



TOOL | POLARITY COACHING

This process is used to appreciate complex challenges and to break down barriers. A polarity lens helps a diverse group see more of the big-picture reality and to understand that paradoxes are opportunities to leverage for transformative change.

WHAT ARE POLARITIES

Start with an identified polarity: a state in which two ideas or opinions are completely opposite or very different from each other. These are paradoxes to be balanced. A paradox is a seemingly contradictory situation that is nevertheless true. It contains elements that appear to be mutually exclusive and that appear to operate at the same time. Paradoxes are interdependent and must be addressed with a ‘both/and’ thinking, not ‘either/or’. Examples:

Stability *and* Change

Competitive *and* Collaborative

Focus on the Individual and the System

Traditionalist *and* Change Agent

Directive *and* Participative

Economic Growth *and* Social Growth

VALUE OF POLARITY THINKING

Polarity thinking can be applied to individuals, teams, community organizations to co-create a learning culture, build trust within teams, participatory decision making, resolve conflicts, build future scenarios, identify priorities, implement strategic objectives, measure outcomes, and evaluate results.

Participants often don’t recognize the importance of the other side. Both polarities of the issue are critical for long-term success in managing an issue. It is important to include people who favor both sides of the issue. You build deeper understanding of the whole picture and greater commitment to the action plan. You will find two factions will evolve – those crusaders that champion change and the traditionalists who want to maintain the status quo, a paradox itself. Those who represent opposing perspectives are especially helpful to balance it in the longer-term. They often become your champion.

POLARITY MAPPING

A participatory mapping activity describes the paradox through identifying goals and fears, desired results, and values related to your most strategic polarities. It clarifies the negative results you’ll experience if you don’t pay attention. It shows how the paradox cycles from one polarity to the other over time and identifies behaviors to shift the focus back where needed for change. This is a transformative process.

Mapping can initially be a quick brainstorm process, then used as a framework for deeper discussion among participants with diverse points of view or mental models about how ‘things should be’. The mapping activity provides a structure to determine what we know, what we don’t know, what is certain and what is uncertain.

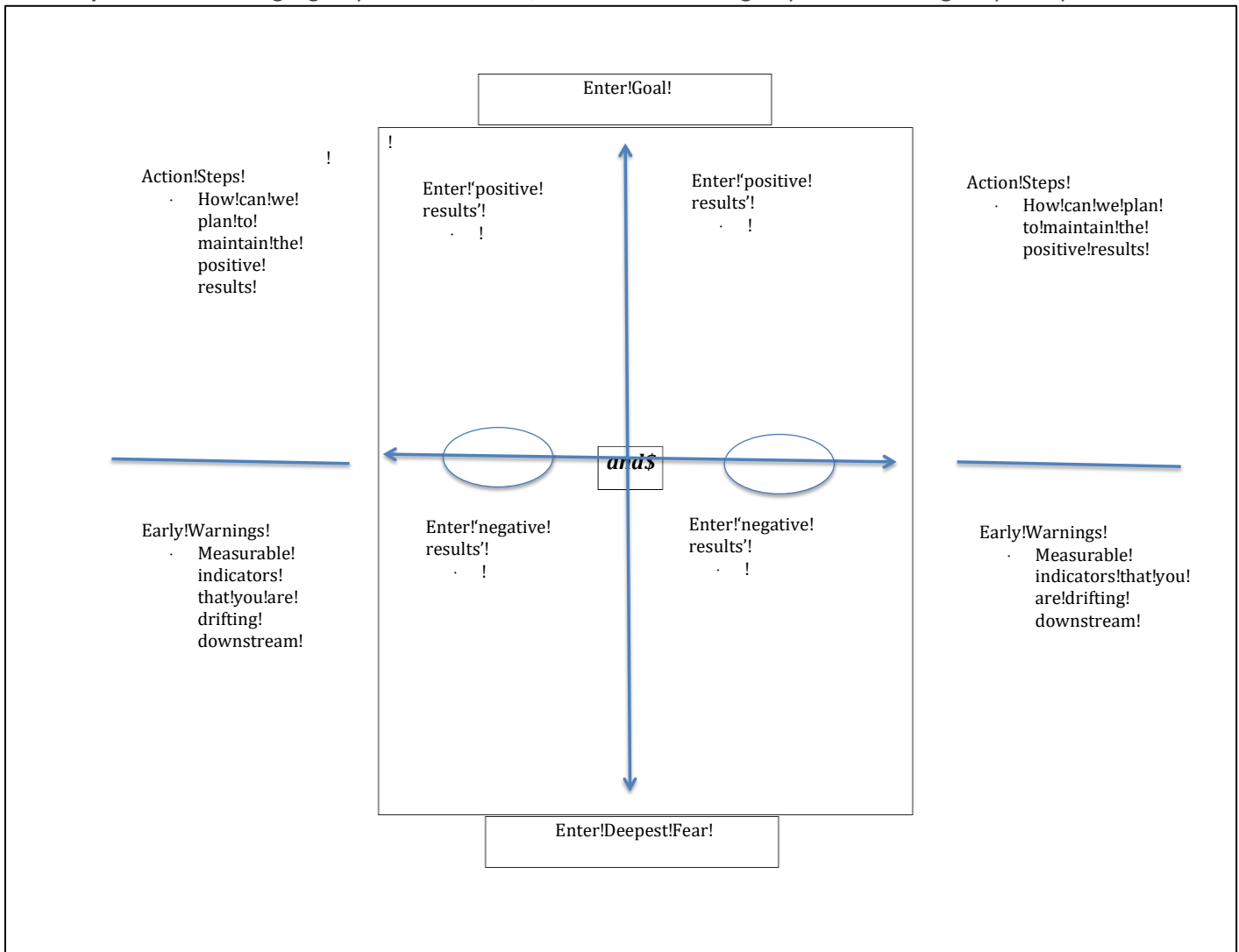
Asking coaching questions such as *What’s important here? What is your fear if we don’t consider this? What can you imagine? What isn’t clear? What is uncertain?* lead to ah-ha moments. The mapping activity combined with coaching questions provide a focus for groups to engage in dialogue from diverse points of view.

