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Balancing Act: An Exploration of Polarities in Personal and Professional Life

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Balancing Act: An Exploration of Polarities in Personal and Professional Life

by

Hana Mamnoon

An Abstract of a Project

in

Creativity and Change Leadership

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Science

May 2024

Buffalo State University

State University of New York

Department of Creativity and Change Leadership

Abstract

This purpose of this project is to explore the concept of polarities. I have been using creative problem solving for years, but recently, I have come to realize that some of the complexities we face in our everyday lives are not actually problems to solve, but rather are polarities to manage (Johnson, 2014). By undertaking this project, I aimed to build my skill set around polarity management in order to help me develop in both my personal and professional spheres. This project allowed me to explore some of the literature of polarities as well as put the concepts into practice by creating ten polarity maps. I started with five polarity maps focused on polarities that challenge me in my personal life, and then extended the scope to explore and map five polarities that I encounter in facilitating creativity. Ultimately, this project has expanded my capacity as a creative leader and stoked the flames of my passion for learning.

Keywords: polarity thinking, polarity management, paradoxes, yes/and thinking, polarity maps



Hana Mamnoon

May 6th, 2024

Buffalo State University
State University of New York
Department of Creativity and Change Leadership

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Dates of Approval:



Dr. Susan Keller-Mathers, Associate Professor



Hana Mamnoon, Student

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Acknowledgment

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SECTION ONE: BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

Purpose and Description of Project

We often hear that we live in a VUCA world (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) characterized by wicked problems (Outram, 2020). We have tools and processes like the Creative Problem-Solving (CPS) process (Firestein, 2019; Osborn, 1979; Treffinger et al., 2006) that help us tackle some of these complex problems; however, what do we do when a problem isn't solvable? Some of the complexities we face in our everyday lives are not actually problems to solve, but rather polarities to manage (Johnson, 2014).

Polarities go by many names including paradoxes, chronic tensions, dilemmas, etc. (Polarity Partnerships, n.d.). No matter which name you choose, polarities are essentially the tensions that we see all around us in the world. A common example of a polarity is breathing - there is a balance between inhaling and exhaling. You can't do both at the same time nor can you exclusively do one or the other. Instead, your body finds the right balance of cycling between both states. This is a basic, biological polarity and is a great starting point for diving into some of the more subtle and complex polarities that we encounter in our lives, such as freedom and control or short-term and long-term thinking.

Though polarities have always existed, the Polarity Management Model (Johnson, 2014) that is most well known today was first created by Barry Johnson around 1975. Johnson (2014) describes his polarity management framework in his book, *Polarity Management Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems*. In the

book, Johnson explains the difference between solvable problems and polarities, helps the reader recognize polarities, and teaches skills around polarity management that help leadership effectiveness (Johnson, 2014).

For this project, I want to build my skill set around polarities in order to help me develop in both my personal and professional spheres. In my personal life, I have a goal of finding balance. I often find myself in an all or nothing mindset which is unrealistic and unhealthy. Polarity management is meant to help you recognize the elements of two opposite forces and find the right balance between the two. It is about embracing the idea of “both/and” rather than “either/or” (Johnson, 2014).

Professionally, I have a perpetual goal of improving as a creative leader. Much of my work throughout the Masters in Creativity and Change Leadership program as well as in my career has been focused on problem solving, specifically CPS (Osborn, 1979). However, as Johnson points out, not all problems are solvable (Johnson, 2014). I believe that exploring this tool of polarity management will help me unlock a skill set that is both distinct from and complementary to the problem solving skills that I have already been developing. I hope this will give me a more well-rounded approach to creative leadership and facilitation.

My personal and professional interests have led me down this path of polarity exploration and I hope that expanding my skills in this area will help me work towards my goals. Below are some of my specific goals related to this project:

- To be able to recognize the difference between solvable problems and polarities to manage
- To find a greater sense of balance in my personal life

- To build up my skills as a creative leader and facilitator
- To expand my curiosity in the field of creativity

Rationale for Selection

There are several factors and experiences that have led to my interest in polarities. First, in a very broad sense, my undergraduate studies in psychology and business both have some connection to polarities. Although I didn't see it at the time, in hindsight, I can see that both subjects are full of tensions. In psychology, polarities greatly affect our mental state as a lot of stress, anxiety, and frustration can come from mismanaging polarities. On the flip side, understanding how to navigate polarities can help alleviate these negative states. In addition to psychology, the business field is also ripe with polarities. There are all sorts of polarities in an organizational setting such as the tension between centralization and decentralization, vertical and horizontal management, structure and flexibility, and more. The most successful managers and companies are those that are able to recognize and manage these polarities. Although I wasn't aware of the concept of polarities while completing my undergraduate studies, it seems that my majors have primed me for an interest in polarity management.

