

COVID Corner

Polarity Management: A Powerful Leadership Approach in Times of Uncertainty

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Some decisions we make are simple. Walk to the store or drive. Eat at home or go to a restaurant. ‘Either—or’ decisions—true or false; good versus bad; black versus white; in the United States these days, Democrat or Republican; and even in the digital world, with 1 or 0—are somewhat simple. But what about the ‘either—and’ decisions?¹ Whether to put money into hospital care or public health? Whether to impose a lockdown to require social distancing, or let people do as they please? These decisions are not simple: they are complex and challenging.

Binary decisions are often the consequence of stability of context. A context of stability allows us to understand many of our choices and predict the consequences of them. But even in stable times there are decisions that defy an ‘either—or resolution’; what might be called, ‘either-and’ decisions. The above decision—putting money into public health or hospital care is one of them. Both alternatives are desirable, but we can’t simply flip a switch and turn one of them off. As Barry Johnson says, we must simply find an accommodation point between the two that will not allow us to slide to one end or the other and trigger the downside of doing so.² During times of great instability, such as we are going through with the COVID syndemic,³ ‘either-and’ decisions are prominent. What we need metaphorically, is a dimmer switch: seeking the optimal position between the on or off choices.

Many issues related to the pandemic—i.e., the mask issue or the lock-down issue—trigger the ‘government is impinging on our civil liberties’ belief system that lies dormant in good times but surfaces during times of social peril. In this instance, segments of society begin to express deeply seated beliefs about government and freedom; and treat them as *either—or* issues rather than *either—and* issues. Divides emerge and conflict results. But it would be wrong for leaders to fall into the same trap; we must seek a resolution to quell the negative consequences of those emergent conflicts.

When an issue surfaces that pits two poles of belief, desire, or action that compete with one another for our resolution, they sometimes mask themselves as binary decisions. They often present themselves as contradictions—a combination of statements, ideas, or features of a situation that are opposed to one another—but are not. New ways of seeing the issue, or conceptualizing it, and recodifying it as something else that does not pit one view of the world against another is what one writer calls integrative thinking, a high leadership art.⁴

Even more challenging are the issues that present themselves as two poles of true contradiction. In this case resolution is impossible because the two poles define each other and are a ‘real’ set of opposites. Such issues “such as immediacy and mediation, short and long term, the fixed and the flux, ideal and real, actual and possible.”⁵ The poles involve each other, are inseparable, and give meaning to each other. Think of a magnet, in which the north and south poles define each other in their opposites and create ‘force fields’ between them.

For issues of this kind, leaders need to demonstrate the skill of polarity management. Between the two poles lies a continuum of positions, views and actions representing a particular

balance between the two poles that ‘manages’ the competing forces. During stable times this point of dynamic tension is also steady. But during VUCA times (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous)⁶ the point of dynamic tension is disturbed, and pressure is exerted to move towards one pole. Inevitably, counter forces are brought to bear, and divides emerge. The new resolution point is unclear, it is itself a place to be discovered through artful action.

For example, when change as occasioned by COVID disturbs the dynamic tension our ‘normal’ society accepted as reasonable accommodations between two opposing forces, deep-seated issues that were masked by a socially accepted point of dynamic tension are triggered. Sometimes they are personal: the tug-of-war in one’s own mind about one’s own confidence versus one’s insecurities is sparked; so we feel vulnerable. The accommodation point realized during stable times begins to move toward the pole of self-doubt.

Sometimes the issue is strategic. For example, during COVID, the need to find a new accommodation between the needs of the economy versus the needs of public health. The Chief Medical Officers in most provinces and nationally are struggling with this challenge: and because it is a new challenge, it has created previously unknown dynamics that cannot be anticipated. There is no history to fall on. The best they can do is to make the best decision in the moment, with the long-term goals of health and social order driving that decision. The rest of must also recognize that there is going to be ongoing volatility in their approaches, as they try to juggle competing demands.

