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THE CHANGE CHAMPION'S FIELD GUIDE

Strategies and Tools for Leading Change in Your Organization

SECOND EDITION

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chapter
TEN

Whole System Transformation Through a Polarity Lens

An Idea Whose Time Has Come

Robert "Jake" Jacobs and Lynnea Brinkerhoff, with Barry Johnson

OVERVIEW

Increased rates of change are driving the need to respond to ever-more complex problems. More and more situations are emerging where factions take different positions seemingly at odds with one another. Nowhere is this more present than in the work of Whole System Transformation. This chapter describes an approach that can enhance all transformation work.

Regardless of the method you have chosen to use in your transformation effort, a "polarity thinking" approach will help you:

- Accomplish the goals that you have set out to achieve;
- Accelerate the time that it takes you to achieve these goals; and
- Sustain the gains you have made over time.

*Please find associated case studies in Part Four.

Seeing transformation work through a polarity lens will enable you to address five common issues that often plague transformation efforts:

1. Resistance to change, whether it stems from fear of the unknown, a desire to preserve the ways things have been done in the past, or concerns about the visions defined during the transformation process;
2. The complexity that comes with engaging multiple stakeholders with sometimes common, but often different needs and interests;
3. Conflict between groups who can't seem to agree on why the transformation is needed, what changes need to be made, or how to make these changes;
4. Chronic issues that keep showing up over and over again with no lasting resolution; and
5. Cross-cultural issues that are becoming increasingly important as organizations continue to expand with operations spanning the globe.

Polarities are energy pairs that are interdependent.

Polarities are energy pairs that are interdependent. They can support one another in pursuit of a common purpose. Whether it's breathing that requires both inhaling and exhaling to support life, providing both tough love and gentle love to create a healthy environment for a child growing up, or paying attention to both cost and quality for an organization to succeed, polarities show up in many aspects of our lives and work.

We believe that transformation *and* continuity is the most fundamental polarity that needs to be leveraged in any transformation effort. *If you want radical transformation, go after creating radical continuity.* The firmer the ground people stand on from the certainty that comes along with continuity, the more willing they are to take the leap of faith into the world of transformation. Appreciative Inquiry, Future Search, and other Whole System Transformation approaches include lessons learned from the past in crafting a collective future. However, as a field overall, we believe there has been an over-focus on transformation and change and not as much time and attention on the continuity that comes with seeing the wisdom in "the way things have been done around here." If we

continue to choose this path we run the risk of generating greater resistance, creating stuckness, waste, a burden to the bottom line, and an unnecessary irritant to those involved.

This chapter describes other key polarities in addition to continuity *and* transformation you can leverage during transformation efforts, a guide for how to unleash an organization's enormous supply of energy that's contained in these polarities, and offers a way to address some of the most challenging issues facing our organizations, nations and planet.

In the movie, *Oh God* with actor George Burns, when asked what it was like to be God, he replied, "It's great, except that I haven't figured out how to make one of anything."

WHOLE SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION WORK SEEN THROUGH A POLARITY LENS

Imagine your organization has a unique opportunity. Maybe you need to create a bold vision charting a new course for your future. Perhaps change is long overdue and you need to radically accelerate the pace of developing and delivering products and services to remain competitive in the marketplace. Strategy implementation, culture change, you name it. Whatever your situation, major changes are required in the way you do business. These times require a *transformation* in your organization. Incremental change around the edges won't get the job done. You must bring about fundamental changes in the thinking, behavior, and results achieved by hundreds if not thousands of people. The task is daunting, but you've got a great leadership team and you're up for the challenge.

You're in a meeting exploring this challenge when a question is raised: *"How are we going to get the rest of the organization's buy-in to these new ways of working?"*

This isn't a new topic for your organization or any other. It's *the* age-old question when it comes to transformation. See Graphic 10.1, Burning Platform.

Quickly the conversation focuses on the split between your leadership team and much of the rest of the organization. *Why is what is so clear to you not registering with so many others?* You've described today's "burning platform," an exciting vision for tomorrow, and a few key steps that will move the organization in

Graphic 10.1. Burning Platform

the direction of that vision. And yet there are still people who want to continue doing their work as they always have. No sense of urgency. No desire to change. In truth, *the more you focus on transformation, the more others in the organization seem to hold on to the way things have been.*

The "Either/Or" Transformation Lens: Seeing Only Part of the Picture

Looking through an either/or lens (Graphic 10.2), your leadership team and much of the rest of your organization end up in one of two camps. The first camp knows that transformation is the only path to the company's future success. Do it well and you can learn from others and implement best practices, capitalize on exciting new opportunities, and create new processes needed so you can win in the marketplace. What are you and others in the organization focused on transformation worried about? Stay stuck in the past and you're on a slippery slope to keep doing what you've always done whether it's working or not, missing out on exciting new opportunities and not doing needed work because you're bogged down in old, inefficient processes. As leaders of the organization, you are clear, committed, and your energy is focused on one thing: the organization's greater good. So build a gap analysis strategy to move from Point A (where we are now) to Point B (where we need to be in the future).

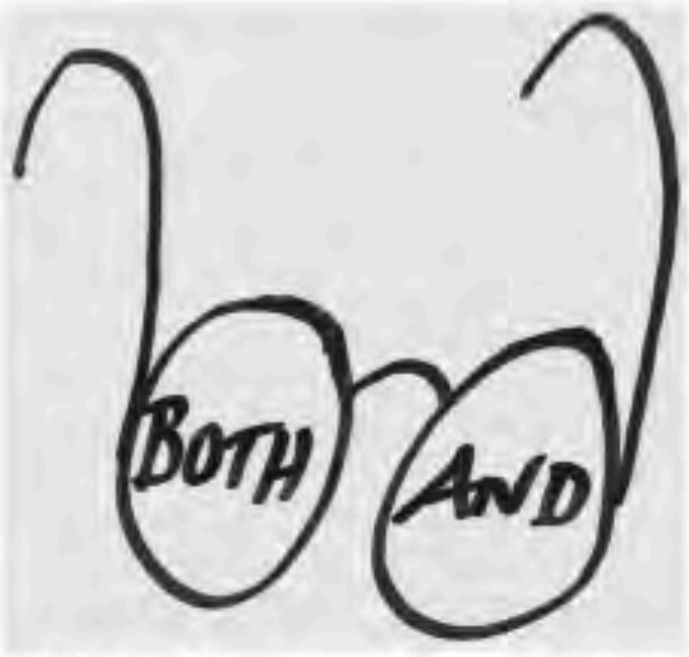
Graphic 10.2. An Either/Or Lens

In the second camp, others are resisting the needed changes. They argue that keeping things as they've always been is the way to go. Follow this path, they say, and you can leverage what we already know, take full advantage of past and present opportunities, and implement proven processes that lead to predictable results. What's their worst-case scenario? *Transform things too much to the neglect of continuity and we'll lose sight of what made us successful in the past, leave potential gains from past and present opportunities on the table, and end up with unproven processes leading to unpredictable results.*

There is a *natural tension* between these two camps. This tension can deliver a *virtuous cycle* of increasingly better results over time—if well navigated from a "both/and" mindset. If, however, it is seen from an "either/or" perspective, the natural tension will easily become a vicious cycle in which everyone and the system loses.

In this case, people who need to collaborate end up in conflict. Each holds a common—though flawed—assumption of the other: "If I'm right, then you must be wrong." *The stronger the case one group makes, the deeper the other digs in its heels.*

Two groups. One goal. Two solutions. Which one is right? They both are. *The problem is that each of them is only half-right.* Transformation and continuity is



Graphic 10.3. Both/And Lens

not a problem that can be solved from an "either/or" mindset. It's a polarity that needs to be leveraged from a "both/and" point of view. (See Graphic 10.3.)

