects is the polarity

*What Flatlanders fail to understand is the fact that often the problem that they are working so hard to solve (by finding the right answer) really isn't a problem at all; instead it is a polarity.*

of stability vs. change. Charlotte rose above her narrow focus on the upside of change and downside of stability. She went to an elevated view that included the entire terrain of both the upside and downside of change and the upside and downside of stability. From this elevated perspective, Charlotte was more able to respect and incorporate the views of opponents to the changes proposed by moving out of an adversarial stance. By managing the polarity of stability and change, she ensured that the best changes were being selected with an eye toward those that would not overwhelm or disrupt the system.

You may be surprised that a concept as powerful as polarity management is so little known. The fact that the term “polarity management” is not a household term in the coaching industry is indeed mystifying. Despite the fact that polarity management has been around since 1992, it is only now emerging as an important discipline. Around the same time, Daniel Goleman (1996) introduced the term *emotional intelligence*. Quickly the acronym EQ (emotional quotient) became well known and the value of focusing on EQ improvement gained worldwide acceptance as a key to both personal and organizational effectiveness. We assert that your ability to manage polarities well is as important as your *emotional quotient*. For that reason, we (the authors) are thrilled that this article might widen the circle of coaches who regard polarity management as a cornerstone of the human potential movement and thereby improve the *polarity quotient*, for themselves and everyone they coach.

### **WHAT IS A POLARITY AND WHAT IS POLARITY MANAGEMENT?**

Many leaders are blind to the distinction *polarity* and are unable to distinguish a polarity to manage from a problem to solve. A problem is a concern that can only be solved by one unique right answer. For example as a leader, if you are looking for a new location for your next office complex, you might have several locations to choose from, but you can only build your next office in one unique location. A problem is solved using either/or thinking. An example of a problem to solve is the question of whether to build our next office in either Topeka *or* in Kansas City.

A polarity, in contrast, is a concern that can be managed by focusing on two interdependent, diametrically opposed right answers. Polarities go by a variety of names such as paradoxes, dilemmas or just “sticky situations.” Regardless, you know you are dealing with a polarity if you are seeking the right thing to do, and the resolving solutions you are considering are diametrically opposed and interrelated. A polarity requires *both/and* thinking to be managed. For example, deciding how to best handle a downsizing requires solutions that focus on both costs and people (customers and/or employees) despite the fact that these two solutions pull in opposite directions.

*Leaders with polarity management skills become Mountaineers that climb to a higher vantage point to chart a path to their objectives, minimizing meanders around dips and obstacles.*

Polarities can never be *solved*. Rather, they can only be *managed* by being vigilant to the proposition that both opposite resolving *answers* to the concern will receive appropriate attention. Too much attention paid to one pole of a polarity while neglecting the polar opposite pole will always lead to failure. For example, in a downsizing situation, if we only focus on cutting costs while neglecting the needs of our employees and customers, we will absolutely undermine our success when our most talented employees leave and our loyal customers receive poor product or service.

Polarities are a fundamental part of life that is acknowledged as a key to well-being and success. An understanding of polarities is reflected in the ancient teachings of Lao Tsu, known as Taoism (Lao Tsu, 1972). Taoism is centered on the belief that well-being comes from acknowledging and balancing the duality of life (also known as the Tao). While Taoism has brought wisdom about polarities to Eastern culture, relatively speaking, Western culture has not embraced wisdom of the Tao in either a spiritual or practical way. Thankfully, a practical philosophical approach to dealing with the dual nature of life called “polarity management” has been developed by Barry Johnson (1992) and is well described in his book, *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems*.

Polarity management is a complete theoretical framework for managing polarities to bring about long-term resolution to ongoing issues. Contained within polarity management are a few central tenets that describe how polarities work, and a simple rubric called a Polarity Map™ that can be used to chart out the dual nature of any polarity. The Polarity Map can enable the user to develop a deeper awareness of the benefits and potential pitfalls of the

**Table 1. Key polarities to manage to create a thriving organization**

People	Profits
Upstream concerns	Downstream concerns
Long term	Near term
Centralization	Decentralization
Customization	Standardization
Cost	Quality
Care of employees	Care of customers
Task	Relationship
Responding to market shifts	Creating a market
Strategically focused	Tactically focused



options considered. On the surface a Polarity Map resembles a list of the pros and cons of each side of a polarity. The true beauty of Polarity Map is in understanding not only a full picture of both sides of a polarity but also how to anticipate the natural flow of energy from one side of a polarity to the other.

Organizational challenges are fraught with polarities; in fact, there are too many for us to present a comprehensive list. Table 1 includes a few of the most typical polarities that underlie the mission of corporate and non-profit organizations. In order for organizations to deliver on their objectives, attention must be paid to both sides of the polarities listed.