My first conscious dip into polarities was through my mom, who obtained polarity certification through Polarity Partnerships. In the past few years, we have had several conversations about polarities, but have never gone deep into the framework. Once I knew about the concept, I started to notice polarities pop up everywhere. In the spring of 2023, as part of the virtual Creative Expert Exchange conference, I attended a session with Dr. Michael Ackerbauer on variations on thinking style themes

(Ackerbauer, 2023). During this session, he mapped Foursight and the CPS process onto a polarity map. While he didn't go deep into the polarity aspect of it, it continued to heighten my interest in the topic. In the fall of 2023, I read the book *Facilitating Breakthrough* (Kahane & Schein, 2021), in which Kahane describes what he calls "transformative facilitation." Transformative facilitation is about removing the barriers to effective collaboration and hinges on an overarching polarity of horizontal and vertical facilitation. Within that main polarity, he describes five other polarities that a facilitator must navigate in order to get the group to move forward together (Kahane & Schein, 2021). Here again, I saw polarities in play and was especially intrigued by the role they play in facilitation. All of this is to say that I have had a lot of exposure to the concept of polarities and some of the possible applications, but I have never had a chance to take a deep dive into the topic to fully understand it and apply it in my own world.

This has all led me to have a deep and unfulfilled curiosity about polarity management which is why I am undertaking this project. I believe that this project may satisfy my growing interest in the topic of polarities as well as help me reach my personal and professional goals outlined above. I am deeply motivated both by my curiosity and my desire to continue to develop as a creative leader.

SECTION TWO: PERTINENT LITERATURE AND RESOURCES

Introduction to Literature and Resources

In order to develop a deep understanding of polarities, I want to first build a solid foundation of the core concept and then proceed to explore auxiliary applications of polarities that relate to my specific interests. These interests include the link between polarities and personality as well as the connection between polarities and Creative Problem-Solving (Osborn, 1979). Some key terms may include polarity thinking, polarity management, yes/and thinking, polarity personality type indicator, tensions, etc. Below, I have identified some literature and resources that I anticipate will help me in building my foundational understanding. I have split the resources into two sections, one focusing on the core concept of polarities and the other focusing on auxiliary applications. I have also included a list of people I may want to talk to who have some sort of expertise or experience in polarities. As I continue with this project, I expect these lists will grow and change.

Core Concept Resources

The following list of resources will help me build my basic understanding of polarity principles. Core concepts include how the Polarity Management Model (Johnson, 2014) works, how to identify polarities, how to use polarities in my own life, and more.

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

Johnson, B. (2020). *And: Making a difference by leveraging polarity, paradox or dilemma* (Vol. 1: Foundations) Hrd Press.

Polarity Partnerships. (n.d.). *Why polarity thinking?*. <https://polaritypracticetools.com/>

Polarity Practitioners. (2021). *And: Making a difference by leveraging polarity, paradox or dilemma* (Vol. 2: Applications). Hrd Press.

Smith, W., Lewis, M., & Edmondson, A. C. (2022). *Both/and thinking : Embracing creative tensions to solve your toughest problems*. Harvard Business Review Press.

Auxiliary Applications Resources

As I was searching for resources on polarities, I came across various works that apply polarity thinking to specific contexts. The following list of resources touch on some of my personal interests and tie them to polarity thinking. This includes polarities related to personality, human resources, and leadership.

The Polarity Institute. (n.d). *Polarity personality type indicator*.

<https://polarityinstitute.com/typology/>

Anderson, K. (2010). *Polarity coaching*. Human Resource Development.

Kahane, A., & Schein, E. H. (2021). *Facilitating breakthrough: How to remove obstacles, bridge differences, and move forward together*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Manderscheid, S. V., & Freeman, P. D. (2012). Managing polarity, paradox, and dilemma during leader transition. *European Journal of Training and Development*, 36(9), 856-872.

Wesorick, B. L. (2014). Polarity thinking: An essential skill for those leading interprofessional integration. *Journal of Interprofessional Healthcare*, 1(1), 12.

Key Conversations

In my search for polarity resources, I came across a few people in my life who have some expertise in polarities and I have access to talk to. First is Ismet Mamnoon, who is my sounding board partner and my mom. She is certified in polarity thinking and knowledgeable in the literature and resources that might be helpful for my project. Next is Liz Monroe-Cook. Liz is co-leading a polarity workshop at the Florida Creativity Conference that I will be attending in March of 2024. I hope to talk to her about my project and believe that she will be an especially good resource for the connection between polarities and CPS. The last person is Suzanne Damerom who is co-leading the polarity workshop at the Florida Creativity Conference alongside Liz Monroe-Cook. Suzanne is also in the master's project class with me, (CRS 690) so I am hoping she will be willing to discuss my project and potential applications. I anticipate that having people to talk to about polarities will help me expand my learning and explore new applications of polarities.