Similarly, the gun law issues in the US; the Black Lives Matter and the Me-Too movements around the world expose polar opposites in social values that have been the battleground in many historical times: a real—ideal polarity. They represent social dilemmas that human societies have created and will unlikely be forever resolved as long as we remain human.^{7,8} At one pole: respect, dignity for all humans (e.g., Black, Indigenous, LGBTQ), and justice for all regardless of wealth or ethnicity; at the other pole disrespect, racist beliefs, domination of the privileged. One defines the other. And the dynamics between the two is an essential human and social struggle for civilization. The tug of war between the two poles is something that must be recognized and managed artfully so we can take action to restore a dynamic balance that will not rend us apart and enable us to live in peace. And we must have faith that as we fight these battles, we are in fact fighting the battle of civilization, and we must always rise to that challenge.

Are there tools to use to operationalize polarity management? Peter Schulte⁹ describes one way to manage polarities.

1. Analyze the problem to determine whether it is an issue that appears to be resurfacing over and over, even though you have thought you had ‘put it to bed’ each previous time.
2. Spend a little time ‘peeling away the onion’: i.e., reflecting on the permanent, rather than the ‘test of will’ between two belief systems that are generating emergent flare-ups of the tension between those two belief systems.
3. Identify the two poles or opposites creating the issue and that define the continuum you must move along.
4. Create a list or a map of the advantages and disadvantages of each of the poles. This depiction is best filled with the symptoms and indicators of when you are experiencing these advantages or disadvantages.

5. Commit to continuously sensing which of the advantages and disadvantages you are experiencing in any given movement. If you are experiencing a disadvantage of one pole, you take steps to move toward the other. Once you start experiencing the disadvantages of the opposite pole, you move back toward the other.

Remember: the poles are not the goal, rather you are encouraged to constantly move between the poles in an upward spiral toward perfect balance between the two. The goal is *between* the poles. You put processes in place to avoid the disadvantages and maximize the advantages of both simultaneously; you invite discussion and analysis of where you are in this tension and where you need to be right now. You accept that that answer might be different tomorrow and different yet again the day after.

Either-and decisions reflect artful leadership: deeply sophisticated, knowledgeable about context, and of the multiple competing people factors that are at play: both on the surface, and beneath the surface. The latter manifest themselves as deep-rooted value conflicts that are muted during times of stability but given voice during turbulent times. *Polarity management is a process by which the leader can realize either-and decisions and maintain the dynamic equilibrium so necessary for an organization—and society—to move through these blustery times.* In short, whenever you face an either—or decision, look for the ‘and’ or the right balance along the polarity continuum.

¹ Johnson, B. (2020). *And: Making a difference by leveraging polarity, paradox or dilemma*. Sacramento: HRD Press.

² Johnson, B. *Polarity management* (1993). *Executive Development: Bradford*. Vol. 6, Iss.2:28.

³ A syndemic is when multiple conditions emerge when there is an adverse interaction between diseases and health conditions of all types (e.g., infections, chronic non-communicable diseases, mental health problems, behavioural conditions, toxic exposure, and malnutrition) and are most likely to emerge under conditions of health inequality caused by poverty, stigmatisation, stress, or structural violence: or in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic. See Singer, M., Bulled, N., Ostrach, B., & Mendenhall, E. (2017). Syndemics and the biosocial conception of health. *The Lancet*, 389(10072), 941-950.

⁴ Martin, R. L. (2009). *The opposable mind: How successful leaders win through integrative thinking*. Harvard Business Press.

⁵ Larsen, R. E. (1959). Morris Cohen's Principle of Polarity. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 587-595.

⁶ Canadian Health Leadership Network. *E-Blast 3 June 2020: COVID Corner Two Faces of VUCA*. Available @ <https://chlnet.ca/wp-content/uploads/COVID-Corner-June-3.pdf>. Accessed on 7 December 2020.

⁷ Dickson G, Tholl B. (2020). *Bringing Leadership to Life in Health: LEADS in a Caring Environment* (2nd edition). April. London: Springer.

⁸ Even in stable times dilemmas exist. They are inherent in the contradictions that emerge through the system's structure, which pits competing groups against one another in the pursuit of resources. See Burns, L. R., & Kuramoto, R. K. (1999). Polarity management: The key challenge for integrated health systems/Practitioner response. *Journal of Healthcare Management*, 44(1), 14.

⁹ Schulte P. Polarity Management 101: The Solution to Unsolvable Problems. [Internet]. *Triple Pundit*. 2016 Dec 29 [cited April 15, 2019]. Available from: <https://www.triplepundit.com/story/2016/polarity-management-101-solution-unsolvable-problems/20846>.