In a recent *Harvard Business Review* article called “Moon Shots for Management” by Gary Hamel (2009), Moon Shot number 20 is described as “better optimization of trade-offs.” To quote him:

Organizational success in the years ahead will hinge on the ability of employees at all levels to manage seemingly irreconcilable trade-offs — between short-term earnings and long-term growth, competition and collaboration, structure and emergence, discipline and freedom, and individual and team success. Traditional systems rely on crude, universal policies that favor certain goals at the expense of others. Tomorrow’s systems must encourage healthy competition between opposing objectives and enable frontline employees to dynamically optimize key trade-offs. The aim is to create organizations that combine the exploration and learning capabilities of decentralized networks with the decision-making efficiency and focus of hierarchies. (pp. 96-97)

Irreconcilable trade-offs like the ones listed in Moon Shot number 20 are almost always polarities to manage. Leaders that choose to shoot for Moon Shot number 20 will certainly benefit from learning polarity management or working with a coach that practices polarity management. This recent recognition of the benefits of “optimizing trade-offs” may well be the result of exposure to polarity management through a management training program. Polarity management has long been a fixture of management and leadership development efforts of corporations, non-profits and government organizations. Notable example clients of polarity management consultants include Boeing, British Petroleum, and the United Nations. While the exact percentage increases daily, a conservative estimate of the Fortune 500 companies that have helped leaders escape from Flatland by formally introducing polarity management through either consulting or training is over 50%.

Up until recently, polarity management has most often been introduced as a stand-alone discipline. A convergence of disciplines is steadily emerging. Polarity management is becoming an

integrated component of strategy, teambuilding, diversity and coaching efforts. Worldwide and particularly in Europe, polarity management is introduced to business graduate students as an integral component of effective strategic planning. New theory is being developed that integrates polarity management, coaching and organizational development. Evidence of this expansion is the growing number of graduate students that have dedicated a master's thesis to topics related to integrating polarity management with other disciplines (one author included; see references that follow). Hopefully, this article will make a small contribution toward moving those integrative efforts forward. In the meantime, models and assessments that reflect polarity management tenets and principles can strengthen your coaching and provide your own escape from Flatland.

*You know you are dealing with a polarity if you are seeking the right thing to do, and the resolving solutions you are considering are diametrically opposed and interrelated.*

### **KEYS TO MANAGE A POLARITY WELL**

Polarity management is deceptively simple. Don't be fooled; there is a lot more to it. This article is only intended to give you a cursory introduction into this very powerful concept. To learn how to manage a polarity well, your best bet is to start with Barry Johnson's book: *Polarity Management: How to Solve Unsolvable Problems*, or attend a polarity management consultant intensive offered by Polarity Management Associates or another practitioner trained and certified in polarity management. Working with polarities consciously is really an advanced leadership skill that requires a flexible frame of mind and patience. To complement Johnson's body of work, here are the few keys to managing a polarity well that we have found most useful.

#### **Key 1. Identify which of your challenges are polarities and which are problems to solve**

Managing a polarity poorly occurs when one side of the polarity is validated as the right answer and the other is vilified as the wrong answer. This is likely to happen if the polarity has been confused with a problem to solve. Poor polarity management will also happen if there is no consciousness of duality in general.

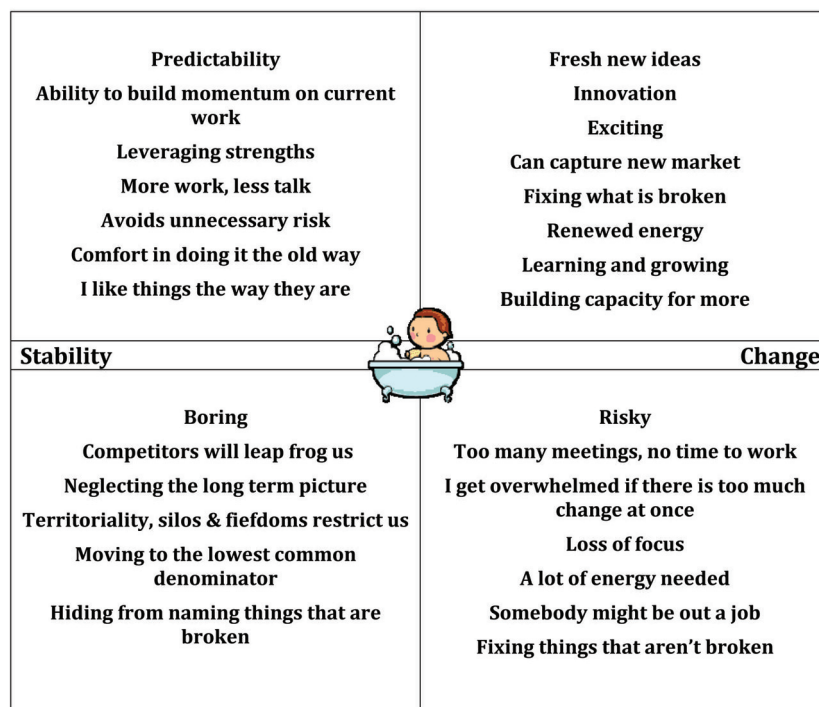
#### **Key 2. Become well versed in naming polarities**

Knowing the key polarities that underlie the typical challenges that organizational leaders face is a great way to start. A quick Internet search on the word polarity and polarity management provides many resources that name polarities pertinent to many sectors such as business, media, health, education, religion, etc. Know the polarities for your field and sector.