SECTION THREE: PROCESS PLAN

Plan to Achieve Your Goals and Outcomes

My project is focused on skill building and exploration, so I anticipate that it will involve a phase of learning and a phase of application. The learning phase will start off with gaining a basic understanding of polarity management and involve the literature listed in the Core Concept Resources in Section Two. I also hope to explore applications of polarities that relate to some of my personal interests which correlates with the Auxiliary Applications Resources list in Section Two. For the application phase, I will produce ten polarity maps, five of which relate to my personal life and the other five for my professional life. Creating these maps will not only give me a chance to practice what I have learned about polarities, but they will also serve as valuable resources to reference any time I am struggling with imbalance. A less tangible output of this project will be my own personal growth in understanding polarities which I will reflect on in the Key Learnings section of this paper. I expect that polarity management will be an extremely useful skill that will come in handy throughout my life, just like CPS has, and will help me reach my personal and professional goals outlined above. Figure 1 below outlines my project timeline and action plan.

Project Timeline

Figure 1.

Project Timeline and Action Plan

Activity	Deadline (gray = strict date)	Anticipated Hours to Complete	Support / Approval Needed
Project development + Concept Paper written	Feb 12, 2024	15	Dr. Susan Keller-Mathers
Read <i>Polarity Management</i> by Barry Johnson	March 1st, 2024	15	
Power Up Your Creativity with Polarity Thinking Session at Florida Creativity Conference	March 9th, 2024	2	Liz Monroe-Cook & Suzanne Damerom
Research The Polarity Approach to Continuity and Transformation (PACT)TM	March 15th, 2024	10	
Determine other essential readings/resources	March 17th, 2024	4	Ismet Mamnoon
Sections 1-3 of paper written	March 18th, 2024	10	Dr. Susan Keller-Mathers
Research Polarity Personality Types	March 25th, 2024	5	
Read academic articles on Polarities	March 31st, 2024	15	
Create 5 personal polarity maps	April 3rd, 2024	15	
Create 5 professional polarity maps	April 12th, 2024	15	
Get feedback on personal maps from 2 personal connection	April 19th, 2024	2	Ismet Mamnoon & Other Connection (TBD)
Get feedback on personal maps from professional connection	April 19th, 2024	2	Donnalyn Roxey
Sections 4-6 of paper written	April 21st, 2024	25	Dr. Susan Keller-Mathers

Full Master's Project Doc written	April 29th, 2024	15	Dr. Susan Keller-Mathers
Submit to Digital Commons	May 6th, 2024	1	Dr. Susan Keller-Mathers
Project Presentation	May 15th, 2024	5	Dr. Susan Keller-Mathers & 690 Classmates

Evaluation Plan

In order to ensure that I meet my goals for this project, I have outlined my evaluation plan for each of my learning goals below.

Goal One: Recognizing Solvable Problems vs Polarities to Manage

Although this goal does not have a tangible product, I should still be able to recognize when I achieve it. It is really about building awareness and understanding of a situation in order to clarify the challenge. In order to know that I have reached this goal, I will need to ensure that I have a thorough grasp of the definition of a polarity and a clear understanding of the differences between a problem and a polarity. I believe this will come through deliberate practice and I will be able to evaluate my progress with check-ins with my sounding board partner. I will reflect on this in the Key Learnings section of this paper.

Goal Two: Finding Balance in Personal Life

While this may seem like a broad goal, I do feel that it directly relates to this project as polarity management is all about finding balance. A first milestone for this goal will be to identify at least five tensions that I struggle with in my personal life. After that, my next milestone will be to build out polarity maps for each of the tensions that

include actionable strategies to manage the polarities. The longer term and less concrete milestone will be to actually use these strategies and this will involve constant check-ins with myself both during and after this project. I expect that getting feedback on my polarity maps from people close to me will help ensure that I am on the right path and help hold me accountable for implementing my strategies.

Goal Three: Building Skills as a Creative Leader

This is really a perpetual goal in my life, but in the context of this project, I plan to work towards this goal by mapping out some professional polarities. Similar to my previous goal, the first milestone will be to identify at least five polarities that I encounter in my professional life. Given my current work, I anticipate that these will be polarities that affect me as a facilitator or affect our clients/participants during workshops. The next milestone will be to build out polarity maps. After that, I will get feedback from a coworker and work towards implementing my learning in my current projects. Check-ins with my supervisor will help me stay on track here. I will reflect on this in the Key Learnings section of this paper.

