Polarity Thinking: A Necessary Skill for Your Wicked Problems

Evelyn Clingerman, PhD, RN, CNE, FNAP
Grand Valley State University
Kirkhof College of Nursing
Objectives

- Upon completion of the presentation you will be able to:
  - Distinguish polarities from problems
  - Identify the steps needed to successfully manage polarities in your work setting.
  - Explain the process used to “See, Map, and Act” on a polarity.
“The first accountability of a leader is to know reality.”

Max De Pree
The importance of the skill of polarity thinking becomes apparent when we place it within the context of today’s realities.

Positives AND Concerns
Complex Realities of Healthcare

- Primary Care
- Care Inconsistencies
- Emergency
- Patient Safety Issues
- Multiple Hand-offs
- Operating Room
- Care Coordination Issues
- Rehabilitation
- System Inefficiencies
- Follow-up
- Acute Care
Navigating the Waters

Your Realities: Problems and Polarities
Solutions: Require New Skills & New Ways of Thinking
Life Preserver for Informatics, Healthcare & Technology Teams
Navigating Realities

We’ve seen reality through the lens of Problems, but we need to see reality with the Knowledge of Problems AND Polarities!
What is a Polarity? Can you see it?

- Interdependent (need one another to achieve a common purpose) pairs of values, beliefs, issues.
- There is energy systems between them (often seen as tension, conflict and polarization of ideas).
- Also referred to as “wicked problems“, paradoxes, or dilemmas.
The Importance of *Both* in PT
Regardless of what you see:

- Both pictures exist;
- Without one, our final picture is incomplete.
- With a polarity we have only half the information we need.
- There is great value in the “pair”. 
Polarity Thinking in Our Daily Lives

Where do Polarities Exist?

- Personal preferences
- Group dynamics
- Organizational issues
- National and global policies
Principles of Polarity

- Polarities are interdependent pairs of different, competing, or opposite values or points of view.

- Polarities are all around us and are unsolvable, indestructible and unavoidable.

- Polarities are about “both AND” thinking, rather than “either OR” thinking.

- Each side of a polarity has an upside (values) and a downside (fears).

- Over time, we can manage polarities so that we can experience the upside and the dynamic values of each pole, to achieve a higher purpose.
Differences in Thinking

- Problem Solving
- Polarity Thinking

Either / Or

and

Both / And
Problem or Polarity?

1. Is the difficulty ongoing, like breathing?
   Yes = Probably a polarity to manage
   No = Most likely a problem to solve

2. Are there two alternatives that are interdependent, meaning you can only focus on one pole for so long before you are required to focus on the other pole, like inhaling and exhaling?
   Yes = probably a polarity to manage
   No = Most likely a problem to solve

3. If we focus on one pole will we eventually undermine our greater purpose and have to redo, revise, or see a waste of Time, money, energy, and other resources.
   Yes = Probably a polarity to manage
   No = Most likely a problem to solve
### Problem or Polarity?—Quiz

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Polarity/Problem? Criteria used?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. We have to get rid of our silo mentality. Let’s break down the barriers and become an integrated team.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What can we do to move patients out of the ED faster?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How can we make faster decisions in our work teams?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. What are the best processes to prevent central line infection?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Is the correct surgical site marked?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Who determines the appropriate reimbursement for care?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Leadership Polarities

- Diplomacy
- Relationship
- Humility
- Encouragement
- Empowerment
- Flexibility
- Creativity
- Teamwork
- Mindful Decision making

- Candor
- Task
- Confidence
- Critical Analysis
- Control
- Structure
- Logic
- Individual Work
- Swift Decision making
To manage polarities, paradoxes or dilemmas.....

- Two alternatives that are interdependent,
  - meaning you can only focus on one pole for so long before you are required to focus on the other pole,
  - like inhaling *and* exhaling

- You need each (both) over time,

- They are Indestructible – no matter what, they exist

- To move from the downside of either Value, you must focus on the interdependent Value.

- The oscillation is ongoing........the natural tension between the two is unavoidable, unsolvable, indestructible, and can be tapped to raise performance to a higher level.
Common Challenges

- Embrace the Past and Innovate
- Directive Decision-making and Participative Decision-making
- Short-term Action and Long-term Planning
- My Business Unit and the Company as a Whole
- Regional and Corporate
- External Focus and Internal Focus
- Generate Ideas and Implement Ideas
- Individual Work and Teamwork
- Results and Process
- Cooperate and Assert
- Hold Information and Share Information
- Task and Relationship
Polarity Map™

- Created by Barry Johnson

- Purpose: serve as a “wisdom organizer” to visualize and leverage/manage polarities.