#### **Key 3. Build a Polarity Map™**

A useful tool that supports polarity management is the Polarity Map developed by Barry Johnson. A Polarity Map™ creates a complete picture of both the strengths and weaknesses that comes from paying attention to each side of the polarity as you work to resolve a challenge. Essentially, a Polarity Map helps the Mountaineer

separate “the baby from the bath water” and lowers the possibility of “throwing the baby out with the bath water.” Again, consider our client Charlotte. Before creating a Polarity Map Charlotte saw all opponents to change as “bath water.” After building a Polarity Map, she could see the baby she had previously entirely missed, the allies of stability who were sensitive to the downside of change. Additionally, Charlotte could also see the “bath water” of change that she had been blind to before. A simplified version of a Polarity Map includes two poles divided into four quadrants. Figure 1 includes the Polarity Map that Charlotte used to understand the stability/change polarity for her reorganization effort. Once a polarity has been mapped, insights and epiphanies rise to the surface.



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**Figure 1. Charlotte's stability/change Polarity Map™**

**Key 4. Use the Polarity Map to agree on options that bring attention to both sides of the polarity in an appropriate way**

Managing a polarity well requires giving *appropriate* time and attention to both sides of the polarity while vigilantly avoiding the unintended adverse consequences that inevitably arise when one pole is neglected too long. Sometimes the appropriate attention is a compromise that blends elements from both sides of the map. In other instances, one side of the polarity has been neglected and appropriate attention requires focused attention on one pole in the near term, while keeping an eye out for the best timing to shift to the other pole.



## WHY POLARITY MANAGEMENT MATTERS TO ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERS

To be effective, leaders must manage the polarity of organizational/self leadership. To bring attention to this polarity, we will make the distinction between the two roles that every leader carries, that of “leader of my organization” and “leader of myself.” We will review the role of “leader of my organization” first.

### Leader of my organization

A leader must focus on his role as leader of his area of accountability whether he is C-level executive, director or manager. Decisions that impact his organization include budgets decisions, cultural tone setting, hiring, firing, promoting, allocating resources and setting priorities. Each decision shapes the culture and direction of his organization.

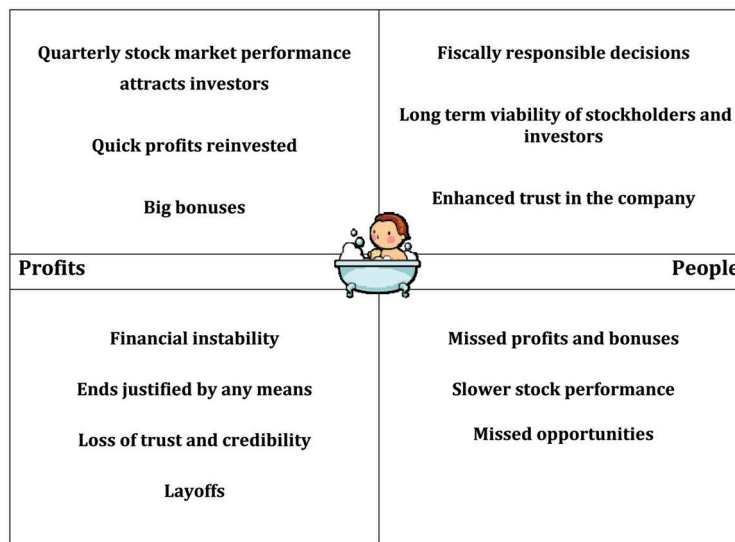
When the organizational leader understands polarity management, it changes the way he thinks about his organization, the way he frames the opportunities and challenges of the organization, and how he communicates the issues and decisions to the rest of the organization. He and his organization benefit because they are able to access the wisdom and dangers inherent in both sides of the polarity.

If the leader, and, therefore, his organization’s culture, carries a Flatlander perspective, they risk the dangers inherent on both sides of the polarity. Additionally, there will be one part of the organization that aligns strongly with the leader’s perspective and another part that will be diametrically opposed. Such division in an organization creates misalignments throughout.

You need only to watch the news to see the devastating consequences of an organizational leader who has confused a polarity with a problem to solve by focusing on only one pole of a polarity. Although there is plenty of blame to go around, AIG was arguably one of the largest contributors to the current global economic credit crisis. Under Joseph Cassano, head of AIG Financial Products, (AIGFP), the company brought the financial world to its knees by mismanaging the profits/people and short term/long-term polarities that should drive decisions about the best level of investment risk to underwrite. Cassano’s singular focus on maximizing profits as fast as possible to the exclusion of focusing on long-term fiscal responsibility led to emphasizing the use of credit-default swaps. These are derivative products that bundle risky investments with insurance contracts. AIG tied its future and, as it turns out, the future of the world economy, to billions of dollars of questionable loans across a wide array of banking institutions. Prior to the recent financial collapse, it was unthinkable that one man could undermine the well-being of the entire world.

*Polarities can never be solved. Rather, they can only be managed by being vigilant to the proposition that both opposite resolving answers to the concern will receive appropriate attention.*

If Cassano had used polarity management to guide decisions in his organization and, thereby, balanced concern for short-term institutional gain with concern for social responsibility and sustainability, the outcome may have been quite different. Unfortunately, according to Gordon Liddy, current AIG CEO, the AIGFP division was not subject to the internal risk management processes that were in place to manage the risk/security polarity for the rest of AIG. Figure 2 is a Polarity Map<sup>®</sup> that might have helped Cassano in his role as leader of AIGFP.



