# Managing Issues Which Generate Polarities

One of the most important theses developed in conflict theory over recent years is that some issues are best understood as semi-permanent polarities which require ongoing management rather than being framed as problems which have a clearly defined solution. The latest edition of Barry Johnson's *Polarity Management: Identifying and managing unsolvable problems* is 2014.

Polarities are complementary and permanent pairs of ideas, practices or perspectives that may appear at first sight to be contradictory or mutually exclusive. On closer examination however, it becomes apparent, within the history or life of the church or organisation, that each polar expression does not function well in isolation from its counter pole. The two values, principles or expressions need to find a point of balance. The insight of Polarity Management is that this balance point is always moving, there is no conclusive perfect solution. People and the environments and cultures they live and work in are all dynamic entities. The balance point is quietly but constantly moving and needs to be tended or managed rather than solved and seen as arriving at an end point.

Several questions can be helpful in identifying a polarity.

- Does the tension have a history?

- Does it appear to be ongoing?

- Can positive and even essential elements be observed in both polar expressions?

- Is some form of both poles needed for the church or organisation to be true to its own identity and vision, effective in its mission and consistent in its values over an extended period?

In order to explore a polarity with a group, Barry Johnson uses the idea of matrix with four boxes (below). The boxes in the left column are one pole and the boxes in the right column are the other pole. The boxes on the top row are the positive aspects of the two poles and the bottom row are the negative aspects of any polarity (A-Z).
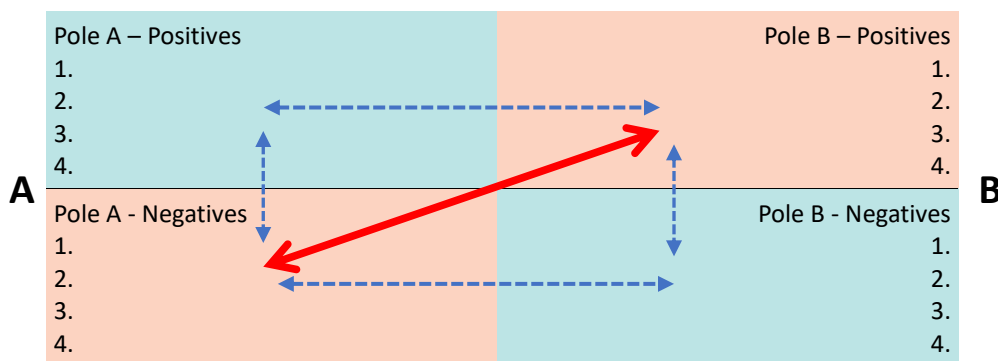
Johnson invites groups to 1) name the poles with non value-laden titles, 2) then to walk through each of the quadrants in turn and to discuss and reflect together on four or five key aspects relevant to each quadrant, and 3) finally to discuss leadership strategies which might maximise the positives of each quadrant while not moving too far into the extremes and negatives of each pole.