The "Both/And" Lens: Seeing the Whole Picture

Let's tell the same story, this time through a "both/and" lens. You decide that transformation is the way to go. As change agents, you can see that if you keep doing what you're doing, you'll keep getting what you've always gotten. And that's no longer good enough. You've been missing out on new market opportunities and new ways of working that are needed to compete in today's ever-changing world (A) (see Figure 10.1).

As the transformation effort gathers momentum, new—and better—ways of working begin to take hold throughout the organization. You begin succeeding in every way, integrating the "best of the best" from other organizations both inside and outside your industry. New customers, new products, and new services are the order of the day. Your business quickly expands; everything appears to be on track . . . until you realize it isn't (B).

The transformation effort is strategic, yet not the only strategic thing to do.

Paradoxically, transformation is not sustainable without also paying attention to continuity. Focus too much on new ways of working without enough focus at

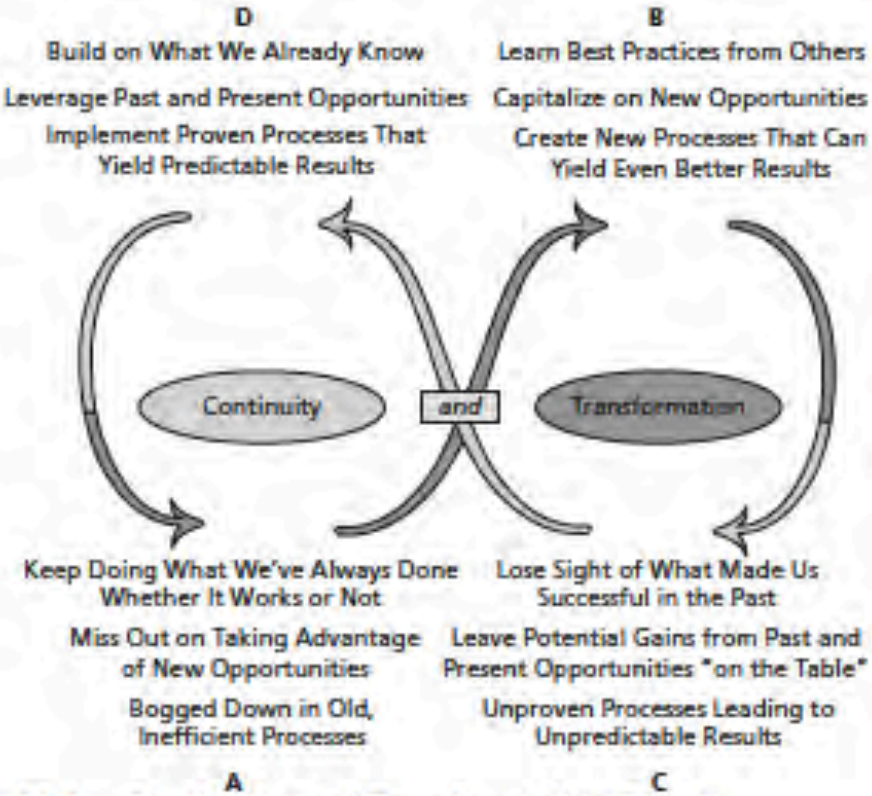


Figure 10.1. Continuity and Transformation Effort

the same time on continuity and you'll find yourself in the downside of transformation alone (C)—losing sight of what made you successful in the past, leaving potential gains on the table, and stumbling by following unproven practices that lead to unpredictable results. Now you have created another set of problems that need to be solved. The solution to these problems is to once again get back to what you've always done best, what's made you an industry leader for years. Leverage what you already know, take full advantage of past and present opportunities, and implement proven processes that lead to predictable results (D).

Truth 1: If you want radical transformation, you need to create equally radical continuity.

And so it goes . . . today's solution becoming tomorrow's problem. This is what we call the all too common "rubber band effect" that plagues so many

transformation efforts. Things seem to be moving in the right direction and yet, over time, it becomes harder and harder for these transformative changes to stick. The harder you try to fix each of these problems, the bigger they get. *The more each group is committed to the organization's success, the more energy ends up working against you in your organization. What you go after with the greatest persistence ends up creating the greatest resistance in others.*

Exasperated, you ask yourself, "Why do we keep running into this same problem over and over again?" If this scenario is familiar, you are an ideal candidate for supplementing your change strategy with a polarity lens and employing the polarity assessment for continuity and transformation approach. Follow the counsel below and improve the achievability, speed, and sustainability of all your transformation work.

TAP POLARITIES: GET THE ENERGY IN YOUR TRANSFORMATION EFFORT WORKING FOR YOU

How do you break this vicious cycle of energy working against you? Begin seeing your transformation work through a polarity lens.

Polarities are interdependent pairs that can support one another in pursuit of a common purpose. They can also undermine each other if seen as an either/or problem to solve. Polarities at their essence are unavoidable, unsolvable, unstoppable, and indestructible. Most importantly, they can be leveraged for a greater good. Like transformation *and* continuity, both poles, or points of view, are needed for sustained organizational success.

The answer to "Should we be transforming or building on the best from our past and present?" is "Yes." Find ways to get people's energy for each pole, or point of view, working together and you create a virtuous cycle of energy working for the transformation effort in your organization.

Truth 2: If you stop treating transformation work as a problem to solve, you will be more successful by starting to leverage the energy of the transformation *and* continuity polarity.

Once you do, you can tap this polarity by designing an effort that leverages the benefits of transformation (B) *and* continuity (D) and minimizes the costs of

over-focusing on either pole (C and A). *Neither transformation nor continuity is sustainable without the other over time.* Intentionally leverage both and you increase performance and gain a competitive advantage over any organization that sees one pole or the other as a solution to a problem. A polarity lens supplements a traditional "gap analysis" approach of moving from Point A to Point B by including wisdom from the entire polarity map in your planning and implementation for the future.

There are many other polarities baked into the work of transformation. Do you struggle with the challenges of delivering short-term results and investing in long-term development at the same time? How do you engage people in creating their own future while ensuring there is clear direction that provides the parameters within which they can work? Do you pay more attention to setting the right strategy or making sure you have smart tactics? Over-focus on any one of these choices to the relative exclusion of the other too long and you'll undermine your success.

Truth 3: Leverage the benefits of both poles over time and you'll enjoy a continuous supply of organizational energy working for you and what you're trying to achieve.

When you're leveraging polarities well, the game changes. Your biggest troublemakers become critical resources. Think of it this way: they're paying attention to something you're not—something you need to pay attention to in order to succeed. Majorities don't rule when it comes to leveraging polarities. The collective wisdom of all stakeholders is needed. A polarity lens builds on and supplements:

- Problem solving and
- Gap analysis and
- Positive thinking and
- Event-based interventions

THE RICH HISTORY AND EXCITING FUTURE OF POLARITIES

The Ancient Wisdom in Polarities

There has been an interest in the phenomenon of interdependency for a long time. The clearest focus has been on interdependent pairs. It shows up earliest within faith communities. For example, within the more-than-five-thousand-year-old

Hindu tradition, there is the God, Ardha Nari, who is half masculine and half feminine. Both are seen as essential. Hinduism acknowledges the difference and the interdependence of the two aspects of Ardha Nari.

Truth 4: The fewer people holding a pole or the less power they have in the organization, the more you need to listen to what they have to say.

Another example earlier is the double message about God within the four-thousand-year-old Jewish tradition: on the one hand, Yahweh holds us accountable for our actions, defined as justice. On the other hand, Yahweh is a source of unconditional love, defined as mercy (see Figure 10.2 below). Well, which is it? Justice *or* mercy? The answer is Yes. Both are essential and they need each other.

