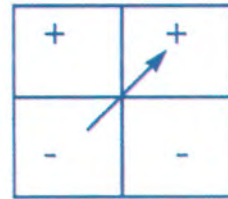


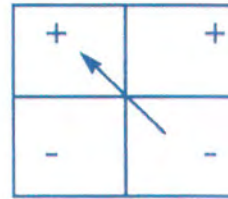
the power of and



Dr. Poonam Nijhawan,
 doctorate in industrial psychology, is the founder of
 Coretech—the skills company. Coretech aims at
 imparting skill sets to enable extraordinary perform-
 ance. Poonam has a passion for causing a difference
 in corporate and personal life

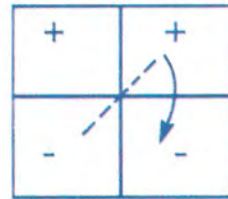


A

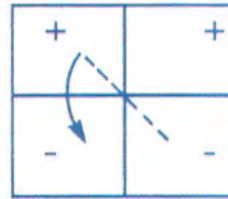


B

This push creates the movement from the downside of one pole to the upside of the other pole, either "A" or "B" below, which is Step 1 in the Polarity Two-Step, ACROSS AND UP:



A

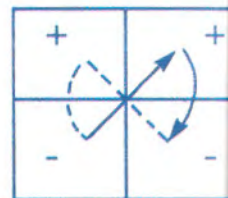


B

With time, a focus on one upper quadrant as a "solution," and the relative lack of attention to the original pole, the movement continues to the downside of that pole, either "A" or "B" below, which is Step 2, DOWN:



A



B

THEN REPEAT = Step 1 and 2 are repeated as the system moves through all four quadrants, making the pattern of an infinity loop:

Organizational contradictions swing from do we promote cohesive units or encourage individual initiative, participatory management to inculcate the culture of empowerment or centralized approach to trace accountability, do we need to be extraverted to be responsive to the customer or introverted to protect our core ideologies, promote creative crusaders or tradition bearing structure protectors. Do we need to decide with our head or is it the heart, do I need to be disciplined or flexible...inhale or exhale!!!

The organizational brain goes dizzy trying to figure out the answers that range from, almost confident 'surely lets focus on one' to a diplomatic/evasive 'lets play it by the ear...we will cross the bridge when it comes.' or a philosophical 'some bitter truths need to be lived with.'

Seems like a problem with never ending quest for solutions - a dilemma. This is perhaps the closest definition for what Barry Johnson termed as "Polarity" - an unsolvable problem.

Would it not then be stupid to solve problems that have no solutions?

Just as it is imprudent to see inhaling and exhaling as a problem to be solved, it is thoughtless to treat personal, organizational, and international polarities as if they can be solved and not managed.

Polarities stretch the continuum with each pole vying for recognition, exerting to declare its indispensability. There is a paradoxical relationship between the poles. Though inhaling and exhaling are opposites, they are part of the same function. One cannot exist without the other. In order to gain and maintain the benefits of one pole, we must also pursue the benefits of the other. Johnson understood polarity as 'interdependent opposites' that need each other for sustained success over time.

Living with paradox is like riding a see-saw. If the movement from one end to another is synchronized, then the ride can be exhilarating. If, however, the opposite member does not understand, or wilfully upsets the pattern, we can receive a very uncomfortable or unexpected shock.

Effective management thus must provide for continuous balancing of these organizational contradictions, and working explicitly with important paradoxes is what Johnson calls Polarity Management A shift from limitation of either/or to the magnanimity of 'and'.

A coin having both sides work

Alfred North Whitehead, Logician and Philosopher must have come one full round when he said "The art of progress is to preserve order amid change and to preserve change amid order."

Recognizing polarities that need to be managed and discerning them from the problems that need to be solved is the most critical step to polarity management. Some of the key identifiers of the polarity are:

- Are there more than one set of benefits?
- Is the issue long drawn?

- Are the choices interdependent?
- Will the focus on one position compromise the over arching interest?

