

By BRIDGET FARRANDS

Complex and ambiguous situations indicate that polarities are present – and that the coach will need to take many viewpoints into account. Conventional problem solving won't work. By managing polarities well, the coach can get the best from a situation that has no right or wrong answer

**WHAT IS A POLARITY?** The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as “the state of having two opposite or contradictory tendencies, opinions or aspects”. Problems that ask for ‘both-and’ solutions, where an issue can't easily or quickly be reduced to one clear outcome, are usually a sign that polarities are present. These are issues holding multiple possibilities, often contradictory, which need to be balanced in order to find a solution.

**Why do we need polarities?**

Polarities are most easy to imagine as a pole with one polarity at one end, and the opposite at the other. For example, goal setting can be imposed and negotiated; organisations can be centralised and dispersed; leaders can be autocratic and collaborative.

Complex, ambiguous, volatile situations are unsuited to many conventional problem-solving methods, because they need to build in large numbers of viewpoints or take into account multiple ‘right’ answers. Effective polarity management gets the best out of both ‘ends’ of the pole while avoiding the limits of either – especially relevant when the ‘best’ solution will be context and situation dependent, and there is no single obviously good or right answer.

Polarities are a tool for problem solving, as much as a way of seeing and thinking about issues that don't easily fit into single answer problem-solving methods.

**When should you use a polarity?**

*When coaches want to:*

- be challenged in how they



MH Jeeves

- think about or deal with issues
- refresh their ways of solving complex or ambiguous problems
- use the perspectives of others with interests in the outcomes of an issue to help work out solutions
- address inconsistencies between how they think they lead and what others experience.

**Examples of business polarities:**

- How do we grow and expand our markets, and reduce numbers in our central operation?
- How do we motivate individuals and reward team collaboration?

- What relationship do we form with competitors who we need as partners to win the contract?

**How do you spot a polarity?**

Just as using binary (either/or) thinking won't solve a polarity, neither is polarity thinking useful when the problem is likely to have a single preferred solution.

To decide if the issue needs balancing as a polarity, most or all of the following features will be present:

1. The issue is hard to break down into clearly differentiated parts that are individually actionable

“One way to immediately experience a polarity is to use the metaphor of breathing: it is the ultimate polarity. The ‘problem’ of staying alive physically can only be solved by equally balancing the two poles: the in-breath and the out-breath”

2. The issue keeps recurring – even when it seemed solved before
3. People feel overwhelmed by the contradictions
4. It’s hard to know where to begin
5. There are multiple right answers, which are interdependent
6. There is likely to be resistance because the issue affects multiple interests/stakeholders with opposing points of view.

One way to immediately experience a polarity is to use the metaphor of breathing: it is the ultimate polarity. The ‘problem’ of staying alive physically can only be solved by equally balancing the two poles: the in-breath and the out-breath.

To have a physical experience of this polarity, take a deep breath in and hold it. Solving the problem of staying alive by limiting the solution to just one pole should soon become obvious!

### Using a polarity map

- Draw a square and divide it into four equal boxes: label the top two boxes *Upsides*, and the bottom two boxes *Downsides* (see Figure 1, page 52).
- The line through the middle of the large square that divides the top and bottom boxes is the polarity you are working. Write a short description of each end of the polarity on the left of

that line and the right. Ensure that the description of each pole is as neutral and unbiased as possible. For example, if exploring a coachee’s decision-making style the poles could be *Impose* and *Facilitate*. Avoid descriptions like *Dictatorial* and *Fuzzy*.

### Work around each of the steps, in the following order:

#### 1. Describe the Higher Purpose

This is the value-adding outcome that addressing this Issue will resolve. Write it above the Upside boxes.

#### 2. Describe the Deeper Fear

This is the opposite of the Higher Purpose and represents the worst-case situation if the polarity is not managed. Write it below the Downside boxes.

#### 3. Identify the upsides of the left-hand Upside box

Aim for the five to six main benefits/advantages that actually happen as a result of this pole.

#### 4. Move to the Downside box of the left-hand pole

Again, aim for 5-6 negatives that result from the Upside pole in Step 3.

#### 5. Repeat Steps 3 and 4, but in the Upside and Downside boxes of the right-hand preference

It’s common to be able to quickly identify the upsides and downsides of one pole and to struggle with the

other. If so, it may be showing resistance or unfamiliarity with what the pole brings.