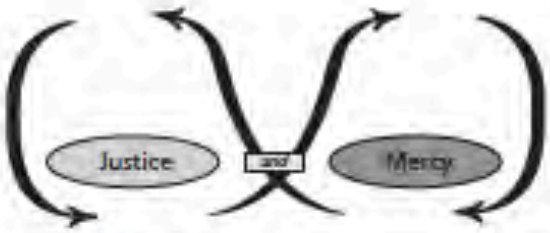


Figure 10.2. Polarity of Beliefs

If we look at the 2,500-year-old tradition of Taoism, Yin and Yang *are two interdependent energies making one integrated energy system.* The message from Taoism is clear: we need both. Life comes from and is enhanced by combining the two.

Truth 5: Polarities are not new in your life. Polarities have been a source of curiosity, fascination, and a foundation for wisdom for thousands of years. Polarity energy is at play within this ancient wisdom.

Within Buddhism, justice and mercy show up as "an all loving God" *and* Karma.

Within the two-thousand-year-old Christian tradition, there is a reaffirmation of justice *and* mercy. It is often called law *and* grace. The wisdom continues. Within the 1,500-year-old tradition of Islam, the polarity of justice *and* mercy is again reaffirmed as a central belief. This fits with the overlapping roots for Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.

Polarities Have Been "Re-Discovered" Within Business

In the last fifty years, business has been paying more and more attention to "and" thinking as a necessary addition to "or" thinking. In the literature it goes by various names, such as paradox, dilemma, or tensions. The proposed solutions range from buzzwords like resilience, agility, mindfulness, and the like, each an outcome of engaging in polarity thinking. Business is paying attention because it is clear that polarity thinking provides a competitive advantage. There are nineteen books in the appendix that support one or both of two messages:

1. The language might be paradox, dilemma, tensions, or the genius of the "and," but we are all talking about the same thing: interdependent pairs in which the polarity energy system is at play.
2. Polarities are very predictable. They behave the same way every time, all the time. Using a polarity map makes it easy to translate the above truths into practical actions that will make a difference in your transformation work. Here are the key elements of a polarity map.

The Polarity Map: Anatomy of a Wisdom Organizer for Transformation Work

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Truth 6: Learning to see and leverage polarities can be useful in business and in our lives.

Some see a polarity map as another of the many 2-by-2 matrixes found in articles and books on creating effective organizations. It's that and much more. A SWOT analysis, one of the most popular of these matrices, is a "snapshot" of current conditions in an organization, an accurate picture *at a particular point in time*. Since polarity maps include how an organization oscillates between poles,

they capture that same picture, but as one frame within the larger movie of an organization's ongoing life *over time*.

Greater Purpose Statement. Also known as the "GPS" (coined by John Scherer), the greater purpose statement acts as a North Star for your polarity work (see Figure 10.3). The GPS answers the question of why to bother intentionally leveraging a particular polarity. The first answer is "to get the upsides of both poles." What is the benefit of getting the upsides of both poles? Something valued by both those who prefer the left pole and those who prefer the right pole—a greater purpose both sides can agree to. The GPS ensures an agreement without concessions. Instead of discovering common ground as an intersection of different groups' interests, the polarity map creates a larger common ground that includes views from all key stakeholders. The more those favoring each pole "win" by holding their ground, the more everyone "wins" by the map (and its upside benefits) becoming larger. In the example in Figure 10.4, the greater purpose statement

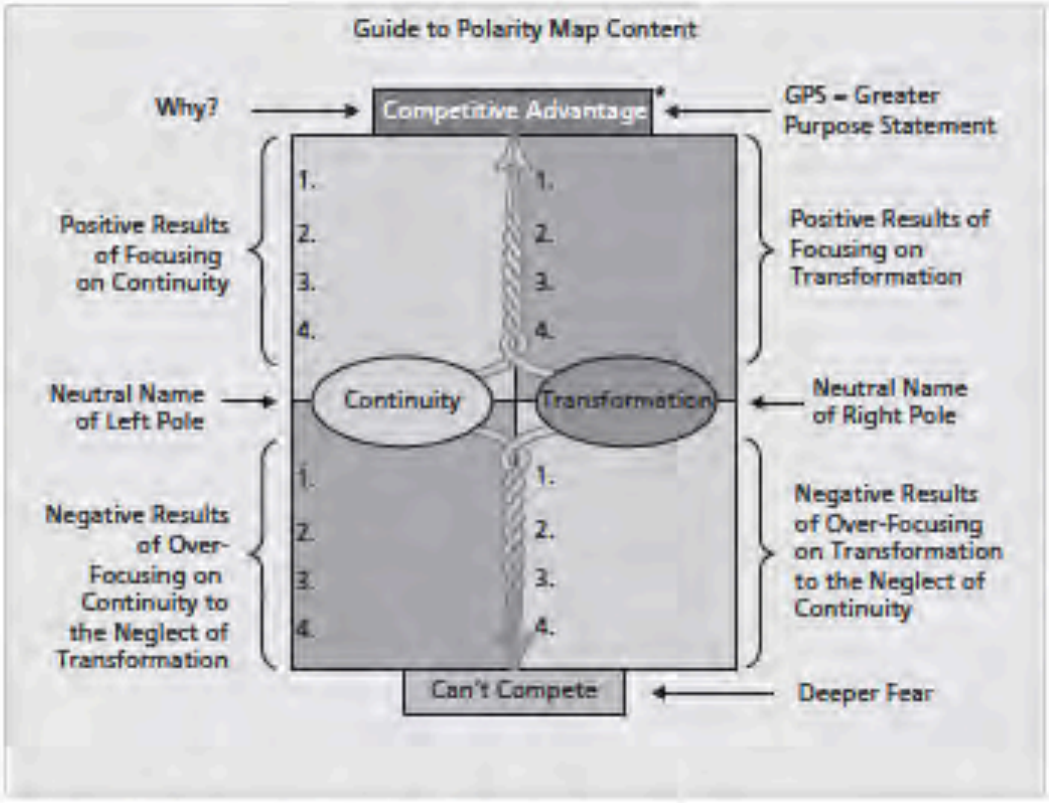


Figure 10.3. Guide to Polarity Map Content

Action Steps

How will we gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on this left pole? What? Who? By When? Measures?

