

## Polarity management

### An introduction

## Polarities

It is not always either/or  
sometimes it's both/and

This material is based on work by Barry Johnson

## A great leader...

- Builds a close relationship with followers – and keeps a suitable distance
- Leads the way – and stays discretely in the background
- Displays trust – and controls what's going on
- Is tolerant – and knows exactly what he/she wants
- Plans time effectively – and is flexible
- Focuses on the department's goals – and is loyal to the bigger picture
- Sets a clear direction –and is diplomatic and considerate
- Is visionary – and keeps both feet on the ground
- Builds consensus – and cuts to the chase
- Is dynamic – and thoughtful
- Has self-confidence – and is humble

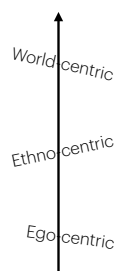
Now you understand why this is not so easy



...and why sometimes you feel your boss could do better

"I believe that the central leadership attribute is the ability to manage polarity."

– Peter Koestenbaum  
"The Fundamental State of Leadership"



## Problems vs. polarities

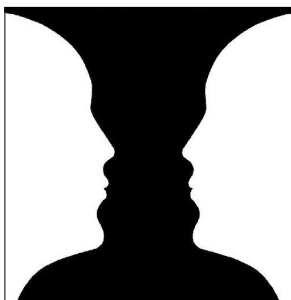
Problem	Polarity
Fish or chicken for dinner?	Direct/involve
How do we increase customer satisfaction?	Individual/communal
We need to find a new team leader?	Clients/employees
How can we reduce cost?	Listen/talk

## What are the interdependent pairs?

Individual	Analysis	Task	What are the POLARITIES?
Implementation	Structure	Conditional respect	AND
Candor	Encouragement	Freedom	AND
Relationship	Expansive	Control	AND
Planning	Confidence	Logic	AND
Responsibility	Workgroup	Diplomacy	AND
Empowerment	Flexibility	Focused	AND
	Unconditional respect		AND
	Creativity	Humility	AND

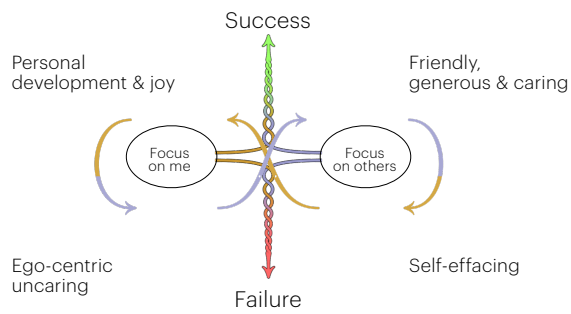
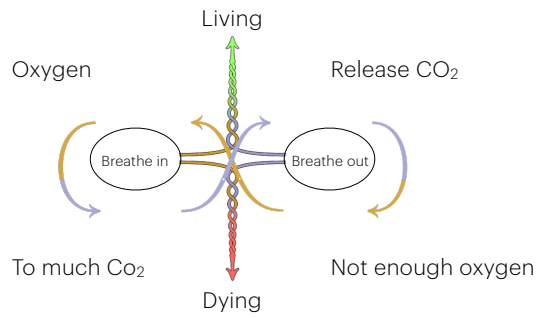
## Interdependent pairs go by different names

- Tensions
- Dilemmas
- Paradoxes
- Opposite strengths
- Interdependent values
- Competing values
- Contradictions
- Wicked problems

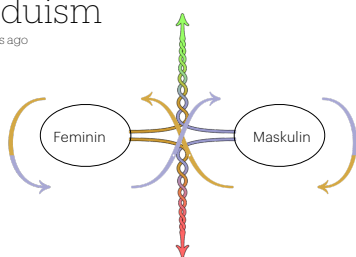


half-

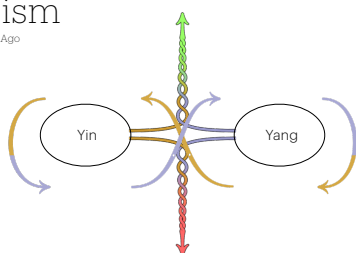
In every polarity, there are two truths –  
together, they represent the whole truth