- Assist us in understanding a complex polarity by making the polarity more concrete and making points on the map more visible.

- Once the polarity is identified (seen), then we can Map it and then Act on the energy.
Life

Increased Oxygen

Increased Carbon Dioxide

Inhale

and

Exhale

Death

Decreased Oxygen

Decreased Carbon Dioxide

Greater Purpose Statement (GPS)™: why balance this polarity?

Values = positive results from focusing on the left pole

Values = positive results from focusing on the right pole

Fears = negative results from over-focusing on the left pole to the neglect of the right pole

Fears = negative results from over-focusing on the right pole to the neglect of the left pole

POLARITY MAP™ © 1992-2008 Polarity Management Associates, LLC / * Thanks to John Scherer, The Scherer Leadership Center / ** Thanks to De Wit & Meyer BV / *** Thanks to Todd Johnson, Arvotown Consultants
Always tension between the two sides

Inhale and Exhale

Values = positive results from focusing on the left pole
Values = positive results from focusing on the right pole

Fears = negative results from over-focusing on the left pole to the neglect of the right pole
Fears = negative results from over-focusing on the right pole to the neglect of the left pole

Deeper Fear from lack of balance
This is where the metaphor ends

Vigilant
SEE (identify) the polarity

Act on the energy in the polarity to move to action

MAP the polarity

Polarities – from vision to reality
Foundational Elements

Why leverage the tension?

How will we gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on this pole?

How will we recognize if we are going to the downside of this pole?

Polarity Management® Map

Greater purpose

Values = positive results from focusing on the left pole

Upside Values (+ Results from focusing on L Pole)

Neutral Name For Pole

Downside Fears (Neg Results from over focusing on L pole to neglect of R)

Deeper fear

Values = positive results from focusing on the right pole

Upside Values (+ Results from focusing on R pole)

Neutral Name For Pole

Downside Fears (Neg Results from over focusing on R pole to neglect of L)

Early Warnings

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

Action Steps

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

Action Steps

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

- Poles should be neutral or positive.
- The diagonal quadrants will be opposites.
- Quadrants should be evenly populated.
- If the content in the left quadrant is the same as the content in the right quadrant, distinguish why the content belongs in each quadrant.
- Your greater purpose: VERY attractive
- Your deeper fear: EXTREMELY objectionable
Make this “REAL” Your Turn to Apply the Map!

1. List Action Steps
   - To help you gain and/or maintain the positive results for both Values.

2. Develop Early Warnings
   - To alert you that you may be over focusing on one pole AND neglecting the other pole.
   (NOTE: These are measurable—things you can count)
Positive results from focusing on Activity

Negative results from too much focus on Activity and no Rest

Positive results from focusing on Rest

Negative results from too much focus on Rest and no Activity

Technology and Practice
Polarity Management® Map

**Sustainable Transformation**

- Innovation
- EBP and professional practice/workflow
- Clinical integration across disciplines
- Caring culture

**Unsustainable Transformation**

- Lack of evidence-based information
- Lack of awareness of tech. benefits
- Decrease timely access & retrieval of patient information

---

**Action Steps**

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

A. Ensure users understand the design, purpose and functionality of technology tool.

B. Provide time for users to learn the technology tool properly.

---

**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. Timelines for activation are all about technology, not about practice transformation.

B. Modifying or deconstructing evidence-based content integration.

---

**Action Steps**

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

A. Create and support time for interdisciplinary team to do transformation work needed to integrate evidence-based professional practice.

B. Provide processes and tools to embed into technology: EBP, scopes of practice, & integrated workflow.

---

**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. Users demand that technology not change what is familiar (e.g. documentation practices).

B. Comments about the fear that technology will dehumanize care and dictate practice.

---

Polarity map showing the practice and technology poles and ways to balance the tension between them.
Polarity Thinking & Polarity Management Provides

- A change in debates from “either or” to “both and”
- Teaches us to identify our mutual goals and our common fears
- Teaches us how to identify warning signs that we are shifting too far to one side of a pole
- Teaches us how to leverage the energy/tension in debates over complex issues
- Brings civility to our discussions,
- Prevents a pendulum change effect swinging from one to the other pole, and
- Eliminates the need to “win” since both poles win!
Key points about how Polarities “work”

• Both sides of the polarity are important.

• Most of us have a preference for one side or the other.

• The more strongly you are attached to one side, the harder it is to see the downside.

• Polarities are interdependent pairs that need each other over time in order to sustain both sides.
LIFE IS VERY UNCOMPPLICATED
IF YOU JUST REMEMBER ONE SIMPLE RULE...

... WE ARE ALWAYS RIGHT AND THEY ARE ALWAYS WRONG!