



MANAGING POLARITIES

Researches out of MIT on collective intelligence have been studying what makes teams smarter or better at decision making. They looked at individual IQ's, cohesion, motivation, and a number of other factors. It turns out none of those made a difference. Only two things mattered, individuals possessed:

- 1) Social sensitivity - the ability to sense what was happening in the emotional climate of the room and adjust accordingly
- 2) Diversity of perspectives - when too many people thought or reasoned in the same way, they were no better at solving complex problems than an individual. The same is true with too many diverse perspectives. Teams needed just the right amount of diverse thinking.

Gender diversity is a powerful way of achieving this. Teams of all women, and teams of all men performed worse than teams with a mix of genders.

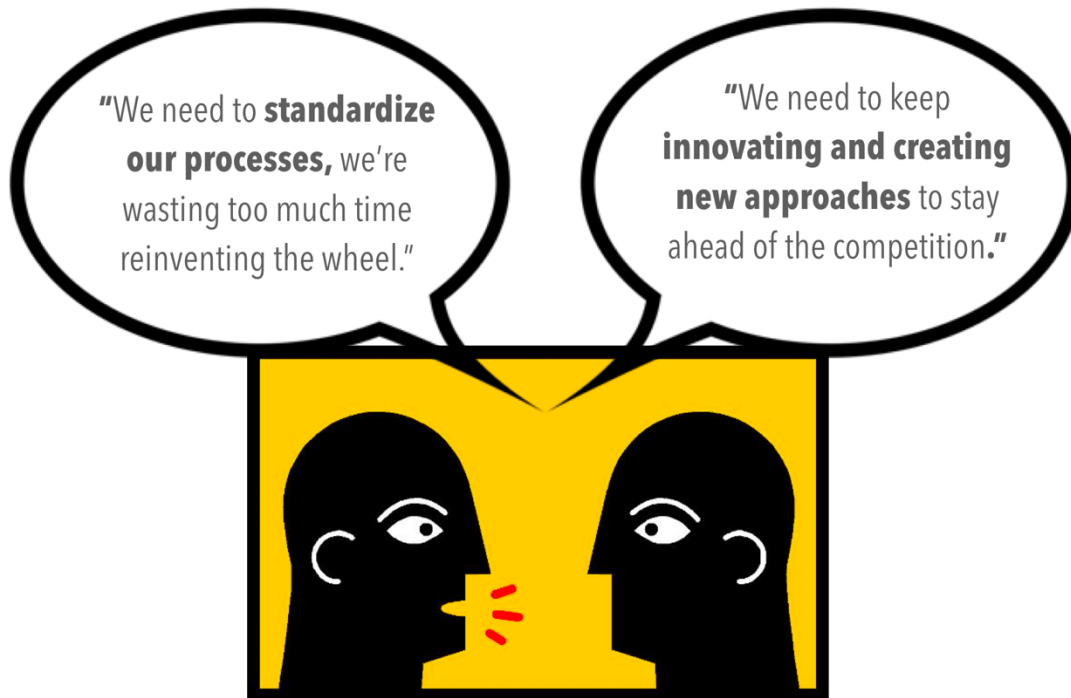
However, diversity of viewpoints is also the biggest reason it's difficult to get buy-in on a team. While it makes a team ultimately smarter, it also leads to conflict, debates, and disagreement, which can bog a team down.

There is a way to minimize this, it requires leaders learn to make a very important distinction between **solving problems** and **managing polarities**.