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**Figure 2. The Polarity Map<sup>™</sup> that might have averted AIG's failed derivatives policy**

With polarity management in place, Cassano's team may have been more cautious and not sold more credit-default swaps than they could responsibly support. Joseph Cassano is an extreme example of a Flatland leader who tragically confused a polarity to manage with a problem to solve. Most organizational leaders don't have the power to create global chaos, but the AIG story does speak to the critical reason for leaders to know and use polarity management as appropriate to guide their most significant business decisions.

### **Leader of myself**

We now move to looking at the role of "leader of myself," one that is less dramatic on the grand scale but key to personal satisfaction and building followership through trusting interpersonal relationships. Since we already know that the reader of this writing values coaching there is no need to argue the value of leaders focusing on their role as leader of themselves.

A common challenge in self-leadership occurs when a highly responsible super achiever suddenly starts hitting the wall. Take Nancy as an example. Nancy came to us for coaching when she

had been a Director level manager for about a year. She was tired, overwhelmed, and felt as though the world was on her shoulders. She was frustrated that her direct reports and her colleagues weren't stepping up in the way she thought the organization needed. No matter how long and hard she worked, it simply was not enough.

Nancy lived primarily on the *doing* side of the *doing/being* polarity. This is no surprise for a U.S.-based corporate professional. Our U.S. culture is heavily weighted on the "doing" side of life and has little respect for the "being" side of life. Nancy's story is a common one. She had used her enormous personal energy to perform tasks, handle details, ensure that others are doing their work, and stay on top of deadlines and goals. And, up until recently, that strategy had served her well and ensured her promotions up the corporate ladder.

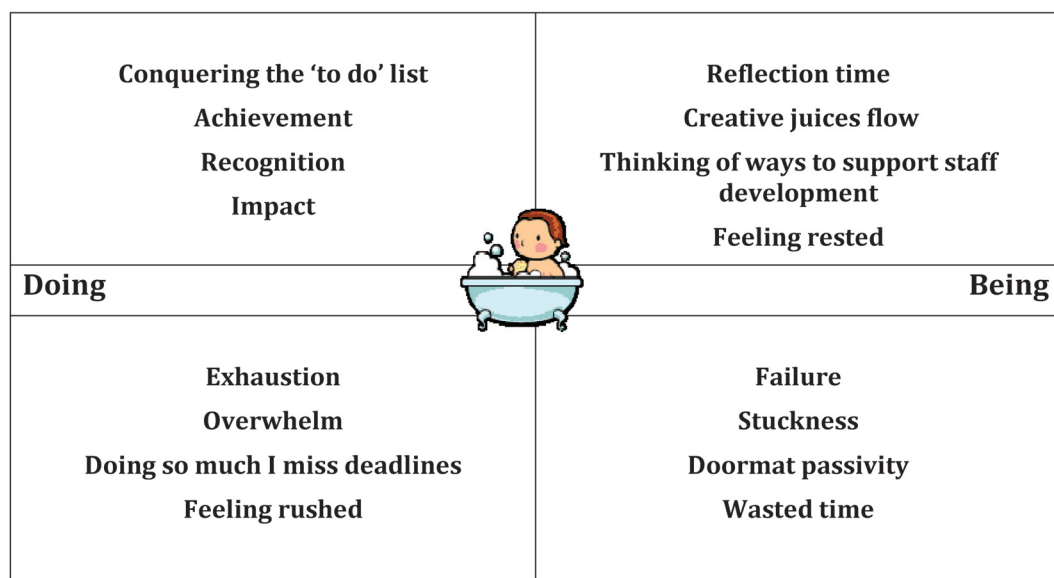
However, once Nancy jumped into the bigger game of being a Director, she found she did not have the time, energy or mind-share that it would take to personally direct all that needed to be accomplished. No one could. She had to find an entirely different way to be in the game (Charan, Drotter & Noel, 2001). As Nancy built her Polarity Map™, she saw all the power of her *doing* way of life: accomplishment, recognition, and career growth. As she built the downside of that side of the polarity, she began to recognize why she was encountering a problem. Nancy wrote down: exhaustion, overwhelm, and missed deadlines. As she explored further, she began to see the negative side's impact to her colleagues and direct reports. As long as she kept stepping up for things, others did not. They sometimes felt that she hogged all the limelight and there was no room for them. And, because Nancy took full ownership for everything in her department, her direct reports felt like they were just another pair of hands for her. They missed out on the opportunity to take full ownership for their own projects and the personal development that would result.

When Nancy began to fill in the upside of *being* on her Polarity Map™, she wrote down things like: time to reflect on the long-term, creative juices flowing into brilliant strategy, planning time for ongoing coaching and development of her people. When she filled out the downside of being, with words such as failure, stuckness, and passivity, she recognized that those qualities were the things she feared and worked to avoid at all costs. She was experiencing *polarity blindness*. Somehow in her mind, doing and action represented success in life. While she was also experiencing the downside of doing (exhaustion, over-responsibility, etc.), before the Polarity Map™ revelation, she negated the experience as something she should be able to overcome. She had not recognized that there was an inherent limitation in her one-sided polarity success model.

With a complete Polarity Map™ in hand (Figure 3), Nancy began blocking out time on her work calendar for leadership reflection

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time. During her leadership reflection time, she developed a clear strategy for handing off ownership on key projects that she should not be running. She also started to notice where direct reports needed coaching and mentoring to better meet the needs of her organization, as well as their own professional development. It took Nancy several years to fully shift her natural bent toward doing and overachieving, but she did. As Nancy stepped back, it wasn't always a smooth transition to others picking up the slack. Some did and some didn't but Nancy is now working at the proper level for a Director level and rarely gets stuck "down in the weeds" of taking ownership that belongs to someone else.



