
FOREWORD

I have been impressed with the work and thinking of Barry Johnson for many years. In the late 1970s Barry visited me at my office in Michigan to describe and reflect on this idea he was calling “Polarities.” I was impressed. The ideas he was developing were clear, easily grasped, and useful. I was particularly excited about the concept of tension between opposites that seemed to be interdependent. His ideas gave me a framework for understanding what I thought to be a conundrum at the time: organizations need both change and stability, hierarchy and consensus, planning and freedom from plans, learning from experience and experimenting where there was no experience. How does one get a “balance” between these opposites? Is it possible to do both at the same time? If not, how does one know when to disrupt and when to stay calm? Johnson’s ideas helped me develop a modicum of clarity that I had not had before. Further, I could see potential of his ideas for work with conflicted congregations and for leaders as they developed strategies for managing their organizations.

Johnson had not only shared his ideas with me, he communicated them with others at the Alban Institute, most especially Roy Oswald. Alban consultants began to use Barry’s ideas in its consulting and training. We put together Barry’s ideas with concepts we were using in our consulting and training generated from other sources that were using some of the ideas central to polarity management, especially the writing of Richard Pascal and Jim Collins (see Appendix D for bibliographical references). George Parsons and I published the *Congregational Systems Inventory*, published by Alban, which drew especially on the thought of Richard Pascal. Moreover, we (Johnson, Oswald and I) developed a series of training/research events to test polarity management’s usefulness in congregations. We invited clergy and other congregational leaders to conferences around the country in which we explained the polarity idea and asked them for their immediate feedback as to the usefulness of the idea where they worked. We asked those who attended these conferences to use the idea “back home” and then tell us what went well and what didn’t, as well as what else they were discovering about the concept we

hadn't thought of. We held follow up conferences in which people who were using these ideas in the field would describe to us and to each other their learning. It was a rich experience for us all, those who led the conferences and those who participated and experimented with the ideas. It was out of these conferences the idea for this book arose. Barry and Roy used the learning from those conferences, and from subsequent work they were doing with congregations and other organizations, to put this book together.

An important learning for me in using this idea brought to us has to do with problem solving in groups. In my work with Johnson and Oswald it became clearer to me that different kinds of problems call for different strategies to cope with them. This book takes a very specific kind of problem, a polarity, and presents interesting and useful strategies to deal with them.

It may be useful to reflect on polarities in the context of other kinds of problem solving that congregations regularly confront. I have come to identify three other kinds of problems with which we deal as leaders of congregations: problems-to-solve, choices, and issues. Polarities are a fourth kind of problem. Each kind of problem calls for a different set of strategies to manage it.

Problems-to-solve is a category wherein one is looking for something to fix, a solution, something to settle. A common organizational problem to solve would be: income is declining, if the decline continues the organization will be not be able to pay staff or keep the doors open. There may be many solutions to this problem some having to do with generating income, others having to do with decreasing expenses. There may even be disagreement about which of the possible solutions is best, or possible, or workable; however, when one takes action to deal with the problem one does so with the expectation that the action or actions will settle it. Other examples of problems-to-solve are: members are not making newcomers feel welcome when they attend, or the roof is leaking, or newcomers find it difficult to find their way to various meeting places on the campus.

Organizations usually go about working problems-to-solve by brainstorming ideas about how to deal with the problem and then choosing one (or more) of the ideas that emerged in the brainstorming as the solution. Sometimes they go out and gather information from other sources to inform the brainstorming they do. Those other sources might be: reviewing

the literature on the subject, talking to other congregations to find out what they have done, bringing in an expert who may be able to provide ideas, etc. Often, with these kinds of problems, it is easy to take a collaborative stance toward the work if the problem solvers will stay open to exploring alternatives that will be satisfactory to those with a variety of perspectives on the issue.

Issues are problems in which disagreements are deeply rooted in values, perceptions of one's identity or basic beliefs. An example of an issue would be one wherein one's understanding of the authority of the Bible fundamentally shapes the stance one takes toward the "solution" of the dispute. When a disagreement about the authority of the Bible is at the root of a question, brainstorming a "solution" is unlikely to produce agreement. Another example of a values conflict (or issue) is whether or not one believes that human life is sacred and that it is wrong to kill. Another is: is it right for Israelis to settle in lands captured by Israel in 1967, or should Israel's existence be recognized. When we are dealing with these kinds of problems, the problem solver recognizes that brainstorming solutions and choosing the best ones are not likely to get him or her very far. People may be committed to a principal they are not open to changing. Their stance toward the problem may come out of a sense of their identity leading them to hold on dearly to that which they believe makes them who they are. With issues sometimes the best that can be hoped for is separation of the parties, or agreeing not to deal with the issues, or setting up boundaries to protect the parties from one another, perhaps some kind of re-framing of the issue so that it has less impact on each side's identity. Gandhi's strategy was based on the assumption that each side has a portion of the truth and engaging in (principled) conflict produces clarity and better decisions.

Choices is another category of problem. When we're dealing with a choice the decision being explored is either/or. It's a situation where we are deliberately deciding not all possibilities will be chosen. When we are engaging in a choice, we don't emphasize the *AND* as Johnson and Oswald propose as a strategy for dealing with a polarity. If we are in a hiring process, some applicants will not be chosen. Sometimes the choice one is confronting is: "take it or leave it." Choices require strategies that will not produce an ongoing dialogue or tension among the alternatives (as is appropriate with a

polarity). To make a choice one might use the strategy, as described in this book, of identifying the upside and the downside of each of the alternatives. But the outcome of the problem solving process will be to end the dialogue or tension between the poles, to make your choice and move on to something else. Central to the idea of a polarity is the expectation that each pole (choice) will continue to have impact on the system.

So, not all problems are polarities, and different kinds of problems require different problem solving strategies. Discovering the need for different strategies, depending on the nature of the problem we are confronting can be useful and freeing as one assesses what is needed when confronting organization problems or difficulties.

I have found the polarity map to highly useful in situations where members of a congregation are able to understand and embrace the idea that interdependent opposites exist, and that each of the poles is needed for the healthy functioning of the system. In settings where there is no immediate conflict stressing the system, helping the leadership see and understand the polarities outlined in this book can be a powerful conflict prevention tool in that increases appreciation for the necessity of both dimensions (not just the side one is on) and helps people work to strengthen both poles as they give leadership to their congregation. In situations of high conflict (where what is under “discussion” is a polarity), an important strategy will be to see if the parties can agree that polarities exist (first), and then see if they can agree that their particular conflict is indeed a polarity. If they can do that, they will have gone a long way to establish readiness to work the dispute in a productive way.

I can speak from experience that the ideas promulgated in this book work. Most congregations where I have used polarity management grasp the concepts quickly and put them to work. It helps them see what’s missing and helps give legitimacy to all the sides in the dialogue. Thank you Barry and Roy (and Alban) for making these ideas available to a wider group than would otherwise be the case if their means of distribution were limited to training and consulting.

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