

## ***Polarity Management***

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*In this article, David Creelman discusses the importance of dealing with the polarity to leverage results in HR initiatives.*

### **David Creelman**

I come across many good ideas in my studies of human capital management, but few have the enduring power of polarity management. Barry Johnson wrote *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems* in 1992; that's almost 15 years ago, but it's still one of the most useful books you can read. It is especially useful for people management issues which rarely have "engineering-type" solutions.

Johnson's point is that many issues are not problems to be solved, but polarities to be managed. Take the issue of individual reward versus team reward—which is better? That question can lead to a spirited, even violent, debate. Proponents of individual pay shout that team rewards let lazy employees take it easy while the good workers go unrewarded (and eventually quit).

Proponents of team reward hit back pointing out how individual pay can lead to corruption, backstabbing, short-term focus and the elimination of cooperation. This debate is never resolved because both sides are right.

Johnson clarifies the issue with a simple diagram:

If Position 1 is "Team Reward" then the proponents can easily list the positive aspects of their position (top left box) and the negative aspects of Position 2: "Individual Reward" (bottom right box). Similarly, the proponents of Individual Reward can quickly list the positive aspects of their position and the negative aspects of the alternative. Very quickly the diagram gives us a good picture of the overall situation.

	<b>Position 1 "Team Reward"</b>	<b>Position 2 "Individual Reward"</b>
<b>Positive Aspects</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• teamwork</li> <li>• etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• retain best workers</li> <li>• etc.</li> </ul>
<b>Negative Aspects</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• workers get lazy</li> <li>• etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• backstabbing</li> <li>• etc.</li> </ul>

If we were problem-solving then the battle would be on to decide which of the two positions was better—but that's the wrong approach. You can't afford to give up the positive aspects of teamwork anymore than you can afford to give up the positive aspects of individual reward. What Johnson proposes is that we recognize this as a polarity to be managed not a problem to be solved. What we want to do is to cycle between the positive aspects of each position—an on-going process of active management. This isn't a tidy solution, polarities are not tidy, but once you recognize them they become manageable.

What tends to happen is just the opposite. Organizations reach a point where the negative aspects of one position are so visible that there is a revolution and they go to the other extreme. However, because they have not recognized the polarity they are likely to end up experiencing the negative side of the new position. After a few years there is a counter-revolution and they swing back again. The organization end up flipping between the negative aspects of one position or another, never succeeding in harvesting the positive aspects.

Notice that Johnson doesn't suggest we strike a balance somewhere in the middle. He suggests we dynamically move back and forth, taking care to reap the positive and minimize the negative that exists in each position. He likens this dynamic movement to breathing. We breathe in because of lack of oxygen, then breath out because of excess carbon dioxide—inhale, exhale. In an organization this would becomes a smooth shifting of focus from one position to the other and back again, forever.

And that is just about it. Johnson's book provides more examples and deeper insights. However, any experienced manager will have seen this phenomenon at work.

The only difficulty is that taking a strong position is fun. It's fun to fight against the evils of one position and praise the virtues of your own position. As soon as we draw the simple polarity diagram that enjoyable argument disappears. We see the world in a different way.

As an aside you may recall that in *Built to Last*, Jim Collins and Jerry Porras said that successful companies practiced "both/and" rather than "either/or". They would have both a focus on teams and a focus on individuals, centralization and decentralization, low costs and high quality—not one or the other. This may be a way of saying that these organizations practice polarity management. It's a powerful tool; one you should practice using yourself, and one you should teach your managers.

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