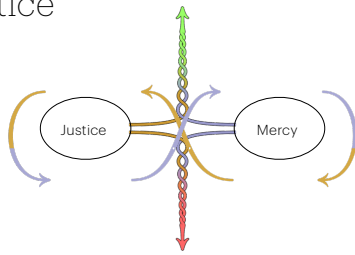
Hinduism  
5000 years ago



Taoism  
2500 Years Ago



## Justice



## A practical example

## Training for a marathon



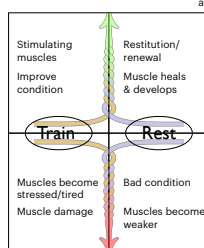
### Action steps

- Run every other day
- Increase the distance by 2 Km every other week

### Warnings

- Constant or increasing muscle pain
- Cramps or sharp pains

### Win the marathon race



Not able to complete the race

Restitution/  
renewal  
Muscle heals  
and develops

### Action steps

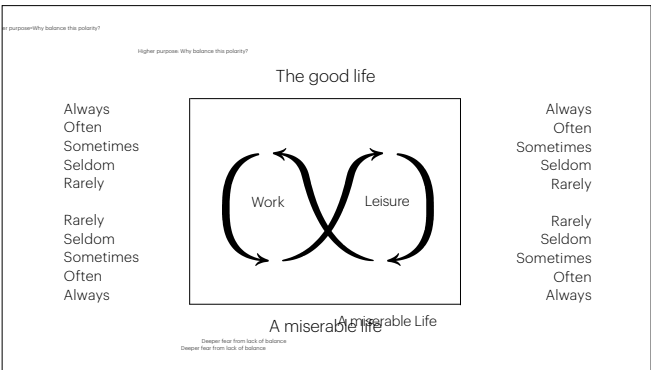
- Minimum seven hours of sleep every night
- Take a day off from training every other day

### Warnings

- Cancel training because of other engagements
- Can't run the planned distance

## Work-leisure balance

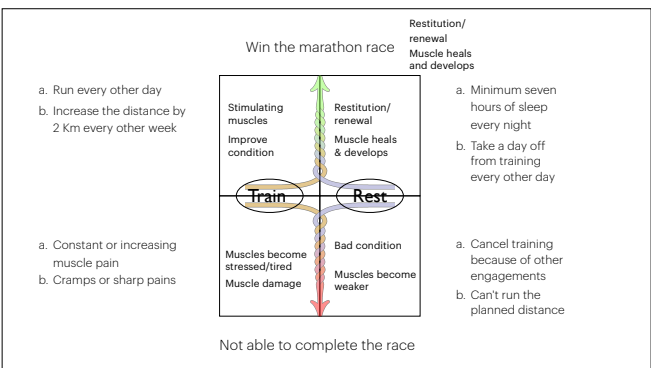
<h1>A balanced Life</h1>	
<p>Higher purpose = Why balance this polarity?</p>	
<p><b>Action steps</b></p> <p>How will we gain or maintain positive results from focusing on this left pole?</p> <p>What? Who? By when? Measures</p>	<p><b>The good life</b></p> <p>Financial success from focusing on this right pole</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Financial security &amp; growth</li> <li>Professional development &amp; skill mastery</li> <li>A sense of purpose &amp; achievement</li> <li>Access to advancement opportunities</li> <li>Contributing to society/community</li> <li>Building professional relationships</li> </ul>
<p><b>Early warnings</b></p> <p>Measurable indicators (things you can count) that will let you know that you are getting to the downside of this left pole</p>	<p><b>LEISURE</b></p> <p>Financial stress</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Loss of professional momentum</li> <li>Reduced sense of purpose</li> <li>Skill stagnation</li> <li>Career limitations</li> <li>Unfulfilled potential</li> </ul>
<p><b>WORK</b></p> <p>Burnout</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relationship strain</li> <li>Health issues</li> <li>Loss of perspective</li> <li>Reduced creativity</li> <li>Demeaning returns</li> </ul>	<p><b>Early warnings</b></p> <p>Measurable indicators (things you can count) that will let you know that you are getting to the downside of this right pole</p>
<p><b>A miserable life</b></p> <p>Deeper fear from lack of balance</p>	