A. Set up project team meetings with the purpose of tracking successes and failures against our company values

B. Include in a senior leadership team meeting an analysis section on our past strategy and its effectiveness

C. Decide whether to launch a business process redesign effort across the company

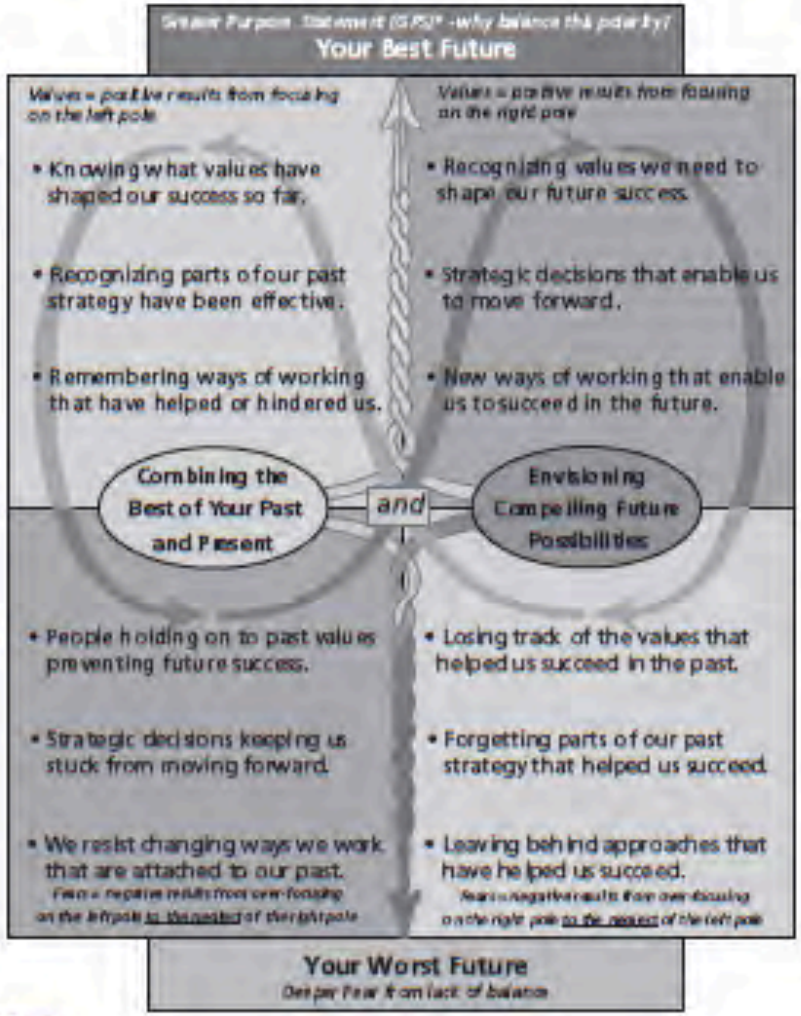
Early Warnings***

Measurable indicators (things you can count) that will let you know that you are getting into the downside of this left pole.

A. Project teams find an increasing number of examples of when our company values got in the way of their success

B. No increase in market share or sales

C. Decreased innovations identified at our annual management conference



Action Steps

How will we gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on this right pole? What? Who? By When? Measures?

A. Senior leadership and project teams all track their future work against our existing company values

B. Include questions on how people feel about the new strategy in our upcoming climate survey

C. Decide whether to launch a business process redesign effort across the company

Early Warnings

Measurable indicators (things you can count) that will let you know that you are getting into the downside of this right pole.

A. People are not able to name all of our values in the climate survey

B. Increased complaints from supervisory level and below that we have "lost our way"

C. Decreased performance against our overall key success indicators for the business

Figure 10.4. Polarity Map

providing direction and inviting participation polarity is to arrive at smart decisions and more commitment in the organization.

Truth 7: Polarities are entirely predictable. They behave the same way every time, all the time.

Deeper Fear. Another answer to the question, "Why leverage this polarity well?" is to avoid the downsides of both poles. What is a deeper fear to avoid under both downsides? This is the negative opposite of the "greater purpose statement." For example, the negative opposite of the GPS "smart decisions and more commitment" could be "stupid decisions and less commitment." This is the deeper consequence from either downside of the providing direction and inviting participation polarity.

Two Poles. Poles in a map must be either positive or neutral in how they are worded. You can test whether you've passed this test by asking, "Would people who hold either pole be proud to be associated with the word you have chosen for their pole?" For example, if you "hung out" more on the left pole in the map in Figure 10.4, would you resonate more with the term "providing direction" or "controlling others"? If you preferred the left pole, you'd likely opt for "providing direction" since it is more neutral or even positive when compared to "controlling others." If you're not sure whether you have a neutral term, check with some key stakeholders who prefer that pole. They'll set you straight right away!

Truth 8: Sustainably high performing organizations can transform well, in part because they have created systems and processes that help them leverage some polarities well.

Two Upside Quadrants. Items in the two upside quadrants of a polarity map answer the question, "What are the positive results we can expect to achieve by focusing on each pole?" It's important to have a broad cross-section of key stakeholders who have input on these quadrants that can impact and could be impacted by how well a polarity is leveraged in your transformation work. In our example

polarity, good direction leads to aligned leaders around a common vision. Solid participation gains you easy ways for people to contribute to creating this vision.

Two Downside Quadrants. You capture the negative results of over-focusing on a pole in each of the two downside quadrants. For example, over-focusing on "direction" to the relative exclusion of "participation" will lead to it being hard for people to challenge the vision, leaders ignoring new ideas to achieve the vision, or even a lack of ideas in the first place. Over-focusing on participation creates its own problems. You may have so much participation that it's difficult to find alignment on a vision, disagreements about what needs to change to achieve the vision, or debates about what should stay the same to achieve the vision.

Action Steps. Action steps are real, achievable actions you are already taking or could begin taking that will help you gain or maintain the upsides of each pole. *When leveraging polarities, these "dual action steps" help you pay attention to both poles.* Having leaders clearly stating the vision for the rest of the organization is a sure way to create alignment in that team. Using an annual conference as the platform for others in the organization to get their oars in the water on this important image of the future is sure to leverage the benefits of the participation pole.

Truth 9: Highly effective transformational leaders are effective, in part, because their experience, intuition, and developed wisdom have led to them leveraging some polarities well.

Early Warnings. Early warnings help you avoid being caught in the downside of either pole. *They are measurable indicators that you are starting to experience the downsides of a pole.* It's easiest when you identify early warnings that you can count, those that may be increasing or decreasing over time. Sometimes it's helpful to think of who might know you are beginning to experience the downsides of a particular pole. People who favor the opposite pole are most likely the first ones to notice an over-focus on their less preferred pole. Complaints at lower levels that the organization has become a "my way or the highway" operation is an early warning of over-focusing on the "direction" pole. An increase in people working at cross-purposes despite believing they are acting in line with the vision may be an early indicator that there is an over-focus on participation to the relative exclusion of direction—not enough alignment to ensure that people are able to collaborate well in working together.

NAVIGATING YOUR WAY THROUGH KEY POLARITIES

There are some additional polarities to pay attention to in transformation work in addition to transformation *and* continuity.

- Company Interests *and* Employee Interests
- Conditional Respect *and* Unconditional Respect
- Logic *and* Emotion
- Short Term *and* Long Term
- Past/Present *and* Present/Future
- Participative Decisions *and* Directive Decisions
- Event *and* Process

We describe four of these in detail below.

The Organization's Interests and Individual Employee Interests

A common question asked during transformation efforts is "*What's in it for me?*" People want to see how a change will affect them. What will be required from them in the future? Will they be capable of fulfilling these needs? From a polarity point of view this is a predictable question. Leaders and other change agents have spent time already thinking through "what's in it" for the organization. However, an over-focus on what's in it for the organization can create resistance from individuals. *These are questions that are best answered together with an appreciation for how answers to one impact the other.*

For instance, a major insurance company was seeking greater efficiency across the board. They decided on a top-down strategy and to push the changes from headquarters for the betterment of the organization. While senior members of the organization did their best to support the transformation efforts, they were quickly made the enemies of the employees as they implemented increasingly unpopular decisions. They lost their role clarity and credibility and became overridden with guilt. As a consequence, during a major transition that required a handoff of vital data between new employees and "elders" of the corporation, there was a mass mutiny, resulting in withholding of information, brain drain, and ill will. This approach to change, without due attention to positive contributions of the past, set the organization back years in efficiencies. Too much focus on the new (transformation) and not enough on "how things have been done around here" (continuity) is a recipe for falling short of your full potential.

An Interesting Idea: In creating your transformation plans, put this "organizational interests" and "individual interests" polarity on a map and invite key stakeholders to work together in completing the map. They'll gain greater insight into each other's needs while at the same time gaining a deeper appreciation of the challenges and issues facing the larger organization.

Truth 10: The more complex the issue, the more stakeholders involved, and the easier your life will be by publicly mapping the poles present.