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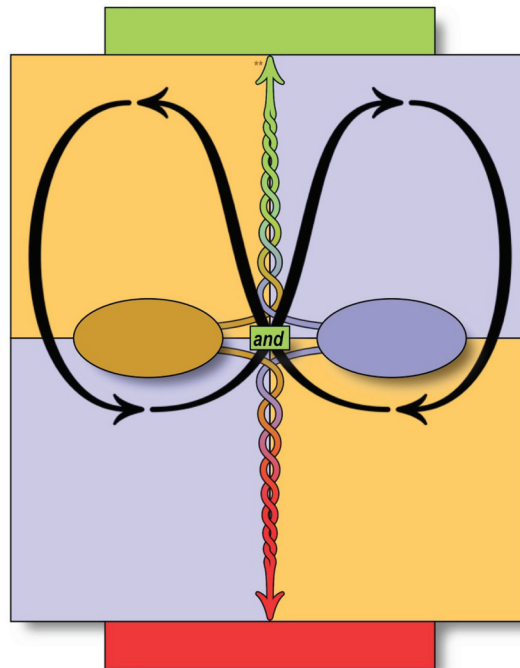
**Figure 3. Nancy's doing/being Polarity Map™**

Almost without fail, when we coach leaders, we find that they fall too heavily on one side or the other of the doing/being polarity. So much so, that it brings to mind an old parable. There was a young disciple of a yogi in India who said to his yogi "Master, you are so wise, you always know just the right way to guide us on our journey. How can you be so consistently right about what we need?" The yogi looked upon his disciple, and, with a slight smile said, "It's easy. I just imagine you crossing a bridge. If you get too far to the left, I say go right. If you get too far to the right, I say go left."

The analogy set out in this parable speaks to the way polarities work. As coaches, we are careful to clarify that you do not need to devote equal energy to both sides of a polarity to achieve balance. In most cases it isn't even feasible to focus on opposing poles at the same time in an equal fashion. Rather, the idea is to weave back and forth across polarities in accordance to the situation at hand. Sometimes a leader is focused on task and getting the job done. Sometimes a

leader is focused on relationship and connecting with his people. The question to ask is, “What response does this situation and employee call for?” When a leader has the sophisticated skill of knowing how to manage a polarity, by choosing the right direction to lean, his opportunity for success increases exponentially.

Once a leader has developed her skill to recognize and manage polarities, she will spend most of her time realizing the benefits of the upside of both polarities and very little time suffering from the downsides of each pole. In this way, a leader naturally flows from side to side of the Polarity Map in a path that resembles an infinity loop ( $\infty$ ). Figure 4 illustrates how the loops of the infinity loop are quite large in the upside quadrants compared to the loops on the downside quadrants of the polarity. When a leader is attuned to the infinity loop dynamic, she will quickly recognize when she is experiencing some of the down side and naturally move to the upside of the opposite polarity.



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**Figure 4. The infinity loop flow of movement shown on a Polarity Map™**

### **POLARITY AS A SCALABLE MODEL**

Polarity management is a highly scalable model that addresses a wide range of organizational challenges. In that sense, polarity is a universal tool that applies to the intrapersonal level, the interpersonal level, the team level and the organizational level. Thus far, we have explored examples at the organizational level, in the AIG example and at the intrapersonal level in the example of Nancy. Next, we will explore the interpersonal level.



### Interpersonal level

A classic concern of leaders revolves around managing the task/relationship polarity (Figure 5). Tom, a heart-centered leader, falls heavily on the relationship side of the polarity equation. Tom's team feels supported and cared for. They have a deep sense of loyalty to him. He knows that people are not robots, and the relationship they have with their manager counts for a lot in terms of happiness at work. However, Tom's heart-centered strength has a flipside. He found that his direct reports did not take accountability for their results. Rather, accountability for results rested heavily, and almost solely, on Tom's shoulders. In addition, no matter how much he and the company provided for his employees, they seemed to have an unhealthy sense of entitlement – a “What have you done for me lately?” attitude. In short, they sometimes acted like spoiled brats.

During coaching, Tom learned about the task/relationship polarity and became aware that he needed to grow a backbone where his wishbone had been. He recognized that despite the benefits of his gifts on the heart side, he had been over-focused on the relationship side of the polarity and under-focused on the task side of the polarity. He saw that as a consequence, his folks missed deadlines and made excuses and he let them off the hook to avoid damaging his relationship with them. In addition, some of his more task-oriented team members resented carrying the load for those who did not assume enough responsibility for ensuring the team's success.