# What is the balance?

When we focus too much on one polarity, we first get the negative effect of that polarity and then also the negative effect of the other polarity

The diagrams illustrate the progression of a system's state over time. Each diagram has a vertical axis with 'More Energy' at the top and 'Less Energy' at the bottom. The diagrams are labeled 'Convergence - Attraction' and 'Divergence - Repulsion'. The first diagram shows a single loop. The second diagram shows two loops. The third diagram shows two loops with a central vertical line. The fourth diagram shows two loops with a central vertical line and a small circle at the bottom.



## A balanced Life

Higher purpose = Why balance this polarity?

### The good life

#### Action steps

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

What? Who? By when? Measures

#### Focus results from focusing on the left pole

- Financial security & growth
- Professional development & skill mastery
- A sense of purpose & achievement
- Career advancement opportunities
- Contributing to society/community
- Building professional relationships

WORK

#### Balance results from focusing on the right pole

- Physical & mental re/h recovery
- Stronger personal relationships
- Pursuit of hobbies & interests
- Better health & stress management
- Time for reflection & personal growth
- Enhanced creativity through diverse experiences
- Emotional recharge & joy

LEISURE

#### Action steps

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

What? Who? By when? Measures

#### Early warnings

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

- Burnout
- Relationship strain
- Health issues
- Loss of perspective
- Reduced creativity
- Diminishing returns

Warning results of over-focusing on the left pole in neglect of the right pole

#### Early warnings

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

- Financial stress
- Loss of professional momentum
- Reduced sense of purpose
- Skill stagnation
- Career limitations
- Unfulfilled potential

Warning results of over-focusing on the right pole in neglect of the left pole

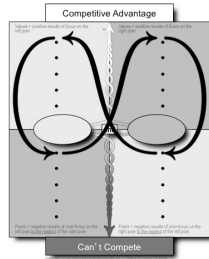
### A miserable life

Deeper fear from lack of balance

When we successfully balance both poles, we get the positive effect of both poles in a self-reinforcing cycle

This often means:

- We speed up
- We achieve results
- Solutions are sustainable



## Leadership & polarities

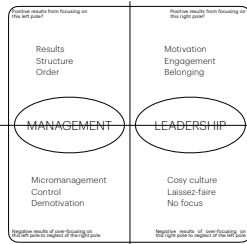
What are typical leadership polarities?

Some examples:

Rules	Freedom
Self-confidence	Humbleness
Structure	Flexibility
Planning	Implementing
Individual	Group
Direct	Diplomatic
Control	Trust
Productivity	Employee satisfaction

## A typical polarity map

Higher purpose = Why balance this polarity?  
A successful career



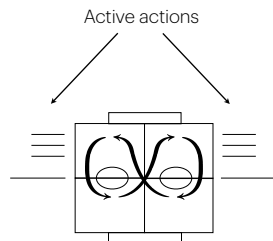
Failure

Deeper fear from lack of balance

What actions could I take to strengthen each of these two polarities?

Who, what, how & when

Specific measurable, attainable, relevant and time based actions

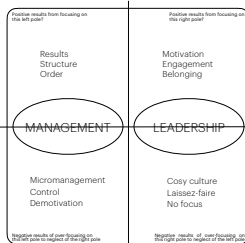


## Complete your polarity map

Higher purpose = Why balance this polarity?