Conditional Respect and Unconditional Respect

Transformation efforts mean change for everyone in an organization. People earn respect in organizations based on performance and what they contribute to the greater good. Promotions, pay raises, and career development opportunities are tied to this type of "conditional respect." People also deserve "unconditional respect" for being members of the organization, regardless of their performance or contribution. *During times of transformation when people feel most vulnerable is when they most need to experience unconditional respect.*

For instance, in a large group meeting facilitated by one of the authors, two hours were spent talking about whether the leadership team would say hello in the hallways to employees. Given the challenges facing the business, a wave and brief greeting in the hallway seemed to be the least of their worries. Seen through a polarity lens, this seemingly inconsequential sticking point takes on new meaning. An over-focus on conditional respect had put this leadership team in trouble. Leverage both of these poles during transformation work, and you'll stack the odds in your favor of creating sustained success.

An Interesting Idea: Create a list of action steps for each pole of this conditional respect and unconditional respect polarity as part of your transformation effort. In what ways will people need to earn the respect they gain through performance on the transformation? Are there targets for timing, scope of needed changes, or quality of deliverables? How will people be rewarded for achieving these targets? On the other pole, what can people count on from the organization regardless of their performance? How will we listen to people so they are heard and feel heard regardless of their status in our organization?

> "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function."
>
> —F. Scott Fitzgerald

When will they receive information regarding changes that are required? What support will they receive as they go about the business of transforming their work and how they do it? Make this map a public conversation. Bring it out during meetings related to the transformation and mark it up with new ideas generated during these conversations.

Logic *and* Emotion

There are important contributions that both logic and emotion play in a transformation effort. Proposed changes need to make sense given the organization's current situation, environment, and other realities. A good bit of time and energy is typically devoted to get the "case for change" clear. An equal amount of time needs to be devoted to the emotional impact of the transformation, the other pole of this polarity. For people involved in transformation work this is an important element of their experience—how they feel about the transformation and what it means for them at a very personal level. *Mapping polarities at its essence is a language and values clarification process.* The upsides of a polarity map describe the values people associate with each pole—what they care about, what they are vested in. The downsides are defined as fears that people have about over-focusing on each pole. This language in polarity thinking is intentional. Effective transformation cares for both the logical and emotional aspects of change. In one case, a tribal government that ran a successful casino operation found cause to reallocate significant resources away from government services to prop up a new hotel on the property. According to Indian cultural tradition, they met regularly in large group "talk back" sessions and followed a formula of an emotionally intelligent organization: (1) consider who will be affected by the changes; (2) inquire about the needs of those affected; (3) communicate realities, empathy, and intention to include; and (4) engage those affected in their own solution.

An Interesting Idea: Pull together a group of interested and affected parties to your transformation work. Even in large group meetings of several thousand there are others in the organization who are not in the room when this work is being done. Find those people and invite them into a conversation about the transformation effort. Don't worry about a map this time. Just start a dialogue

about what value there is for people about focusing on getting the logic right in the transformation effort. For example, what are the benefits of making sure the rationale for the change work is solid? Now look to the downsides: What risks do you run by over-focusing on the logical part of the plans to the relative exclusion of people's emotions? Next, move to the upsides of the emotional pole. This is typically a topic not as often broached in transformation work. What are the "upsides" of paying attention to people's emotions as you work your way through your effort and what are the potential "downsides" you risk experiencing if you over-focus on emotions to the relative exclusion of logic. Having this same conversation with a series of small groups will put word out in the system that you're paying attention to both poles of this critical transformational polarity.

Short Term *and* Long Term

Transformation efforts must be based on a long-term view. A vision has to stretch the organization over time, challenging people to do what they may not have previously thought possible. That's the nature of transformational work. Yet there is a common refrain during major change efforts to put "quick wins" on the scoreboard. The bigger the transformation the more quick wins you need to count among your early victories. That's the nature of polarity work. As much as you focus on the long term, you need to focus on the short term. Intuitively we know we need to focus on both to succeed. *Progress in the short term builds momentum for the longer haul. Holding the long-term vision amidst the daily struggles and hassles of transformation work helps people stay aligned and focused on the prize.*

For instance, two mining companies merging their organizations required a dual focus on the short and long term. They set up "synergy capture" teams to achieve and track improved returns on investment linked to the merger—returns that began to accumulate starting on Day 1 of the new organization's existence. There were cost savings to be gained through intercompany sales of raw materials, combined ERP system implementations, and a whole host of other new ways of doing business. At the same time, leaders of both organizations focused on creating a shared culture and future vision that would become the solid foundation of the new organization for years to come. The merger would be seen as a failure by investors if the short-term wins were not achieved. Without a long-term view that included creating the vision, values, and culture of the new organization, short-term wins would be all they had to show for their efforts.

Truth 11: Organizations that swing between transformation efforts such as centralizing and decentralizing every few years have missed the mark when it comes to polarities. They are just shifting from pole to pole without leveraging the energy between them.

An Interesting Idea: Although we know it's important to pay attention to the short term and long term in transformation efforts, how do we know when we have over-focused on one to the relative exclusion of the other? That's where the polarity map's early warnings can add value. Think of them as an insurance policy protecting you against the downsides of each pole. Might you be too focused on the long term? If so, one early warning might be people beginning to complain about the transformation effort being too much work with too little reward. Could you be running the risk of being too preoccupied with short-term wins? In that case you'll soon hear people talking about how all the work they are doing isn't worth it. They've lost sight of the larger goals of your transformation work. Make a list of things you would hear, see, or feel yourself if your effort veered too far toward the short term or long term. Who would notice this over-focusing first? What would they be saying that would give you a clue that trouble could be around the corner? You have metrics to track progress in your effort. Create some to measure whether you're dipping into the downsides of this critical transformation polarity. Make it the norm in the organization to use the words: "Do you think we are getting into the downside of this pole and how do we self-correct without losing the benefits of this pole?"

Truth 12: Like gravity, polarities act on you whether you believe in them or not.

How Polarity Thinking Can Supplement Your Transformation Work

You can use polarity thinking to supplement any transformation work you do, including the approaches described throughout this book. *It is not a replacement for ways you work now. It is an addition to them.*

Figure 10.5 shows a process that will enable you to leverage polarity energy to further enhance all transformation work you do, whether it revolves around

Figure 10.5. "Both/And" Point of View = Competitive Advantage

cross-cultural issues, mergers, interdepartmental conflict or any number of other areas where major changes are needed. Supplementing your transformation efforts with polarity work will improve what you achieve, how fast you accomplish it, and how long you sustain these gains over time:

Achievability. Ensure people are paying attention to poles they naturally favor and you will become more effective in bringing about significant change. Think of it this way: if you're dealing with polarities (and all shifts "from" Point A "to" Point B have embedded polarities), the conversation changes. Instead of pitting people against each other who have different positions on a particular issue, you'll be encouraging each of them to hold their "poles" and include the other pole. In doing so, they will best leverage the energy in both poles.

Speed. Resistance typically acts as a friction coefficient in transformation work. The higher the resistance, the slower goes your effort. Polarity thinking adopts a different mindset when it comes to resistance. *Instead of seeing it as something to be overcome, moved around or through, polarity thinking sees the wisdom in resistance.*

work for all stakeholders (see Figure 10.6 below). *There is no such thing as "word-smithing" when it comes to polarity maps. The words count—all of them.* Take the time to make sure you have all key stakeholders with you as you develop a map and you'll be sure to have them with you when it comes time to leverage it.