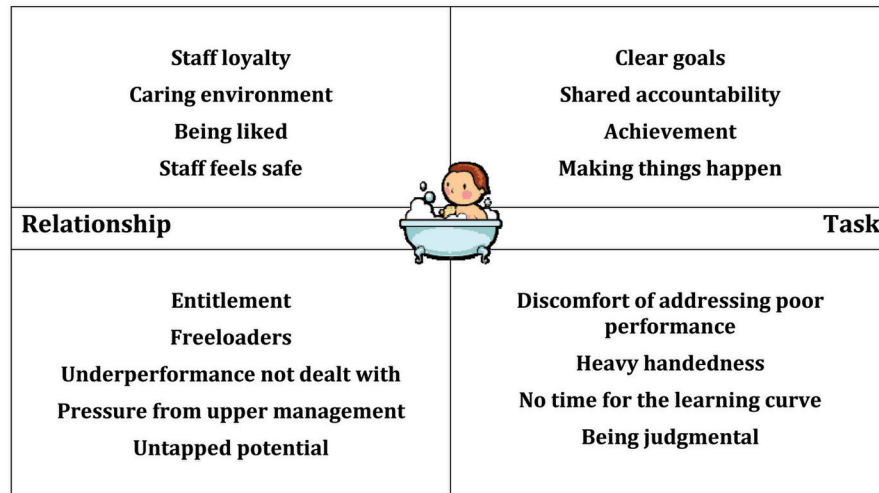
As we coached Tom through building a task/relationship Polarity Map™, he began to see the positive side of the task pole. Prior to the map, he feared that more backbone and rigor would cause his employees to respond negatively to what he perceived as adversarial confrontation, disconnection and dominance over his people. As often happens, he entirely missed the positive consequences of having backbone as a manager because his fear of the downsides of over-focusing on task to the neglect of relationship overshadowed them.

With the Polarity Map developed, Tom saw the many positive benefits to bringing more backbone and task focus into the equation. He saw that his people were crying out for structure, accountability, and clarity on direction and expectations. And he also saw that his whole team was suffering from a lack of credibility in the larger organization because they were not holding up their end of the work. Lastly, he recognized that his own credibility as a leader was suffering in the eyes of his superiors, colleagues and direct reports.

Taking the step to clarify expectations was fairly easy for Tom once he recognized the full implications of not managing the relationship/task polarity well. However, holding some of his less productive team members accountable for their attitudes was much more difficult. We rehearsed the conversations a number of times until he felt comfortable with conducting the real conversations.

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Results with most of the team were outstanding and they were relieved to have more ownership and accountability. One person had a hard time getting on board and ultimately left the group.



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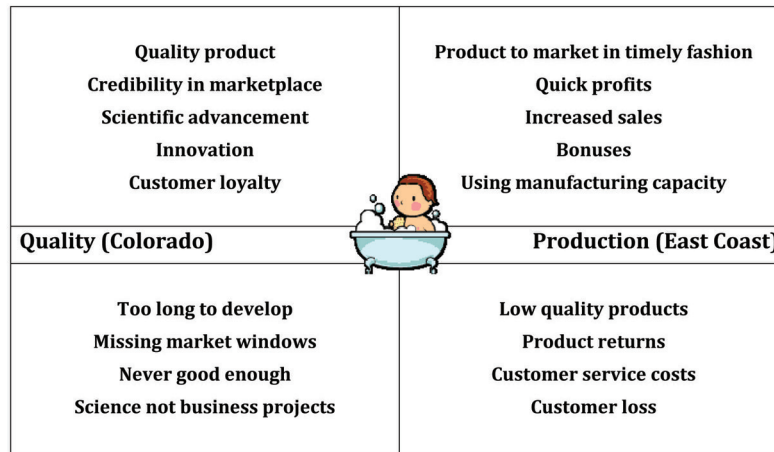
**Figure 5. Tom's relationship/task Polarity Map™**

Tom now consistently brings a polarity perspective to his work on himself and his direct reports. He understands that in order to have a sustainable structure that both cares for direct reports and produces business results, he must bring in both backbone/task and heart/relationship according to what is needed for the situation at hand.

### **Work group/team level**

Another important level to work polarities in any organization is at the work group/team level. We worked with one team who had members from their East Coast operations and Colorado operations. They were working very poorly together due to expectations that lived on opposite poles of the Polarity Map. The East Coast team was responsible for determining products needed for market with clear windows of opportunity for those products to hit the market. We'll call that side of the polarity "production focus." The Colorado part of team was responsible for developing those products with high quality for the market. We'll call that side of the polarity "quality focus." See Figure 6 on following page.

Both teams started their journey in Flatland. The East Coast team members thought the Colorado team was ineffective and inefficient. The Colorado team thought the East Coast team was rude and unreasonable. With the two teams together, we taught them Polarity Management. Things started improving almost immediately as they began to appreciate each other's perspective. Given the practicality and scalable nature of the polarity model, we hope that you are now ready and inspired to integrate polarity management into your work with organizational leaders.



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**Figure 6. Colorado and East Coast team's quality/production Polarity Map™**

### **PRACTICAL STEPS TO INTEGRATE POLARITY MANAGEMENT INTO COACHING WORK WITH ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERS**

Business coaches have a perfect opportunity to instill the power of polarity management into a wide network. Here are some practical ways that you as a coach can get started.

#### **Step 1. Become well versed in polarity management theory**

The first step is to build your base knowledge of polarity management. Barry Johnson's book (1992) is the seminal work on polarity management and is the first place to start. In addition, Barry has numerous white papers and other tools available on his website. Many coaches and consultants are well versed in polarity management. We recommend that you spend time familiarizing yourself with polarity management theory by attending a polarity management consultant intensive and/or working with a mentor coach who is well versed in polarity management. With a sound theoretical base in place, you will have climbed out of Flatland into the powerful new world of a Mountaineer.