A successful career

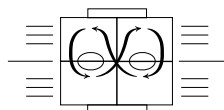
- Project review meetings
- Planning
- Budgets
- Follow up



Failure

Deeper fear from lack of balance

- Conversations
- Connection before content
- Psychological safety
- Team V-model
- Feedback appreciation



Warning lamps

It must be something we can measure:  
What increases or diminishes?

It needs to be specific for either side of the polarity  
so that we understand what is going wrong

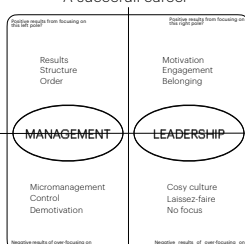


## Complete your polarity map

Higher purpose = Why balance this polarity?

A successful career

- Project review meetings
- Planning
- Budgets
- Follow up



Failure

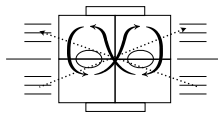
Deeper fear from lack of balance

- Conversations
- Connection before content
- Psychological safety
- Team V-model
- Feedback appreciation

- Bad atmosphere
- Silent resignations
- Sick leave
- Resignations

- Missed deadlines
- Complaints
- Missed financial targets

If this



Then focus on that

Warning lamps

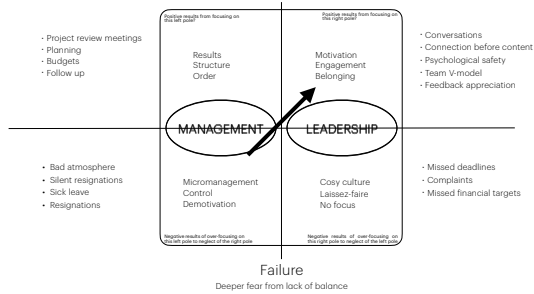
What concrete steps can I take to correct the imbalance – (look at the diagonal)?



### Complete your polarity map

Higher purpose – Why balance this polarity?

A successful career



## More polarities from business:

- Listen – speak
- Risk – security
- Serious – fun
- Enthusiastic – reserved
- Thinking – feeling
- Short-term – long-term
- Independent – collaborative
- Diplomatic – direct
- Planning – acting
- Practical – beautiful
- Flexible – structured
- Creative – practical
- Stability – change

## Note that:

All change projects involve polarities

If we look at polarities as if they were problems:

- Lack of results
- Slow progress
- Unsustainable results

Change process is doomed to fail if it is tied to just one polarity

## However...

Whenever we can identify clear polarity, we also have a solid basis for creating sustainable change



"A visionary organisation doesn't seek the balance between short-term and long-term, for example. It seeks to do very well in the short-term and very well in the long-term.

A visionary company doesn't simply balance between idealism and profitability; it seeks to be highly idealistic and highly profitable.

A visionary company doesn't simply balance between preserving a tightly held core ideology and stimulating vigorous change and movement; it does both to an extreme.

In short, a highly visionary company doesn't want to blend yin and yang into a grey, indistinguishable circle that is neither highly yin nor highly yang; it aims to be distinctly yin and distinctly yang – both at the same time, all the time."

– Jim Collins 'Good-to-Great'

YOUR TURN!

## Complete your polarity map

Higher purpose = Why balance this polarity?

### Performance

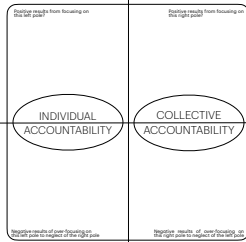
#### Action steps

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

What? Who? By when? Measures

#### 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 positive results from focusing on this right pole?

What? Who? By when? Measures

#### Early warnings

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

under achievemnet

Deeper fear from lack of balance

## COMPLETE YOUR POLARITY MAP

Higher purpose = Why balance this polarity?

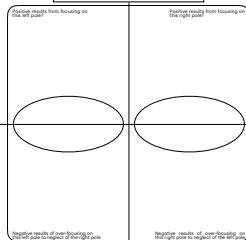
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#### Action Steps

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WHAT? WHO? BY WHEN? MEASURES?

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Deeper fear from lack of balance

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