Goal Four: Expand Curiosity in Creativity Field

As I come to the end of this master's program, I hope to continue to explore the field of creativity. Part of this goal is to feed my existing curiosity, in this case polarities. Along the way, I want to make sure that I give myself time and space to go down any rabbit hole that catches my eye. I will know that I am on track with this goal if, by the end of this project, I still feel energized and curious about the field of creativity.

SECTION FOUR: OUTCOMES

Polarity Maps

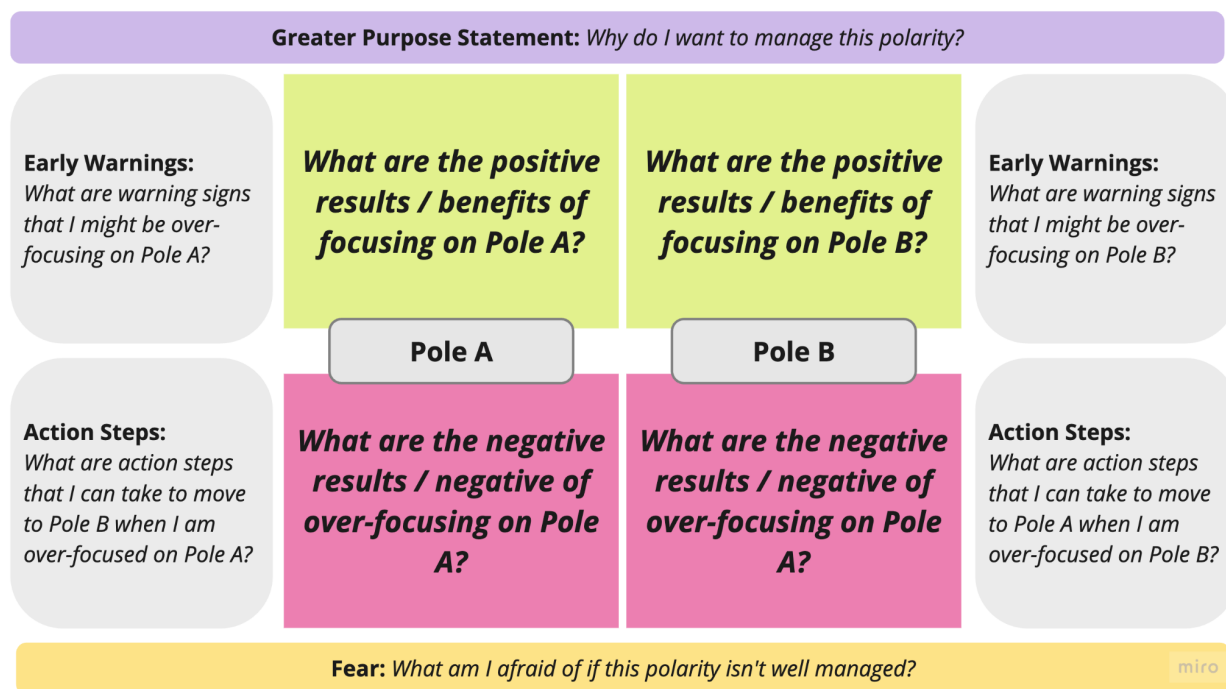
The early process of this project involved me diving into some of the literature around polarities which turned out to be deeply interesting. Based on my reading and research, I created the main output of this project, a set of personal and professional polarity maps. The process of creating these maps gave me a chance to put all my learnings about polarities into practice while creating something of value for myself. Not only are the end products of the maps going to be valuable going forward, the process of actually creating them gave me a deeper understanding of how polarities function.

I modeled my maps after the Polarity Partnerships's (n.d.), template (Appendix A), adapting it to fit my needs. The core concepts are the same; there are two poles, each with their own upside and downside, creating four quadrants. These quadrants form the main core of the map. Within the main core, there is an infinity sign illustration (depicted in gray in Figure 2) which represents the flow of energy through the polarity. The infinity sign, or energy flow, is symmetrical and balanced when a polarity is well managed; however, if there is something unbalanced in the polarity, the infinity sign indicates which quadrant you may be spending too much or too little time in. On the outside of the main core are the early warning signs that help you notice when you are spending too much time and energy on one pole to the neglect of the other. There are also action steps that help you move from the pole that you are stuck in over to the other pole. Lastly, there is a greater purpose statement (GPS) and fear statement at the top and bottom of the map to remind you why this polarity is so important to manage (Polarity Partnerships, n.d.). The difference between my polarity maps template and the

one provided by Polarity Partnerships (n.d.) is that I flipped the location of the early warning signs and action steps because it made more sense for me that way. Figure 2 explains each section of my polarity map template.

Figure 2.