### This completes the mapping activity.

Pause here and take a look at the map so far. Especially notice patterns/relationships between the upsides of one pole and the diagonally opposite downsides. Notice also, the infinity loop that is created by moving between the Upside and Downside boxes: an illustration of the dynamic tension between the poles.

### Make it work

- Minimise the downsides and maximise the most valuable aspects of the upsides (which may not be all of them) to deliver the Higher Purpose and reduce the chances of reaching the Deeper Fear.

### Fatal flaws

- Missing early warning signs (actions, problems, missed deadlines) that may signal the possible arrival of downsides.
- Not spotting existing signs that may already be present – which may well be why the issue has become an issue in the first place.
- Not acting when both sides of the upsides get out of balance.

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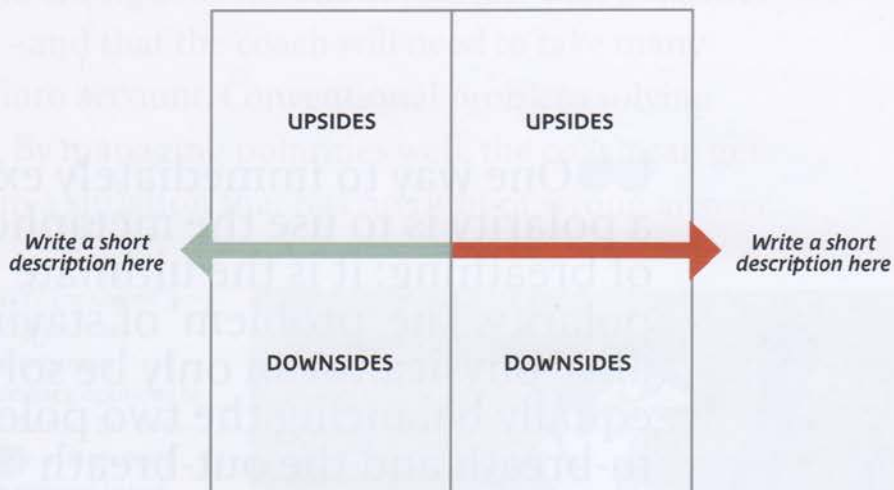


Figure 1: Polarity map

**Make it work – in three steps**

**1. A single issue may contain multiple polarities**

For example, a coachee exploring team issues could use a polarity map for any of the following:

● *His own team leadership*

Where the focus may be on the leader's competencies, experience and readiness to take on the job.

● *The role and purpose of the team*

Where this is changing or unclear.

● *The context in which the team works*

The external environment within or outside of the organisation and its impact on the team's performance.

**Fatal flaws**

● **For the coach** Focusing on the problems the coach enjoys solving the most because he has his own preferred models and skills to bring to the situation.

● **For the manager** He has the problem defined, and a preferred solution, and wants help bridging the gap.

**2. Get the higher purpose described well**

Because context, pace and diversity all affect problem framing and definition,

placing the issue within a broader purpose helps address the issue at the 'right' level.

The higher purpose description needs to locate the issue as worthwhile to solve – not just tactically useful. Aim for a statement that is inspiring and motivating.

**Fatal flaws**

● **For the coach** Not helping the manager make a wide enough frame around the issue to give him greater scope to find the point of balance between the poles.

● **For the manager** Taking sides and favouring those who support his solution; the issue becomes one of win/lose, not one of balancing upsides in the interests of reaching the Higher Purpose.

**3. Aim for quality of discussion, not just resolving the polarity**

The goal in using this tool is a broader discussion as much as a resolution of the polarity and an action plan. Managers come to problems with ready-formed views on why it's happening (and often a solution), but a polarity-based discussion can

challenge favourite views of the world and generate resistance.

**Fatal flaws**

● **For the coach** Also being a victim of a preferred point of view on the issue and allowing that to direct the discussion. Keep questions open and don't avoid the challenging ones.

● **For the coachee** When one person is right, those who disagree may also be right. Avoid binary thinking or right/wrong, supporter/opposer. ■

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**Further information**

● Barry Johnson has been a great influence in developing polarity management as a way to think about complex issues. I am indebted to his teaching and the generous sharing of his knowledge.

On Barry's website is also a comprehensive list of articles to download, workshops to attend and other resources. To learn more visit:  
[www.polaritypartnerships.com](http://www.polaritypartnerships.com)