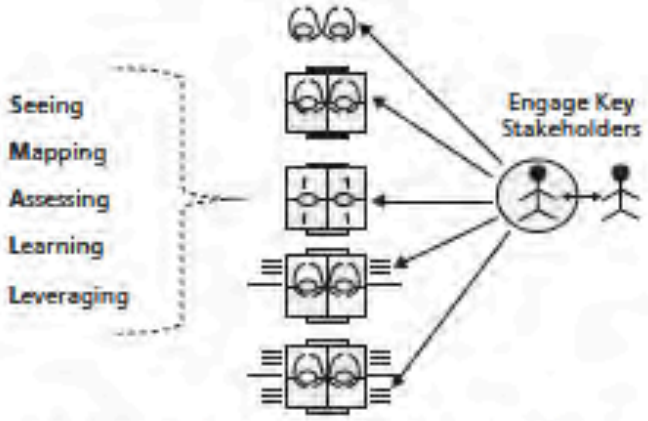


Figure 10.6. Five-Step Polarity Approach to Continuity and Transformation

Seeing

As you begin working with polarity energy you'll want to focus on those polarities that will have the greatest positive impact in your transformation work (see Figure 10.7).

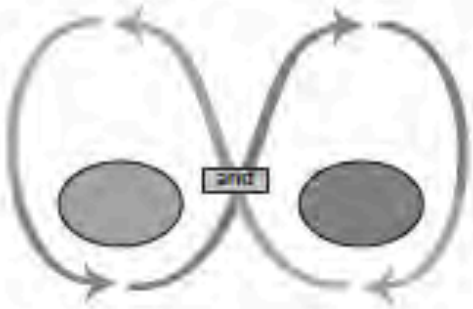


Figure 10.7. Seeing

Follow the energy in your transformation work and you'll find polarities you can leverage. Are some people excited about a new opportunity or others concerned this same path might lead down a dead end? These are all signs of underlying polarities. Invite your key stakeholders into these dialogues with you. They'll

Truth 13: If you want to guarantee the sustainability of your transformation work, tie it to both poles of a polarity.

Transformation work becomes emotional because it taps into people's values and fears. We want to hold onto what we value and avoid what we fear. When caught in an "either/or" mindset there can be only winners and losers, values cared for and fears realized. With a "both/and" mindset, all values or upsides can be leveraged and all fears or downsides minimized. A polarity-based perspective enables everyone to see the whole picture (see Figure 10.5). Seeing through a polarity lens, resistance becomes something to welcome, listen to, understand, and incorporate into the transformation work you are doing. *Make resistance your friend instead of foe and you'll see your transformation efforts pick up pace.*

> "I believe that the central leadership attribute is the ability to manage polarity."
>
> —Peter Koestenbaum

Sustainability. Polarities are indestructible. They have been part of organizations' earliest makeup and continue to exert their influence over decisions and actions taken today. If you want to guarantee the sustainability of your transformation work, tie it to both poles of a polarity.

LEVERAGING THE ENERGY IN ALL POLARITIES: THE FIVE-STEP POLARITY APPROACH TO CONTINUITY AND TRANSFORMATION

The five-step approach is aimed squarely at helping you achieve your organization's mission. To achieve your organization's mission, you might need to improve your bottom line, implement your strategic plan, ensure profitable growth, or be a place where people love to work. Leveraging polarities well will make you more effective in achieving each of these outcomes. Think of the five-step process as "going small to get it all."

Including Key Stakeholders

All stakeholders impacted by or who can impact a polarity need to be included in identifying, creating and leveraging it. The map—and each word in it—need to

likely add items to the map that had not occurred to you, and engaging them early will help make sure they are on your side when it comes time for implementation.

An Interesting Idea: See whether you can frame the changes needed in a "From _____ To _____" statement. This statement might be from a downside of one pole to the upside of another, such as "We keep doing what we've always done—whether it's worked or not (see Figure 10.8).

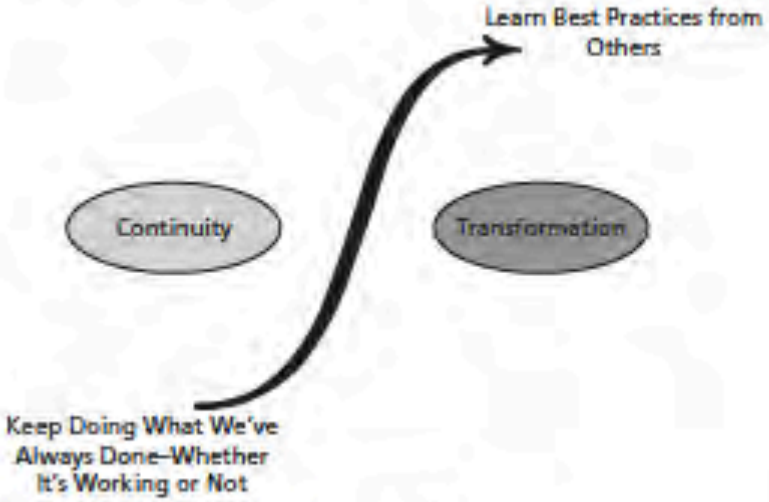


Figure 10.8. A Gap Analysis Approach

If your "From → To" Statement has two neutral or positive terms like "continuity" and "transformation" you've likely identified a polarity from pole to pole (see Figure 10.9).

Figure 10.9. Moving from Pole to Pole

Mapping

Once you have identified the highest leverage polarities that will impact your transformation efforts, it's time to "map it" by filling in all four quadrants of the polarity map and identifying your greater purpose statement and deeper fear (see Figure 10.10).

Begin by entering content into the two "upsides" of the map. We begin with the upsides because they speak to what key stakeholders value. Starting with this

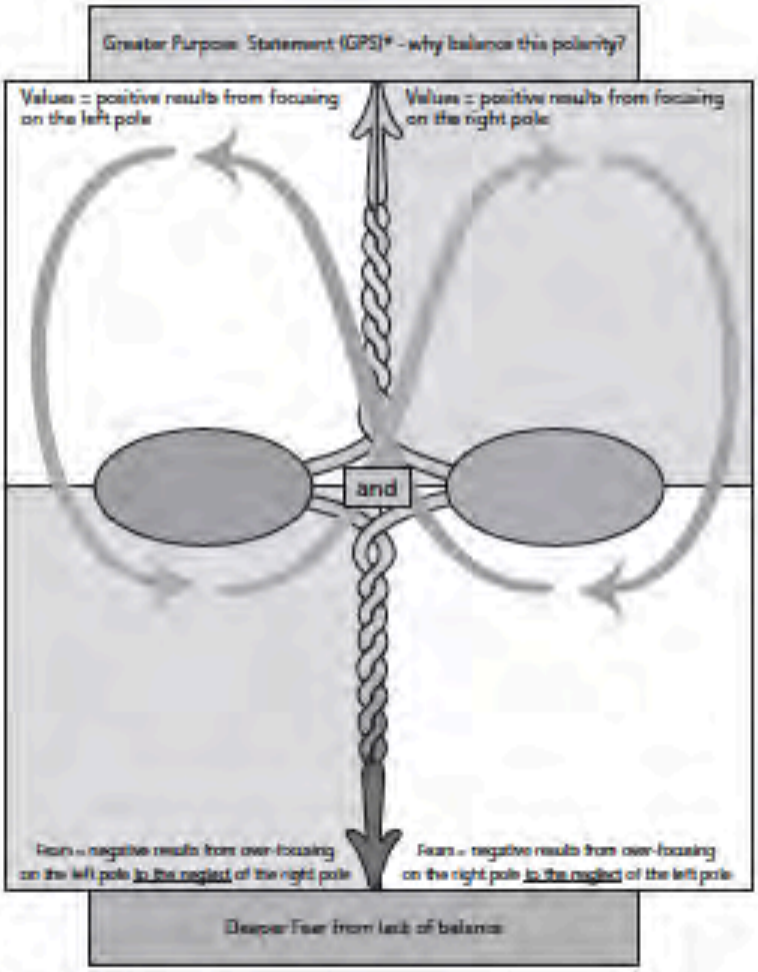


Figure 10.10. Mapping

positive energy of what is wanted helps affirm each stakeholders' desires. After capturing the benefits of leveraging the polarity well, shift to completing the "downsides" or costs of over-focusing on each pole to the relative exclusion of the other. *It's harder for people to articulate the values of their less preferred poles and fears others may have of over-focusing on their preferred poles.* That's when it's most important to ensure everyone is listening well, especially to those who bring a different point of view to the table. You also need to complete your "GPS" and deeper fear during your mapping. Sometimes it is easiest to identify these early in the process as a way to make sure everyone is on the same page. In some cases, you may want to hold off on identifying these until you have the information from the quadrants to inform your thinking.