Johnson points out that all of us tend toward one or other of the poles on any polarity. We find it very easy to see and articulate the positive reasons why our pole is valuable, important and should be affirmed by others (red diagonal). We can also see clearly what is wrong with the opposite pole and can be quite articulate around its negatives (even, as is often the case, these are just assumed to be the diametric opposites of our treasured positives). It is much more difficult, even confronting, to see, accept and affirm the value of the positives of the other pole and also the negatives of concentrating on our own pole to the exclusion of the other. We have an inbuilt resistance to recognising, understanding and especially embracing elements of the other as we feel we are losing hold on something important to us (blue dashed lines).
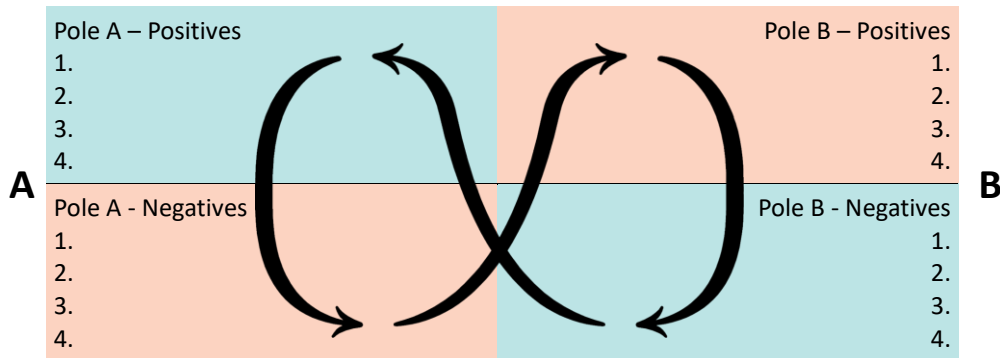
Significant breakthroughs in conflict management can occur when each side is able to honestly and openly consider the potential downsides of their own polar extremes. This often then enables consideration of the positive side of the polar opposite. When both sides move away from a defensive and exclusive position and move to a collaborative process of seeking some shared valuing of both positives, some important work can be done.
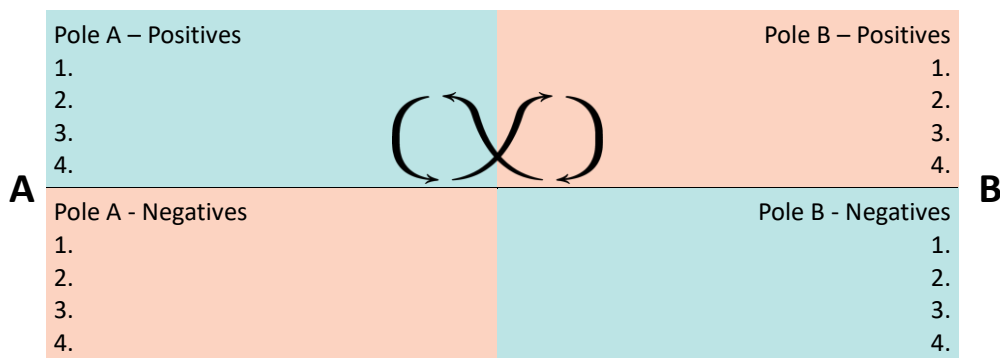
For an introduction by Barry Johnson

http://www.jpr.org.uk/documents/14-06-19.Barry_Johnson.Polarity_Management.pdf

The Weighty 8 and the Nimble 8

A key part of Johnson's insights into polarities is, that left unmanaged, a polarity centre point tends to move toward the exclusive end of one of the poles. This will at some point inevitably cause a fairly sharp drop into the negative aspect of this pole. The drop then often triggers a reactive swing into the extreme positive end of the opposite pole. Again over time this also becomes a negative and the swing back then occurs. We call this the Weighty 8. It is heavy, reactive and easily sinks into the negative sides of both poles. It is also subject to big and dramatic swings which invite high levels of conflict and undermine church and organisational stability.

Pole A – Positives	Pole B – Positives
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
A	**B**
Pole A - Negatives	Pole B - Negatives
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.

The challenge for the leadership of any organisation is to shrink the Weighty 8 into a Nimble 8. The nimble 8 stays in positive territory through intentional and careful management. It is kept turning quickly once small movements away from the positives are detected. The balance point is encouraged to move into the positives of the other pole without becoming extreme or exclusive for a time before coming back into the other polar quadrant. This nimble frequent movement is what keeps the organisation healthy. There are times to move toward each of the poles and these need to be handled well, quickly and smoothly without large swings and drops deep into negative territory which is usually highly conflicted.

Pole A – Positives	Pole B – Positives
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
A	**B**
Pole A - Negatives	Pole B - Negatives
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.

An example of a polarity map
Polarity: Collaborative Empowering Leadership vs Directive Visionary Leadership

	Pole A – Positives	Pole Z – Positives	
	1. Everyone feels a part of the group	1. Clear sense of where we are going	
	2. Greater wisdom from community decision making	2. Clear delegation and accountability	
	3. Sharing the load, more achieved	3. Fast decision making	
Collaborative Empowering Leadership	4. Growth and development of leaders	4. High standards	**Directive Visionary Leadership**
	Pole A - Negatives	Pole Z – Negatives	
	1. Slower to action and achieve things	1. Can be personal loyalty centred	
	2. Hard to organise and coordinate	2. Get on board or find another bus (no room for alternative ideas)	
	3. Not always aligned direction and values	3. Easy to misuse power	
	4. Collaboration takes time and energy	4. Limits growth through low levels of involvement	