Polarity Map Template



Note: Adapted from Polarity Partnerships

Personal Polarity Maps

We experience polarities in all aspects of our lives. The more I read about polarities and polarity maps, I knew the best way for me to gain a deeper understanding was putting the theory into practice by creating my own set of polarity maps. It seemed clear to me that the best place to start would be with the polarities closest to me - the ones that affect me in my personal life. There is an endless list of polarities that I could

have chosen from to create my personal polarity maps, but I chose to focus on polarities that I tend to struggle with the most because that is where the maps would be most useful. Throughout this process, I found that creating these maps helped me understand where I currently get stuck in each polarity and identify where I need to put more focus.

Independence & Interdependence

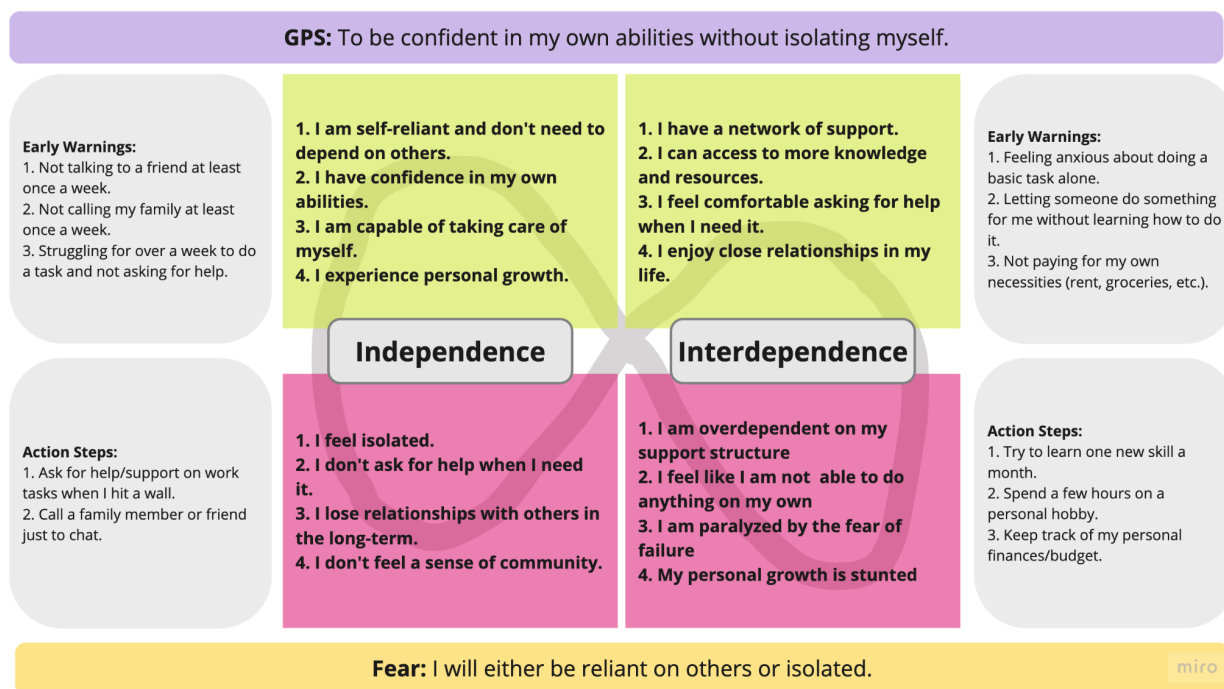
The first polarity I chose to map out in my personal life is independence and interdependence (Figure 3). This is a polarity that has become more prominent in my young adulthood. Throughout childhood many of us, myself included, get a lot of support from the people around us whether it be our parents, teachers, coaches, or friends. As we age, we gain more independence and responsibility. I sometimes find it difficult to balance the ongoing need and desire for support with the need and desire for independence. I often find myself gravitating to the independence side, trying to be hyper independent and handle everything on my own. After a while, I get burnt out or hit an obstacle and swing over to the interdependence side. By then, I am often so overwhelmed that I lean too heavily on my support and start to experience the downsides of that pole. This cycle is clearly a poorly managed polarity, which is why I wanted to map it out.

The process of mapping out this polarity helped me see that while I often experience the upside of independence, I rarely experience the upside of interdependence. It's not because I never lean on support from others, but rather I wait till I am so far in the downside of independence, that I swing too far into

interdependence and very quickly move into the downside of that pole. If I pay more attention to the early warning signs of independence and take the appropriate action steps, it would help me spend more time in the upsides of each pole.

Figure 3.