MAPPING HOW-TO

This process can be facilitated in groups - writing on paper, flip charts, white boards, or taped on the floor to physically walk through the steps all work. Different polarity maps related to one issue can be posted on the walls so that groups move through several maps for collective impact. Groups return to the whole group for shared learning experience. Do a sample map first with a polarity example, such as tough love and free love (humour helps).

Materials: Flip chart paper, white board or paper map templates, tape, post-its, felt pens.

Create Space: If facilitating a group of more than 4, divide into several groups of 3-5 for higher participation.



Steps:

1. Prepare blank map on flip chart paper, white board or paper or taped on floor,
2. Identify the issue and the goals (what we want) for successful resolution and greatest fear (what we don't want) if goal is not met. Record these on top and bottom of map.
3. Define the polarity poles. Write in the center of the 4 quadrants – If known already, this may be done ahead of time. Sometimes this is identified in a previous meeting, workshop.
4. Upper left quadrant - Record the positive and desired results when focusing on the preferred pole.
5. Lower left quadrant - Record the negative results when there is an over focus on the preferred pole (and neglect the other pole).
6. Upper right quadrant - Record the positive and desired results when focusing on the preferred pole.
7. Lower right quadrant - Record the negative results when there is an over focus on the preferred pole (and neglect the other pole).
8. Review what has been captured and facilitate coaching questions such as *What is missing? What surprises you?* Record additional characteristics that may emerge.
9. Identify red flags or early warnings that too much focus has been placed on one pole. Record beside the lower quadrants. These should be measurable. Ask *What if...?*
10. Determine how to balance the paradox with coaching questions to achieve the best aspects of both polarities. Generate strategies (action plans) for staying in the upsides of both poles while avoiding the downsides. Question *What isn't clear? What is uncertain? or What is certain?* The goal is maintained when there is a dynamic flow like an infinity loop, over time between the two opposing poles.
11. Discuss how we weave diagonally through the quadrants over time and how to pay attention to the early warnings signs. Commit to achieving the goal and identify the how, who, what, and when markers.

VARIATIONS

1. Transformative scenario building using balanced polarities – after step 8, identify the characteristics of both polarities and design scenarios assuming these elements are present. If several maps were created to address more than one polarity, look for similar characteristics among the maps.
2. For a powerful team-building exercise, create a large, blank Polarity Map on the floor with masking tape and invite participants to stand in circle around the map. Elicit from the participants the characteristics of each quadrant of the polarity map. Write their responses on 4 separate flipchart sheets placed on the appropriate quadrants on blank map. Invite the participants to act out the polarity. By playing out the negative aspects of the polarities in an exercise, the group could save the money, stress, and time of playing them out in real life.
3. Use a blank Polarity Map in individual coaching sessions (face to face, online, or over phone). Writing on paper, flip charts, white boards, or taped on the floor to physically walk through the steps all work. With coaching questions, elicit what the individual thinks the characteristics of the opposing polarity if “walking in someone else’s shoes”. Individuals can use a polarity lens to understand personal conflicts and gain confidence to have difficult conversations with others with opposing views. They develop strategies for effective actions to achieve personal visions.

SOURCES

This process is adapted by Holtby Consulting (holtby@shaw.ca) from Adam Kahane’s *Transformative Scenario Planning*; Barry Johnson’s *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvability Problems*; Kathy Anderson’s *Polarity Coaching, Coaching People and Managing Polarities*. Polarity Management® & Polarity Map™ are registered with Polarity Management Assoc. Polarity Coaching™ is from Kathy Anderson.