



Polarity Wisdom™: A Core Leadership Competency for a Complex Future

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Working with Polarities is a 21st century skill that enables individuals and leaders to make a quantum leap in recognising, interpreting and integrating tensions and conflicts that are a natural part of all human systems. As we become increasingly aware of the complexity of our times and find ourselves being called to respond in more and more sophisticated ways to our internal and external tensions, integrating *Polarities* becomes an invaluable support to help us navigate the labyrinth of our professional challenges in complex times.

Polarity Wisdom™ is a skill that leaders can deliberately develop. They can learn to identify problems that need to be solved, and distinguish them from polarities that need to be managed. Polarities are interdependent, paired strengths that both need attention for healthy resolution of natural tensions. For example, leaders might hold the mindset that they can ‘either’ be directive (often translated in their mind as autocratic) ‘or’ collaborative.

Many end up struggling with this tension in an ongoing way, or choosing to be more directive. This choice can come from the privileging of heroic leadership over servant leadership. There is an assumption that leaders need to 'drive'. So sometimes collaboration is assumed to mean that one's own judgment needs to be suspended, or we need to defer to another's perspective, or we need to let go of our investment in the outcome. Other leaders might privilege collaboration over providing direction, believing that all solutions must come from consensus. Polarity Wisdom™ suggests that leaders need to be able to do both judiciously. Learning how to recognize and harmonise or integrate the many polarities in day-to-day leadership helps leaders move to the next stage of maturity.

Polarities are not new in that all of us can easily see how we have been working with them all our lives. Yet it is amazing to see how we continue to function in less than optimal ways because we don't quite know how to apply this lens consciously to seemingly intractable and chronic issues. We often don't realise that we continue to be sub-optimal in some situations because we are not yet aware of the unconscious ways in which we get pulled into 'either-or' thinking when it may not be of service to orient ourselves in that context. The fun thing about working with Polarities is that it is at once simple and scalable, enlightening and relieving – it can provide structure *and* liberate us (a polarity!). We are able to take more mature action when we carry a nuanced understanding of the nature of interdependent truths.

Polarity Wisdom™ is very practical tool, as well as a theory that can be used to inform other theories and practices. Next time when you feel torn, when you feel you have choose between two options, or two ways of being or two values, pause to consider: is this really an either-or choice? Are these two variables interdependent, and will I need to embrace both over time?