#### **Step 2. Start using Polarity Maps to work through your personal challenges**

Before you help organizational leaders use polarity management, we recommend that you practice building Polarity Maps to address issues from your own life and work. It generally takes awhile to become competent at recognizing a polarity and naming the two poles of the Polarity Map™. The concept is easy but the application is often not as straightforward as you might think. Don't get discouraged! Ultimately, you will achieve an almost unconscious competence in recognizing polarities. As you develop your ability to use polarity management to address your own concerns, you will be in a much better position to help your clients do the same.

### **Step 3. Integrate polarity management and polarity mapping into your coaching sessions**

Once you are skilled at recognizing polarities and building Polarity Maps, start building Polarity Maps with friends and clients with whom you are comfortable experimenting. You will want to be fairly competent at this before introducing it fully into your practice. When you see an obvious polarity with a client, try mapping it out with her.

We find that it is helpful to explicitly teach our clients what a polarity is and how it works. We have slides that we use to introduce the concept in a didactic way as soon as the first obvious polarity pops into a client's exploration. Once your client is educated on polarity management, begin to apply the model immediately to polarities that are coming up within the coaching sessions. Once your clients become confident with the polarity model, encourage them to use the model on their own in between sessions. Our goal is to use polarities often until our clients move out of the Flatlander perspective.

### **Step 4. Use models and tools that reflect polarity management tenets**

Lastly, we do our best to always find and use models and tools that reflect the polarity management principles. Notable tools we use include The Leadership Circle 360 Profile (TLCP), developed and sold by The Leadership Circle and the Polarity Management Assessment Tool (PMAT) sold by Polarity Management Associates.

Since the 360 assessment is a cornerstone of many organizational leaders' coaching engagements, we will elaborate on the Leadership Circle Profile a bit. The Leadership Circle Profile is a solidly researched 360 leadership assessment that measures the competencies most closely correlated to effective leadership as well as the tendencies most closely correlated to leadership derailers. The results are presented in a circle graphic that reflect the four quadrants of a task/relationship Polarity Map. The profile is divided from left to right with relationship related competencies on the left and task related competencies on the right. Interestingly, leadership research confirms the importance of having both relationship and task related strengths. To learn more about TLCP profile, see the resource list at the end of this article for the link.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNICATIONS**

Flatlander and Mountaineer leaders communicate very differently. Flatlanders sound confrontational when encountering resistance to their proposed solution. It is a communication problem that they think will be solved by clarifying and repeating: 1) how terrible the problem really is; 2) how terrific and essential their proposed solution is; and 3) how thorough their strategy is. Understandably this defensive posture increases resistance in cases where the issue is a polarity rather than a problem to solve. The resistance felt comes from Flatlanders in the audience who are equally caught in either/or thinking. They see the upside of the present pole as the

solution, and the downside of the pole as a problem to be avoided. Mountaineers approach communication very differently. They use multiple strategies to build committed and aligned action.

### **Clarify the polarity to set context first**

Mountaineers recognize the value of spending more time up front clarifying key polarities that underlie the challenge being addressed. The polarity provides a more complete picture of the benefits and potential risks of both poles that underlie the challenge being tackled and provides a foundation for thoughtful deliberation.

### **Inquire, listen and mirror first**

When Mountaineers enter a highly polarized environment they know that they must turn opponents into willing co-creative advisors. To do so, they often begin with inquiry and/or listening intently. Mountaineers know it is their job to reflect back to the group both sides of the polarity in a respectful way. They understand that sincerely validating the concerns and values of their opponents creates a trusting environment more conducive to allowing the upsides and downsides of both poles to be deliberated thoroughly. For that reason, they discuss the opponents' pole of the polarity before discussing the side of the polarity they are leaning toward.

### **Play devil's advocate**

When Mountaineers are communicating to an audience aligned behind one view, they still take the time to advocate their views within the context of both sides of the polarity. A mountaineer might also play devil's advocate, arguing both sides of the polarity with himself in front of others. By doing this, the organizational leader models a full perspective and signals that it is safe to have a dissenting point of view.

As a result of consistently employing these strategies, communication becomes more reciprocal, respectful and inclusive. The dialogue fostered reflects effective management of the polarity of inquiry and advocacy. Stakeholders gain confidence in listening to one another, and they reach alignment behind more creative and stable solutions.

When mountaineers first employ these strategies, they must realize that their audience is often starting in Flatland and can sometimes perceive their new communication strategies as weak leadership, "waffling" or even worse, manipulative. Organizational leaders escaping from Flatland will benefit greatly from coaching support to think through how to best express a polarity consistently and concisely. This can support not only having a larger perspective for themselves but also guiding others into it as well. Coaches can support leaders in proactively planning for extra up front time to frame concerns appropriately. Since most organizational leaders are pressed for time, coaching support can assert and affirm that time invested up front will save time and energy in the long run while also creating a more sound solution and stronger alignment.

*In most cases it isn't even feasible to focus on opposing poles at the same time in an equal fashion. Rather, the idea is to weave back and forth across polarities in accordance to the situation at hand.*



Organizational leaders can benefit greatly by seeing a Mountaineer with excellent communication skills role model how to effectively lead by framing concerns, vision and values around a polarity. Unfortunately, leaders who do this well are indeed rare. A celebrated leader who consistently acts as a role models for how to frame polarities clearly is President Barack Obama. Regardless of one's political views, it cannot be denied that Obama is a gifted communicator who has a proven ability to enroll a majority to tackle large-scale challenges. Obama's first opportunity to work formally with International leaders was the G-20 economic summit held in March of 2009. Before leaving for the summit Obama vowed to first "listen not lecture" before taking a posture of advocacy. Obama's approach was well received and several new agreements in his country's favor were forged.

