

# Problem or Polarity?

## Dealing with Interdependent Opposites.

*How wonderful that we  
have met with a paradox.  
Now we have some hope of  
making progress.*

- Niels Bohr

In business, we have become familiar with the notion of Technical versus Adaptive challenges<sup>1</sup>.

**Technical challenges** have clear cut responses often issued by experts or figures of authority using current thinking, structures or processes.

**Adaptive challenges**, on the other hand, require experiments and new discoveries, and sometimes a change in values and ways of working. Yet, even if we are skilled at differentiating between adaptive and technical challenges and know how to best manage them, we sometimes *still* cannot find solutions.

Often, when this is the case, it is not a problem we are facing, but a *polarity*<sup>2</sup>.

### Recognising Polarity

Polarities can be overwhelming, complex, and appear indecipherable. They can show up as technical paradoxes such as short-term profit vs. long-term profit, or in leadership and culture conundrums<sup>1</sup>, where we may be faced with having to choose between being empathetic or tough, commanding or encouraging.

The inherent tension between polarities can be best characterised by the process of inhaling and exhaling (*Fig 1.0, p.2*) – though they tug against each other, both need to be present for human beings to survive and thrive.

The dynamic of this infinite partnership is also influenced by context. For example, if we are meditating, then the relationship between inhalation and exhalation is calm and measured; if we are running for our lives, the relationship is pressured. We gasp for air, our lungs filling with excess carbon dioxide, struggling to find the equilibrium of measured breath. Similarly, you may find that when you're working at pace, polarities become harder to balance or reconcile.

# Polarity Management Map

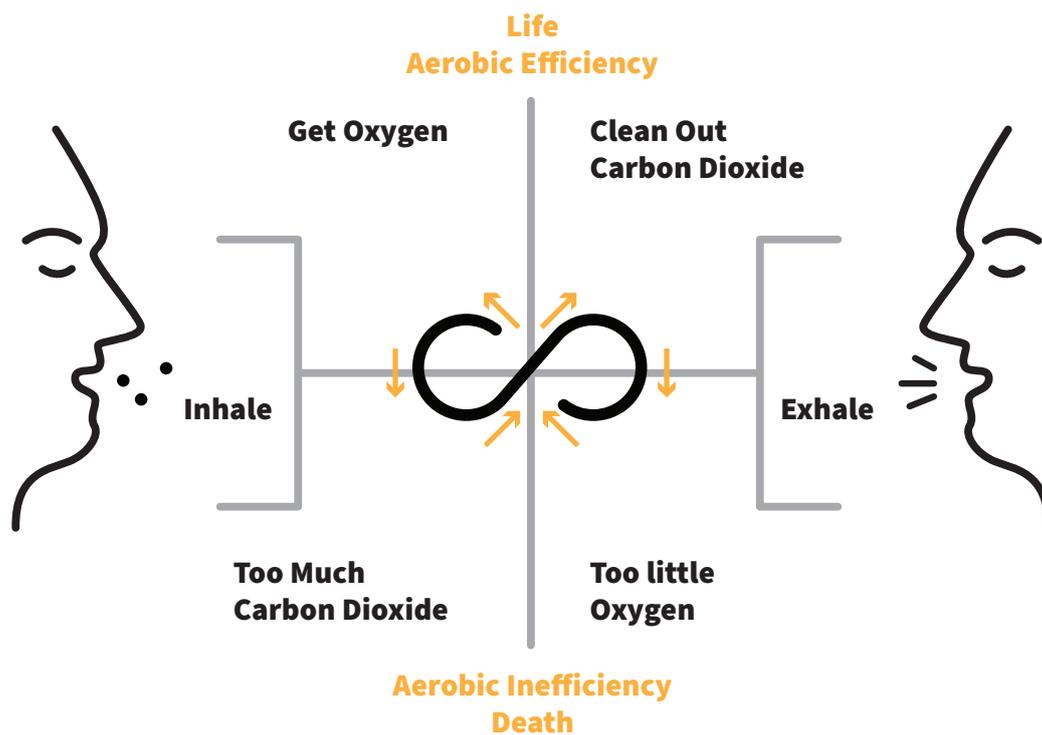


Figure 1.0 Polarity Management Map, Barry Johnson Ph. D, 2019<sup>3</sup>.

Some examples of polarities in organisations include<sup>4</sup>:

- organisational life, including leadership (control vs. empowerment)
- teamwork (tasks vs. relationships)
- strategy (competition vs. collaboration)
- structure (centralised vs. decentralised)
- and within ourselves (work vs. home).

If these polarities are incorrectly viewed as problems, then a solution in favour of one, means being out of balance with the other. It can become a pendulum of poor decisions, swinging back and forth from leader to leader. This see-sawing effect provides neither solution, stability, nor real innovation and will put some employees into a threat state.

## The Polarity Mindset

However, if, as leaders, we can hold competing interests in mind, there is wisdom and opportunity to be gained. Managing polarities effectively is not a case of making a choice between them. Instead, the power lies in recognising them for what they are and riding the current that connects them. Polarities create energies that are leverageable - new possibilities, options, and opportunities for different thinking or a deeper understanding. Being able to harness this energy may be as simple as acknowledging that neither pole is wholly wrong nor wholly right.

Key mindset shifts<sup>5</sup> required when dealing with polarities include moving:

- From consistency to consistent inconsistency – avoid picking a side, find the truth in both options and manage the tension over time
- From scarce resources to abundant resources – seek to create value from a broader range of alternatives
- From stability and certainty to dynamism and change – seek to become comfortable in ambiguity and experimentation



## Takeaways

Adopting a polarity-friendly mindset brings greater freedom, flexibility, and opportunity. Here are some practical tips to help you get started<sup>6</sup>:

1. Identify the current polarities in your system – where can you move from "**either or**" to "**both, and**"<sup>7</sup>
2. Acknowledge personal bias – which pole do you tend to prefer?
3. Map your movements between poles – name the benefits and downsides of both poles
4. Leverage through specific actions – seek actionable items that draw upon the strengths of both poles

The leader who can seek out and reframe the way they navigate the polarities existing within their organisation will find a previously untapped wellspring of energy and potential. But to reach the point where we can hold the best of both truths at the same time, we first need to get really curious.

### Begin by asking yourself:

- What kind of management structure do you have – siloed or horizontal?
- How are decisions made – bureaucratically or autonomously? Instinctively or data-driven?
- Which behaviour do you champion from your leaders – candour or diplomacy?
- Which has priority – shareholder or customer value?
- What is the organisation's purpose bias – margin or mission?
- Is change framework-driven or project-driven?
- How would you characterise your company – efficient or innovative?

Add your own polarity questions to the list. When you're finished, replace 'or' for 'and' to begin mapping your new way of thinking.

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