Independence & Interdependence Polarity Map



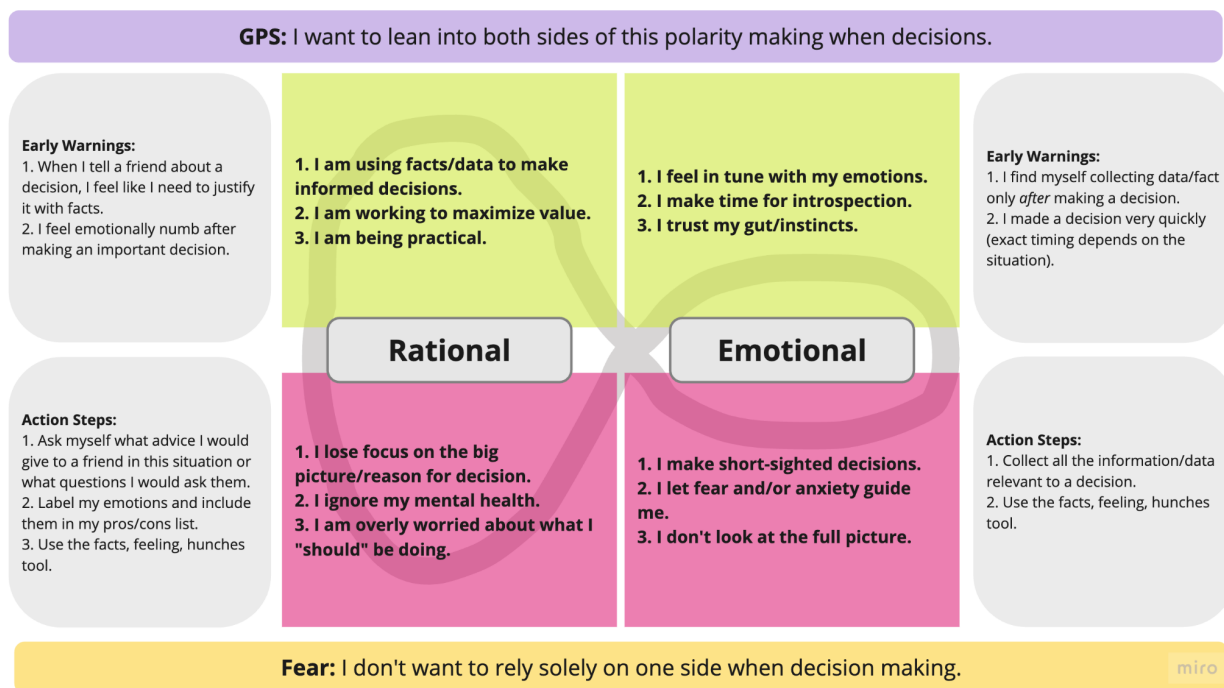
Rational & Emotional

Balancing rationality and emotionality has always been an ongoing effort for me and I now realize that it is a polarity. I tend to gravitate to the rational pole more often, especially when I am stressed. In fact, the more emotional I am, the more I lean into the rationality side of this polarity because I think that being objective is the “right” option. However, mapping out this polarity outlined in Figure 4 showed me that there are benefits to recognizing emotions and that it is important to spend time and energy on

that side of the polarity as well. I don't often recognize the upsides of emotionality, even when I am experiencing the downside of rationality; it just never occurred to me that rationality and emotionality were interrelated. Seeing them mapped together helps me understand how the two are connected and how I can use emotionality to my benefit and to help mitigate the downsides of rationality. Making this map also helped me realize that some action steps can help you no matter which downside you are in; in this case, it is the facts, feelings, and hunches tool (Burnett, 2010, p. 133) which helps for either pole.

Figure 4.

Rational & Emotional Polarity Map



Stability & Change

Stability and change is a polarity that I experience in many facets of my life. Over the past two years, I have been very happy in my career and I think it is due to managing this polarity well. I am experiencing the upside of stability in that I have comfort and security in a job that I enjoy. At the same time, I am experiencing the upsides of change as my role and tasks at my job adapt as I continue to learn and grow. In other aspects of my life however, I am still struggling with this polarity. For example, I have been moving around a lot the past year having lived in North Carolina, New York, and Massachusetts in addition to a lot of travel. I have been enjoying the upsides of change, but am also starting to experience the downsides.

Mapping out this polarity as seen in Figure 5, helps me see my success in my career as well as the opportunity for better balance in my physical location. I recognize that this is a longer-term cycle for me as compared to the previous polarities. The shift between stability and change takes a lot longer. Making this map helped me realize that I am currently creeping towards the downsides of change, in terms of my physical location, and that I need to spend some time moving in the direction of stability.

Figure 5.