In hope of holding the best of both worlds, organizations reach out to encompass the benefits of both sides of the poles and, in the process of juggling to pocket all benefits, end up dropping some... and then start all over again. The famous corporate dilemma of maintaining the top line and the bottom line too; the street smart seller crunching numbers at whatever cost and the disheartened manager crying out 'who wants to have the cake that you can't eat'!

There is a never-ending shift in emphasis from one position to the other and back; polarities to manage require interdependence between these positions. It is a "both/and" difficulty. Polarities to manage do not get solved. They are ongoing and do not have a clear, end-point solution. Corporate can go blue discussing whether it works to have trendy flat structure or traditional hierarchies.

Hapless managers have spent many a sleepless nights trying to sort through some of these entangled strings that hold the secrets of a robust balance sheet.

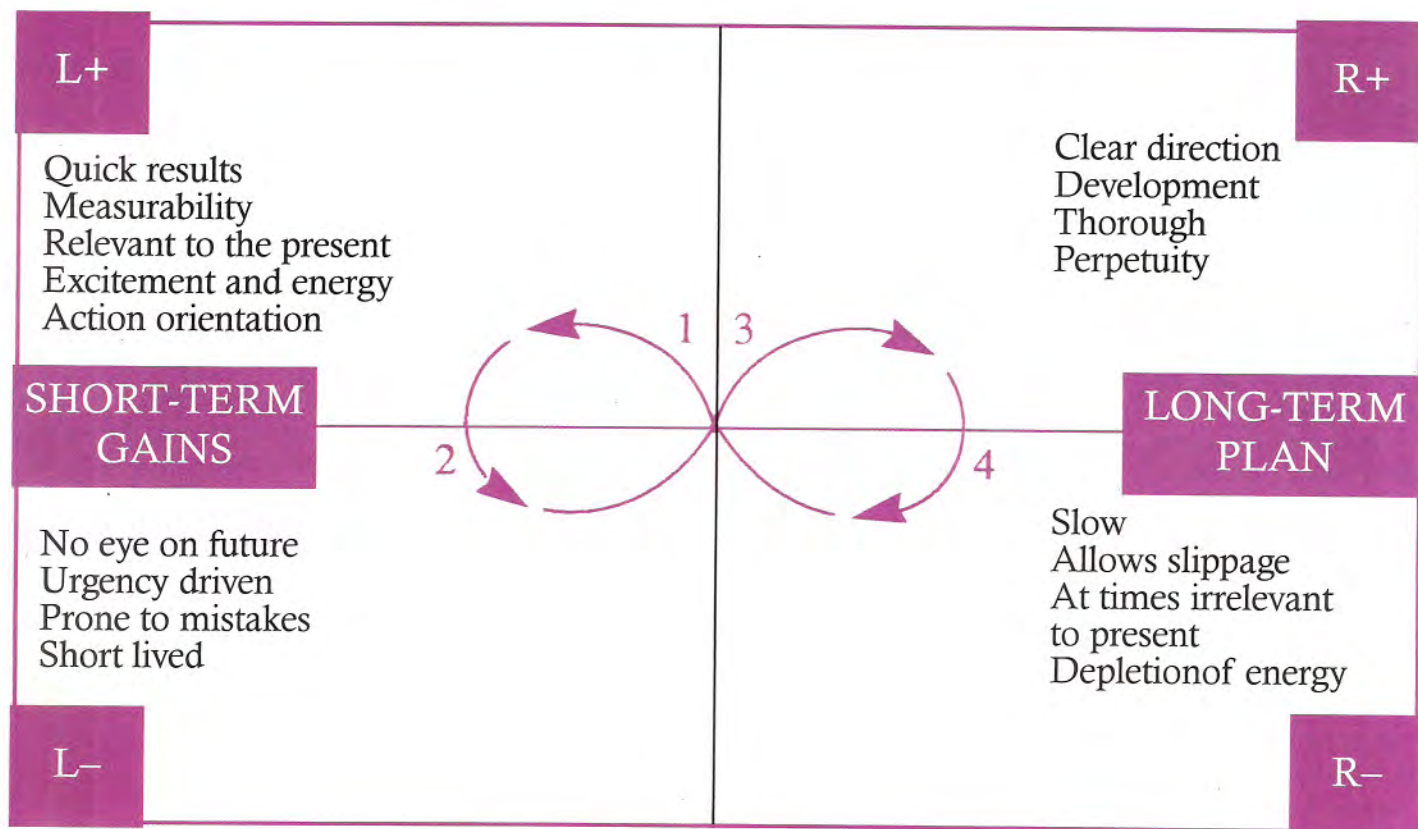
The next stage is in mapping some relevant polarities in more detail by:

- Clarifying the transcending interest and the repercussions of managing the tension.
- Defining the polarity and ascribing a neutral identity to the poles.
- Plotting the upside and downside of each pole.
- Identifying mechanisms of maximizing benefits from one pole while the other is still maintained.
- Identifying the symptom ensuing from overemphasis of one pole in order to take corrective action.

The Polarity Management Model

We can identify the elements of a dilemma by viewing them through Johnson's polarity model (see accompanying figure) explained in the 2x2 matrix where each dimension of the polarity is categorized into its highs and lows. It begins with determining the opposite perspectives or poles. In the illustrated example, the poles might be described as "short term gains" and "long term plans." In the polarity map, the upsides of each perspective/position are listed in the upper quadrants and downsides in the lower quadrants. The illustration describes the pull that organizations feel when they oscillate between the urgency of present viability and importance of thorough plans. It is a polarity because sensitivity to immediate results and wisdom of an overarching game plan are inter-reliant, and because, the dilemma - in this case, tensions between advocates for each method - are ongoing.

Listed in the lower left hand corner of Figure (L-) are the downsides of focusing on the short term gains in the workplace. These are the characteristics that lead the Change agents in the organization to describe the situation as a problem. Observing,



anticipating, or feeling these downside factors allows these agents to point out that the solution is to move to the opposite positive pole, or the upper right hand corner (R+), where all the benefits of long term plans are listed. But there are downsides to long term plans, which will be pointed out by the Defenders of the "short term gains" pole. These defenders will also point out that the answer to the downside of long term plans (R-) resides in the positive or upper left hand quadrant of the model (L+).

In a well-managed polarity, most time is spent experiencing the positive aspects of one pole or the other. When the downside of a pole is experienced, it is used as an indicator to move to the positive of the other pole. For example, people who manage the Individual and Team polarity well are able to challenge themselves and their subordinates to do their best regardless of the system. They travel between the two, guided by indicators such as lack of shared vision, or too much conformity. Focus moves through all the four quadrants in its continuous management, making a pattern of an infinity loop - a well-winged butterfly.

There are also such things as poorly managed dilemmas, beginning with complete blindness or resistance to acknowledge the presence of polarity. Consequently the organization/people get stuck primarily in one and at times, both the quadrants. In fact overstate one pole for a long time and we get the downside of both the poles and worse so end up losing the benefits of the overstated as well as the neglected pole. Have we

not heard of desperation setting in for people who are averse to risk (downside of traditionalist) and they get pushed to taking irrational risks (downside of creativity). One's worst fears are thus founded!

When a polarity is being managed poorly, there is an ineffective alliance going on between the change agents and the defenders. Both Change agents and Defenders attempt to persuade others to migrate to the opposite pole, away from the pole they describe as problematic for the organization. This can cause rifts and misunderstandings based on old win/lose habits and the inability to hold two views at once or, at the very least, to shift fluidly from one pole to the other. Gorged by the horns of dilemma - there seems to be equal power and equal validity to opposing views.

Effective management of a polarity involves focusing on the positive factors of each position, understanding the downsides and acknowledging it as a signal to shift, not allowing the negative factors to control decisions and actions, just as a figure skater wants a perfect score for both artistic impression and technical merit.

And the journey continues for a tightrope walker, balancing Word and Deed, Intention and Expression, Being and Doing... towards actualization.

Reference: Johnson Barry. Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvably Problems. HRD Press: Amherst, MA, 1996