

BREAKING POLARITY THINKING

Using the Polarity Map

The average adult makes 35,000 decisions every day, so it is vital to have a well-honed ability to decide between “yes/no,” “either/or,” and “when/where.”

But daily life is also filled with paradoxes—seemingly contradictory realities that need to co-exist. These are the “yes/and” tensions in life. It’s the successful navigation of these polarities that leads to big wins.

Common paradoxes that exist in academic medical centers are:

- » Individual competency / Team competency
- » Centralizing / Decentralizing
- » Uncharted innovation / Established processes
- » Change / Stability
- » Present / Future

Effective management means getting the best of both possible choices.

To reach better outcomes, capitalize on diverse ideas, create productive dialogue, and engage key stakeholders, use the **polarity mapping** tool.

Here’s how to use it:

- 1 Define the challenge or issue**
- 2 Identify a key polarity**
Make sure you are balancing a paradox—not just solving a problem. You will know it is a paradox if the issue is recurring, efforts at solution result in more problems, and both sides of the issue are critical for success.
- 3 Agree on pole names**
Avoid charged language and bias. Names for poles should be value-neutral.
- 4 Write the pole names on the map**
- 5 Brainstorm content for each quadrant**
Aim for 4-8 points per positive and negative section of each pole.
- 6 Determine the higher purpose and greater fear**
The higher purpose is the major benefit of managing the polarity well, and the greater fear is the major negative of managing the polarity poorly.



See examples of a completed map at iLearn.unmc.edu

Additional Resources

Johnson, B. (2014). *Polarity management: Identifying and managing unsolvable problems*. HRD Press.

Levknecht, L. (2013). Using 'polarity thinking' to achieve sustainable positive outcomes. Elsevier. Retrieved from <https://www.elsevier.com/connect/using-polarity-thinking-to-achieve-sustainable-positive-outcomes>

POLARITY MAP

Action Steps

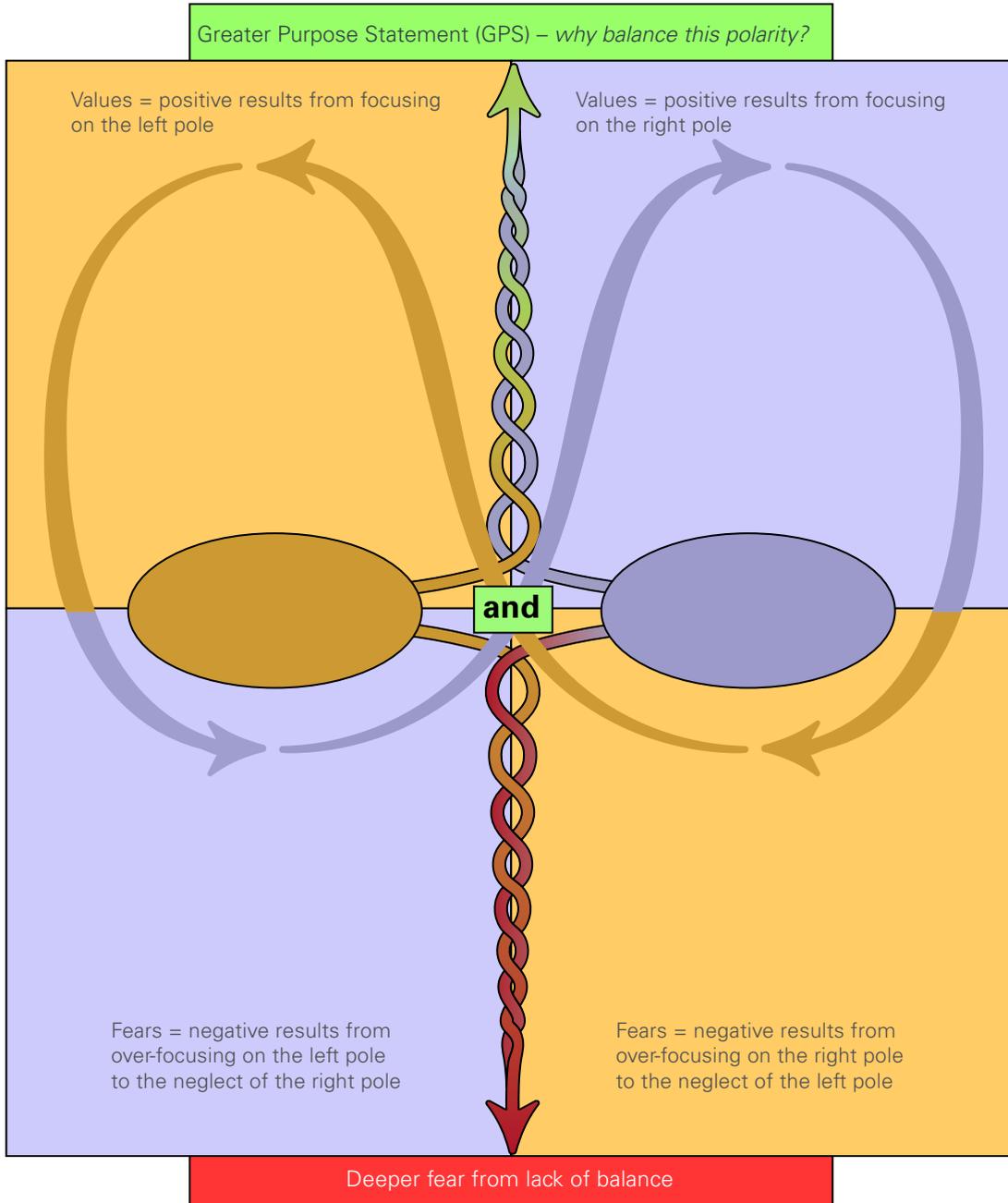
How will we gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on this left pole?

» 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?



Map used with permission of Polarity Partnerships, LLC

Early Warnings

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

Early Warnings

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