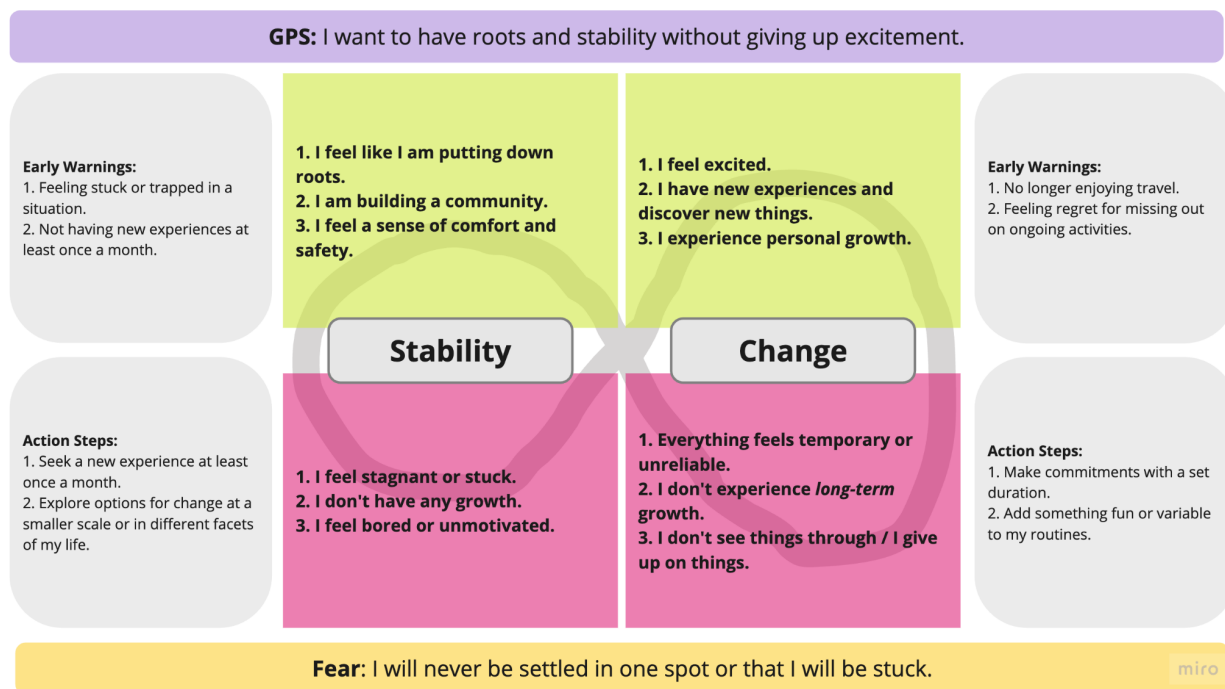
Stability & Change Polarity Map***Future Planning & Present Moment***

Figure 6 shows the fourth polarity I mapped; future planning and present moment. I think it is basic human nature to know you should work towards long-term goals but be tempted by present pleasures. Personally, I often try to limit short-term enjoyment, trying to resist the “temptation”. Looking at it as a polarity instead of a temptation helped me see that focus and enjoyment in the present moment also has benefits and that both sides of the polarity are worth enjoying. This was a key moment of taking an unsolvable problem and recognizing it as a polarity to manage. Instead of a constant feeling of guilt when I enjoy things in the moment, I can now see there are

upsides to focusing on the present moment and seeing that gives me a more complete picture.

Figure 6.

Future Planning & Present Moment Polarity Map.