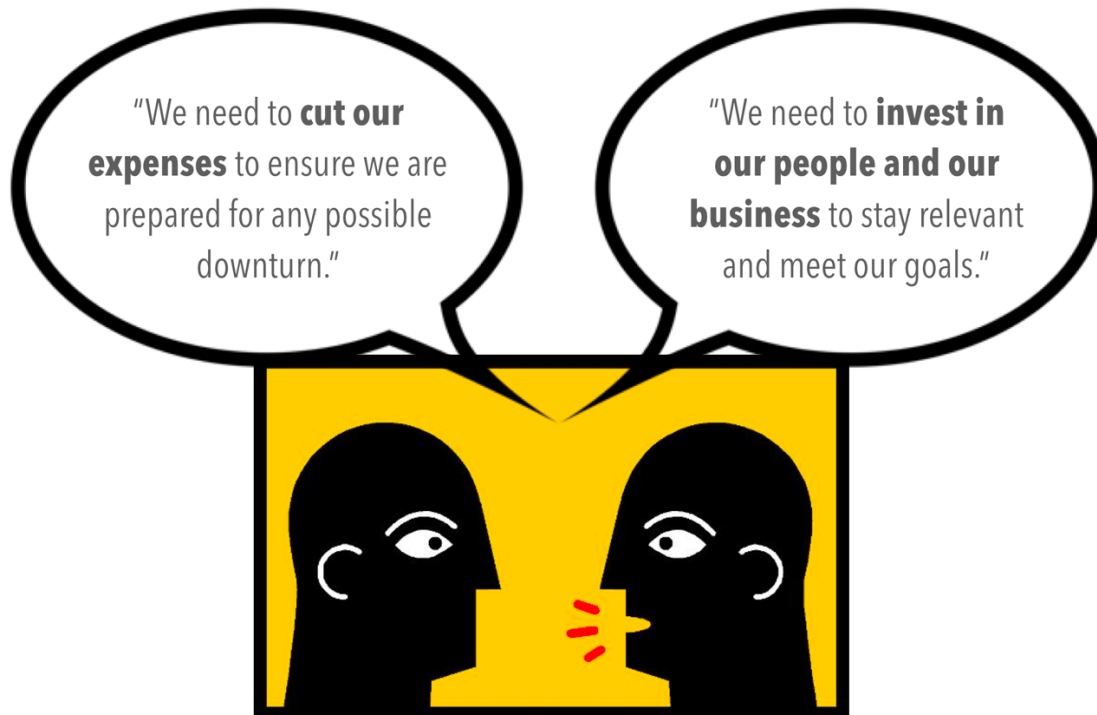
Research by Dr. Barry Johnson on "Polarity Management" shows that organizations and leaders who understand this distinction experience the following benefits:

- ✓ **Able to manage issues more effectively**
- ✓ **Experience fewer power struggles**
- ✓ **Allows teams to be more open to change**
- ✓ **Fosters the ability to see more pathways**
- ✓ **Increases stability amidst rapid change**

Consider this common debate in a team:



Or this one:



These debates often go in circles. Most of the time you already know who is going to say what in the conversation. Each person has staked out their positions on the issue and are attempting to persuade others to their cause.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PROBLEMS AND POLARITIES

What most leaders miss is that these kinds of debates are not actually **problems**, they are **polarities**. A *polarity* cannot be solved it can only be *managed*.

When leaders understand this, they can begin to guide their team in a different kind of conversation that unlocks pathways and builds buy-in much more easily.

The chart below summarizes the difference between a **problem** and a **polarity**:

PROBLEM	POLARITY
Has a beginning and an end	On-going
Avoidable	Inevitable
Mutually exclusive alternatives	Mutually inclusive
Independent opposites	Interdependent opposites
<u>Examples of Problems:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Not enough time in the day</i> • <i>An underperforming team member</i> • <i>A key person has left your company</i> • <i>You are unhappy in your job</i> 	<u>Examples of Polarities:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Innovation and standardization</i> • <i>Cost control and investment</i> • <i>Attracting new customers and taking care of existing ones</i>

When leaders attempt to treat a **polarity** as if it were a **problem** to be solved people end up in endless debates and conversations that can't be resolved because it is not the nature of polarities to be solved.

***A polarity is a pair of interdependent positive (or neutral) opposite poles.
Both poles are required to achieve balance.***

THE FOUR DYNAMICS OF ALL POLARITIES:

1. Both poles support and **feed each other**. For example, *breathing in is necessary for breathing out*
2. The **expression** of one pole creates the **need** for the other. For example, *Exercise requires rest to rebuild muscle.*
3. When we focus **only on one** pole, we will experience the **downside** of that pole.

If I exercise without resting, eventually my body will give out and lose muscle since I never allow it to recover. Rest is when the muscles rebuild.

4. The more I value one pole, the more willing I am to **tolerate its downside** and the more I **fear the downside of the opposite** pole.

If working out is a big value of mine, I'm more willing to accept the risk of injury, exhaustion, and loss of free time. I am more likely to fear becoming out of shape, losing strength, and being lazy.

HOW POLARITIES CAN BE MISTAKEN AS PROBLEMS:

Polarities always come in pairs. When you only look at one half of the pair, it looks like a problem. For example, here's a common refrain in some organizations:

"There's too much bottleneaking and power at the top, we need to empower our people, so we can be more nimble."