At the press conference held immediately after the conference, Obama described the independence vs. interdependence polarity that all political leaders must be aware of, in order to negotiate international agreements. The polarity was described in this way:

In terms of local politics, look, I'm the President of the United States. I'm not the president of China; I'm not the president of Japan... I have a direct responsibility to my constituents to make their lives better to ...live what we call the American dream. And I will be judged by my effectiveness in meeting their needs and concerns.

But in an era of integration and interdependence, it is also my responsibility to lead America into recognizing that its interests, its fate is tied up with the larger world, that if we neglect or abandoned those who are suffering in poverty, that not only are we depriving ourselves of potential opportunities for markets and economic growth, but ultimately that despair may turn to violence that turns on us, that unless we are concerned about the education of all children, and not just our children, not only may we be depriving ourselves of the next great scientist who's going to find the next new energy source that saves the planet, but we also may make people around the world much more vulnerable to anti-American propaganda.

So if I'm effective as America's president right now, part of that effectiveness involves providing Americans insight into how their self-interest is tied up with yours. And that's an ongoing project, because it's not always obvious.

This transcript of the G-20 press conference clearly demonstrates Obama's profound ability to recognize, manage and communicate polarities to create a foundation for collaboration and forward movement. We would like to reiterate, whether you are a fan of Obama's views or not, a quick Google or YouTube search is a worthwhile way to turn up many examples of President Obama's masterful use of the techniques discussed in this article.

*Once a leader has developed her skill to recognize and manage polarities, she will spend most of her time realizing the benefits of the upside of both polarities and very little time suffering from the downsides of each pole.*

## THE BENEFITS OF INTEGRATING POLARITY MANAGEMENT INTO YOUR WORK WITH ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERS

Polarity management is an elegantly simple, yet infinitely deep, model for expanding your thinking. Don't be fooled by its simplicity. If you continue to work with it in your life and your coaching practice you will climb out of Flatland into the multi-dimensional world of Mountaineers. Imagine how limited your perspective is when you are on low flat land with no high ground. You think you have a pretty good idea of what's in front of you but anything in your way can obscure your view. Polarity management practitioners are like Mountaineers that can see how much they were missing while on flat land. Can your organizational leaders really afford to be without this elevated world-view?

The polarity model is impressive in its scalability. You can use it in all aspects of your work with leaders, from helping leaders to realize their personal and professional potential to managing a large-scale complex enterprise. More polarity management-savvy coaches are needed to build an integrative discipline and increase public awareness of this powerful methodology. We welcome you to this exciting movement.

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### RESOURCES

True North Programs, LLC, [www.LeadershipSmarts.com](http://www.LeadershipSmarts.com)

Polarity Management Associates, [www.polaritymanagement.com](http://www.polaritymanagement.com)

The Leadership Circle, [www.theleadershipcircle.com](http://www.theleadershipcircle.com)

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## ■ ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### About the authors' collaboration

In 2000 Patty Beach and Jennifer Joyce became the founding partners of True North Programs, LLC a boutique leadership development consulting firm. Since then they have relied on polarity management to effectively blend their complementary yet opposite strengths to deliver on many collaborative efforts. These include the creation of Leadershipsmarts.com, an online resource for leadership training and coaching and the authorship of many products and programs that improve personal, interpersonal and organizational performance. Polarity management is a foundational component of many of our current projects including a webinar series on leadership and polarity and a blog on the masculine/feminine polarity. Our latest webinars and offerings can be found at [www.LeadershipSmarts.com](http://www.LeadershipSmarts.com).

### Patricia Beach, MCC, MSOD

**Phone:** 303-545-5258

**Email:** [pbeach@truenorthprograms.com](mailto:pbeach@truenorthprograms.com)

**Website:** [www.truenorthprograms.com](http://www.truenorthprograms.com)

Patty, an ICF Master Certified Coach with an MS in Organizational Development from Pepperdine University, has used her 20 years of corporate and entrepreneurial experience as a learning laboratory for leadership skills. Patty's signature is helping leaders shift from unconscious to conscious choice, overcome fears, and step confidently into their vision. Patty has been leading workshops on polarity management since 1994 for corporate and non-profit organizations. In 2000 she completed a Master's Thesis on the feminine/masculine polarity.

### Jennifer Joyce, MSW

**Phone:** 303-877-9148

**Email:** [jjoyce@truenorthprograms.com](mailto:jjoyce@truenorthprograms.com)

**Website:** [www.truenorthprograms.com](http://www.truenorthprograms.com)

Jennifer graduated from the Coaches Training Institute Coaching Program and the Leadership Institute of Seattle Executive Coaching Program. She holds a Master's in Industrial Social Work and a BA in International Communications. However, her best training has come from life experience and a keen observer's eye. Jen is a popular coach and speaker who draws on 20 years of corporate leadership development experience to ensure that her presentations are practical yet inspiring. Many of Jennifer's presentations include the concept of polarity management shared through stories that drive home the value of this powerful concept in an intimate yet impactful way.

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