Assessing Present Realities

Assessing a polarity tells you how well you are leveraging the energy in it. You can do a quick assessment of any polarity map (see Figure 10.11). Use the map on the right as a guide. Mark an "X" along the line through the center of each pole for each of the four quadrants that best gauges to what extent you have seen or experienced the "upsides" and "downsides" contained in a map over some period of time—say the last few weeks or months. Then connect the X's with an infinity loop to see how well you are leveraging this polarity you have identified as critical to your transformation effort's success. Space at the top of the infinity loops represents opportunities to gain more of the upsides on any map. The further your infinity loop reaches to the bottom of the map, the more you're experiencing the downsides of over-focusing on either or both poles of your polarity. For a more comprehensive assessment of polarities, we've developed the polarity assessment

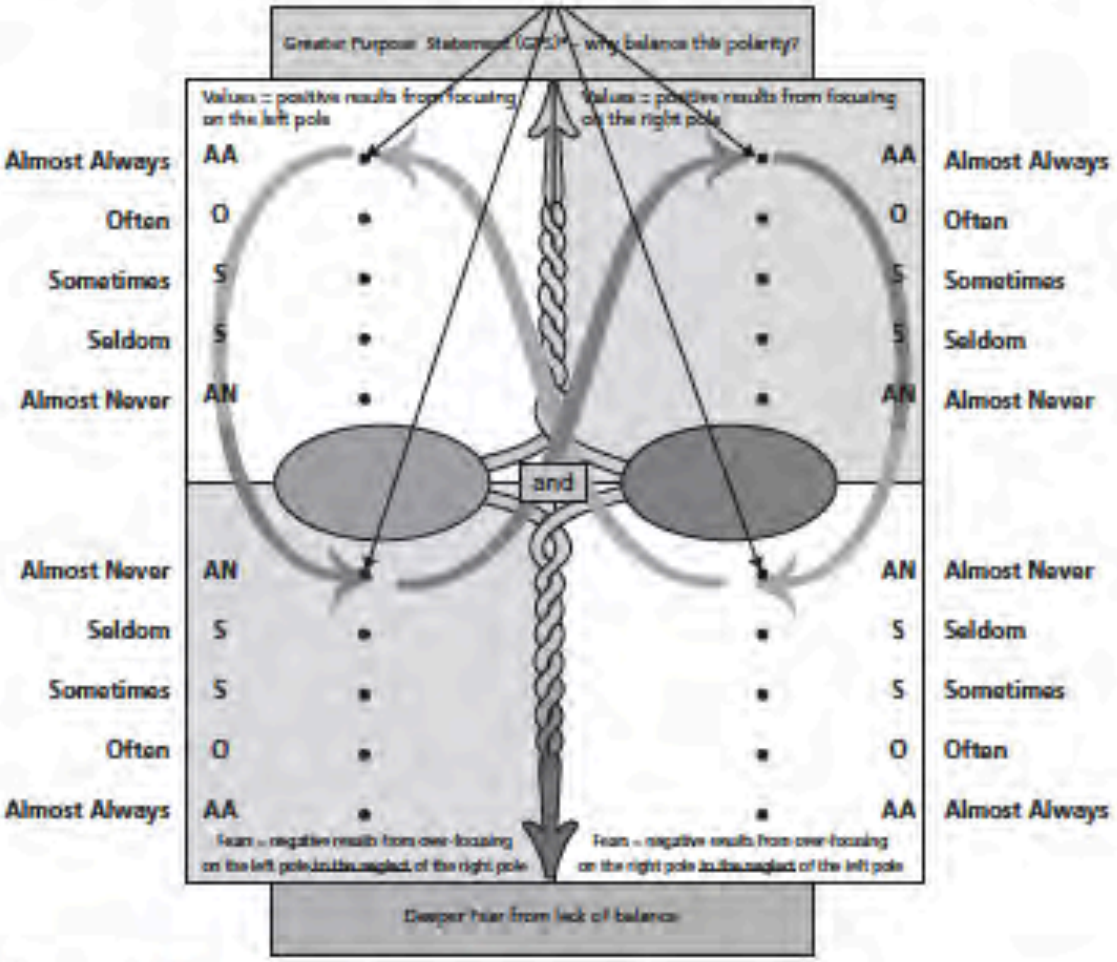


Figure 10.11. Assess Present Realities

for continuity and transformation (PACT). More information on the PACT can be found at the end of this chapter.

Learning

Reviewing and learning from your assessment results is another important step of the PACT. See what evidence in your organization supports the assessment scores you received. How does how well you are leveraging a particular polarity show up in your everyday business? By using our online assessment you can learn item by item how well you are making the energy in this polarity work for your organization (Figure 10.11).

Leveraging: Taking Action Steps

Action steps will help you gain and maintain the upside benefits of your critical transformation polarities (see Figure 10.12). As with any action planning, the more specific and tangible your actions, the more likely they will be implemented well. In looking at polarities that will influence your entire transformation effort you will often find that an action step can be as small as a to-do on one person's list or a major project requiring significant organizational resources. The key is to find the right action steps and to follow through on them successfully.

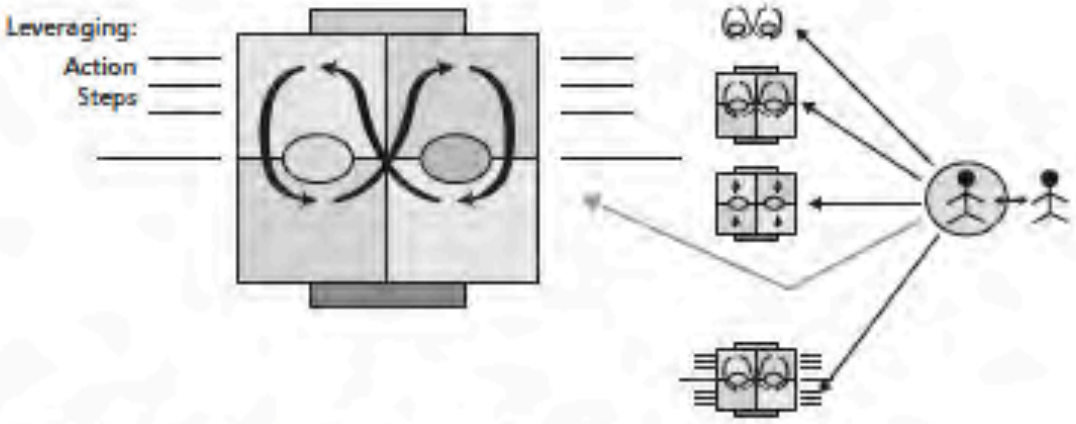


Figure 10.12. Leveraging: Action Steps

Leveraging: Paying Attention to Early Warnings

It's most important with early warnings that they be early (see Figure 10.13). *They should be things that you can count, whether you're counting something that you can*