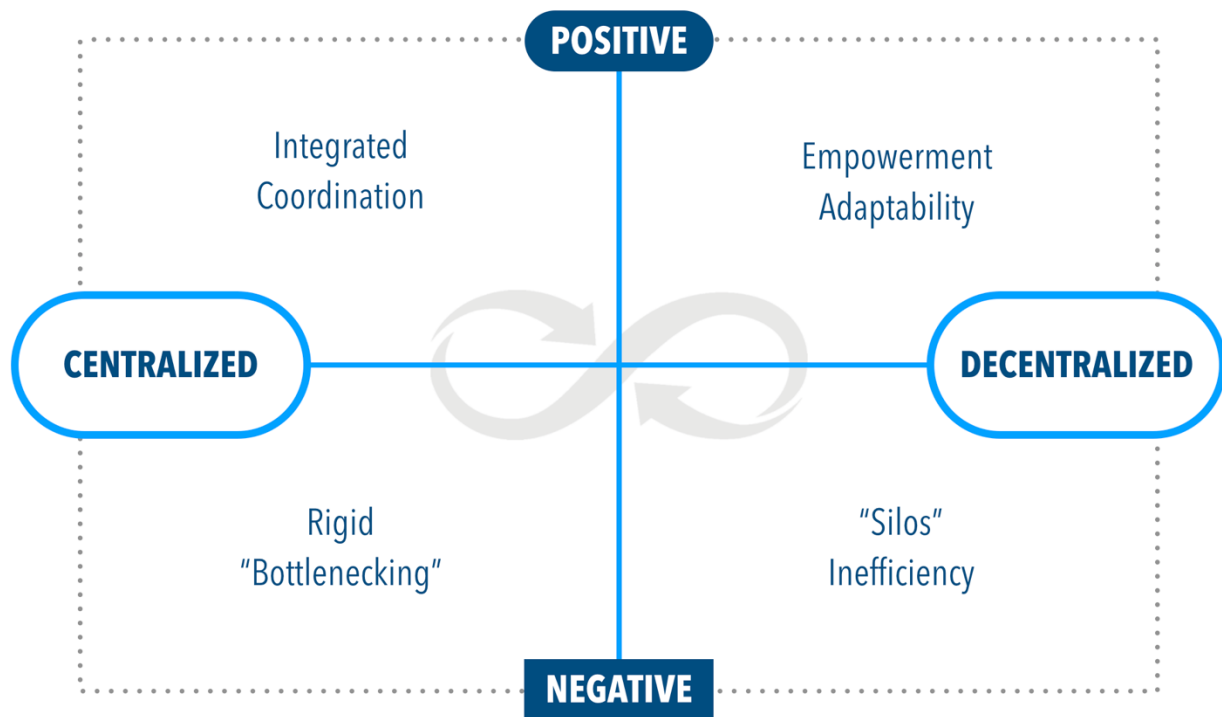
This seems like a problem to be solved. You have identified the gap, now all you need to do is design a strategy to close the gap. The solution is to give your front-line people more power and authority to make decisions on their own.

However, in reality, this isn't a problem to solve, this is one half of a polarity. In two years that same company will be singing a different song that sounds like this:

"People operate siloes, there's a lack of consistency and accountability, we need more coordination for all these moving parts and higher standards."

These two statements function together to form a polarity. One way to organize these positions is to map them so they can be understood more fully. Each one of the statements above expresses a different opposing value: **Centralized** power vs. **decentralized** power.

In the map below, both are represented, and each side has a positive and a negative expression, both are necessary:



You can see here how each side corrects and balances the other. Over focusing on one side means you will begin to experience more of the negative expression of that side. The positive side corrects the negative of the opposite value. Hence you see an infinity loop linking all four quadrants.

Managing Polarities well means:

- Affirming the wisdom of both
- Maximizing the benefit of both
- Decreasing the downside of both

- Seeing that all values and goals come in pairs

To accomplish this, *first* we must recognize and manage the polarities within us. This helps us see how we project our biases into organizational life.

Next, we must learn to see with both eyes open. Specifically, that means learning to reframe the pole or value we tend to avoid, invalidate, or deny. We must rename them using positive (or neutral) language.

Instead of seeing the act of tending to the emotional needs of team members as “babysitting” we might call it “attentiveness.”

Or instead of seeing a top down unilateral decision as “bossy,” we rename this as “directing.” This is subtle but very important because it expands the possibilities for us.

Finally, we must be able to see the very real positive and negative expressions of each pole. Only then can we navigate the dance between them.

Further Resources:

For personal application see: MODULE 5, Video “Personal Polarity Map Blank” document in the client center

For organizational application see: MODULE 5, Video “Organizational Polarity Map Blank” document in the client center