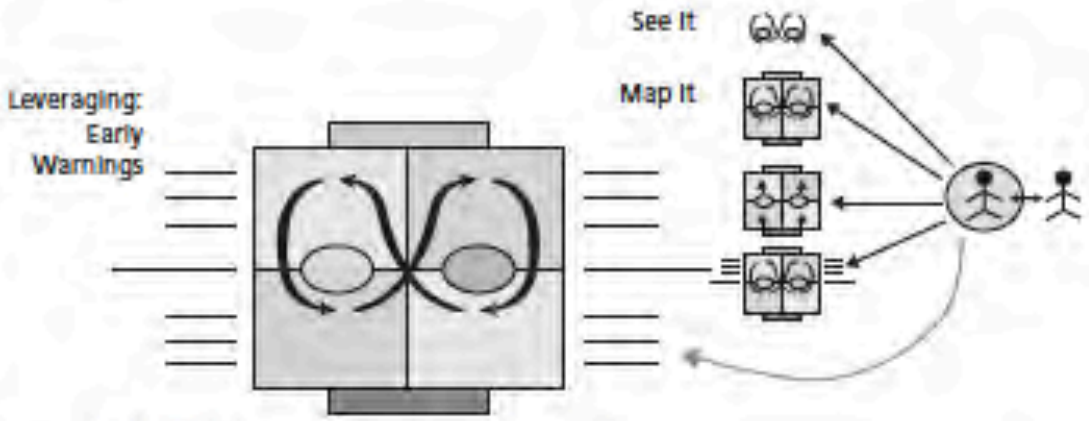


Figure 10.13. Leveraging: Early Warnings

hear, see, or feel. Identify these well and you'll quickly course correct as you begin to experience the costs or downsides of any polarity.

GETTING UNSTUCK: A FIVE-STEP APPROACH TO ACCELERATING TRANSFORMATION WORK

Many transformation efforts get stuck even before they really begin, paradoxically because of the deep commitment and passion of those who are leading them. How does this happen? Here's the scenario. Leaders who understand how important their visible support is to the cause of creating transformational change in their organizations use a gap analysis approach. The first step in this process is to create a "burning platform," a clear and convincing picture of how bad things are right now.

Step 2 is to paint a compelling picture of a possible future—a vision of how things can be different and better after the lion's share of the transformation work is done. Then all that is left is to create a strategy to go from Point A to Point B. From a polarity thinking point of view, these are three essential pieces of the transformation puzzle. However, if only following these steps you run the risk of knocking your head against the wall featured in Figure 10.14 because you are ignoring very real values and fears that people involved in your transformation effort share. But, because polarity work is based on a paradoxical view of the world, what seems intuitively obvious can often end up with you creating your own resistance.

In the getting unstuck approach (Figure 10.14), instead of starting the transformation conversation with the burning platform, begin by exploring what is good and right about the current organization and how it operates. Then the wall

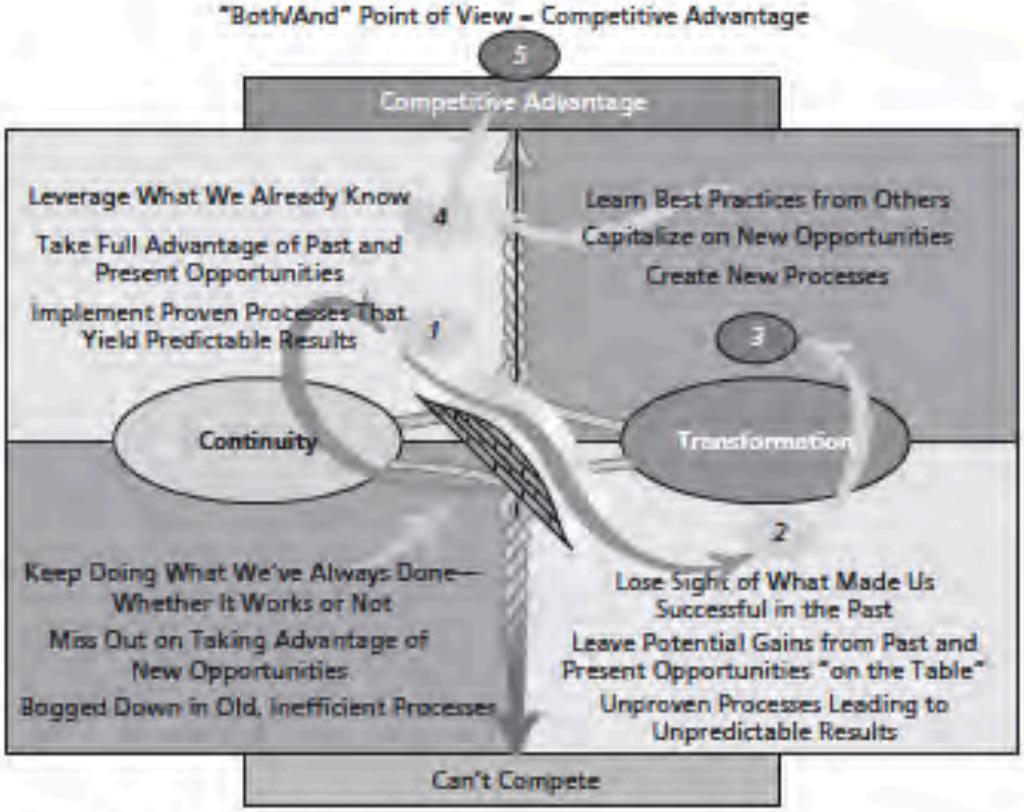


Figure 10.14. Getting Unstuck

of resistance often found by following a gap analysis strategy becomes a bridge between people's pride in aspects of the current organization and their fears about the future after the planned transformation has taken hold. Typically, this is taboo land in organizations. People who find fault with an organization's vision are known by a number of names, including not team players, resisters, troublemakers, and folks who just plain won't get on board. From a polarity perspective we see there is wisdom in their resistance. Think of their cautions as risk mitigators—they are paying attention to what might go wrong when everyone is excited about what's going to go right in your transformation effort.

Once you move through Steps 1 and 2 of the process you can move to Step 3, inviting others to help in crafting a vision for the future. Once they have been heard and their values and fears respected, they will be much more likely to join in creating a common and compelling future vision.

Step 4 is critical. It's a revisit of what is right and good about the current organization. Skipping this step makes it easy for others to see your listening to them

as manipulative or just paying lip service to gain their support before you go out and do what you had been planning all along.

The fifth and final step is to return to your greatest purpose statement to remind all key stakeholders of the common prize you all care about achieving.

POLARITY THINKING AND TRANSFORMATION: AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS COME

Transformation work has never been more needed in our organizations, nations, and planet as it is now. Rapid technology advances for organizations, the battles for democracy in many nations, the ripple effects in international financial markets from national fiscal policies, and the continued threats facing the planet from global warming all require transformational change. *A polarity approach to these issues means not only finding a place for differing views to be heard but also each party realizing how essential others are to success in the long term.* There are two truths in every polarity; both are accurate and neither is complete. The "both/and" mindset is a needed supplement to the "either/or" approach that is essential to effective problem solving.

Truth 14: Focusing on one pole of a polarity alone is an unsustainable trap. Both poles of a polarity, when leveraged together, are an indestructible resource.

Moving the needle just a little with the scope and scale of these needed changes won't be enough to make the needed differences. Polarity thinking supplements all transformation work no matter your model, practices, or situation. It makes your goals more achievable, the pace of change faster, and your gains more sustainable. Supplement your transformation work with a polarity thinking lens and make your best contribution for the people in your organization, your clients, and the world in which we live.

Truth 15: Polarities are a force in nature. They are indestructible. Any polarity that you identify will be a solid base on which to build a sustainable transformation effort and sustainable organization.