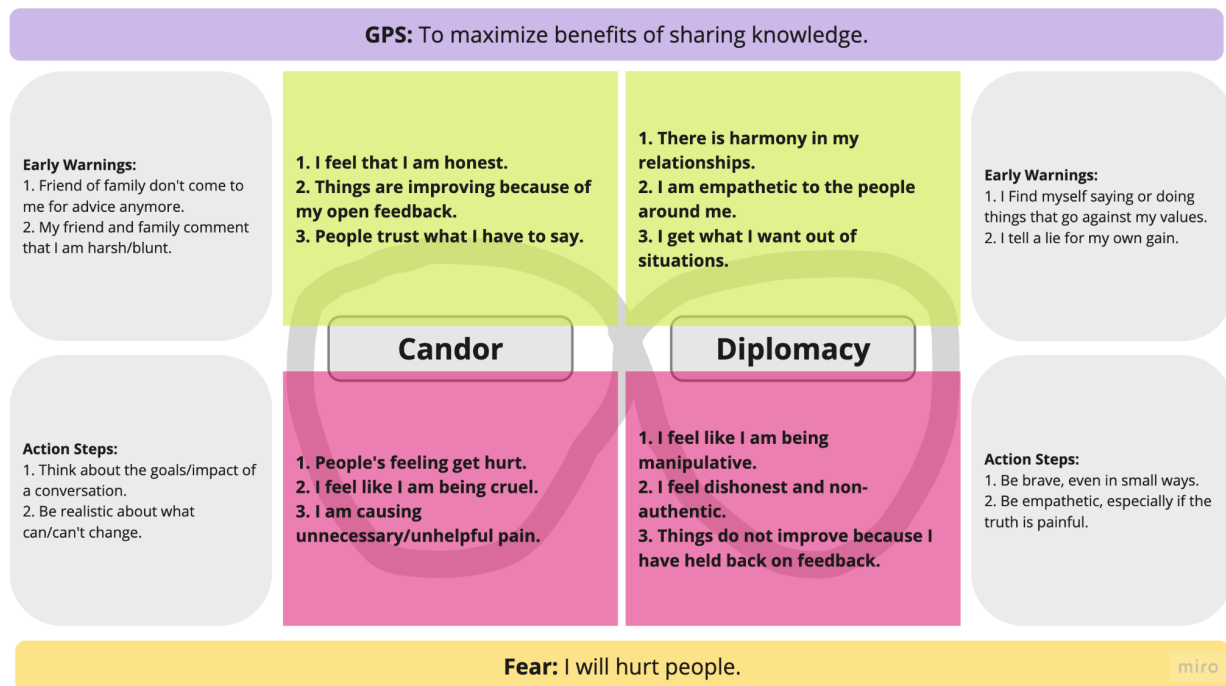
Candor & Diplomacy

In my mind, candor is telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth while diplomacy is curating information for a certain audience. Personally, I have experienced the downsides of each of these poles. I have had moments where I am too honest in situations where the blatant truth is unnecessary and hurtful. On the other hand, I have also had times where I have kept quiet just to keep peace and ended up making things harder in the long run or feeling manipulative. For me this is one of the trickiest polarities to manage because the downside of both poles involves hurting other people,

which is the last thing I would want to do. Mapping this out (Figure 7) allowed me to see that I tend to spend time in the downside of both poles and rarely experience the upside. Seeing the full picture makes me realize that upsides exist and that they are worth working towards. The warning signs and actions steps will help guide me to an upside when I am stuck in a downside of either pole.

Figure 7.

Candor & Diplomacy Moment Polarity Map



Professional Polarity Maps

My inspiration for doing a set of professional polarity maps is from my sounding board partner and mom, Ismet Mamnoon. In the spring of 2023, Ismet ran a series of three workshops on polarities with my company, KnowInnovation. KnowInnovation's mission is to accelerate scientific innovation by using creativity to facilitate events and

workshops for scientists (KnowInnovation, n.d.). Understanding polarities can help us run better workshops, so it was great to have had Ismet teach us about how polarities show up in our work. We had one session on polarities for self, one on polarities we manage as facilitators, and one on polarities our clients struggle with. All three sessions were extremely valuable and really sparked my interest in polarity thinking.

While all three polarity sessions were valuable, the reason I chose to focus on facilitation polarities specifically is due to Adam Kahane's use of polarities in the book *Facilitating Breakthrough* (Kahane & Schein, 2021). In his book, Kahane identifies five polarities that are essential to what he calls "transformative facilitation." These polarities are Inquiring & Advocating, Advancing & Concluding, Discovering & Mapping, Accompanying & Directing, and Standing Inside & Standing Outside. Kahane says that a facilitator must navigate these polarities in order to get the group to move forward together (Kahane & Schein, 2021). While overall I found the book to be inspiring and useful, I would have loved to see Kahane use polarities more deeply. In my mind, identifying the polarities is a great first step, but actually mapping them out and offering warning signs, action steps, or tips to navigate the polarities would have been extremely helpful for readers. In the session we had with Ismet, we had the chance to map out the polarity of Keeping to Time & Allowing for Conversation. This was extremely useful to me and after seeing how Kahane outlined the facilitation process as a set of polarities, I was even more intrigued.

All of this has led me to create a set of polarity maps focused on polarities we face in facilitation. The five polarities I chose are not comprehensive of all the polarities that are involved in facilitation and instead are just a few I found interesting to start with.

I picked polarities that are particularly relevant in my professional life as a facilitator. I help plan and facilitate workshops that leverage the science of creativity to help scientists for various disciplines come up with innovative research ideas. You will notice that all of my professional polarity maps have balanced polarity sign illustrations (seen in gray). For my personal polarity maps, the infinity sign illustration represented the flow of energy through the polarity and how much time and energy I spent in each side. However, these professional maps are more generalized so the energy flow will vary for each situation and each facilitator so I could not accurately map the energy flow. I chose to still include the illustration as a reminder of the dynamic flow of polarities.

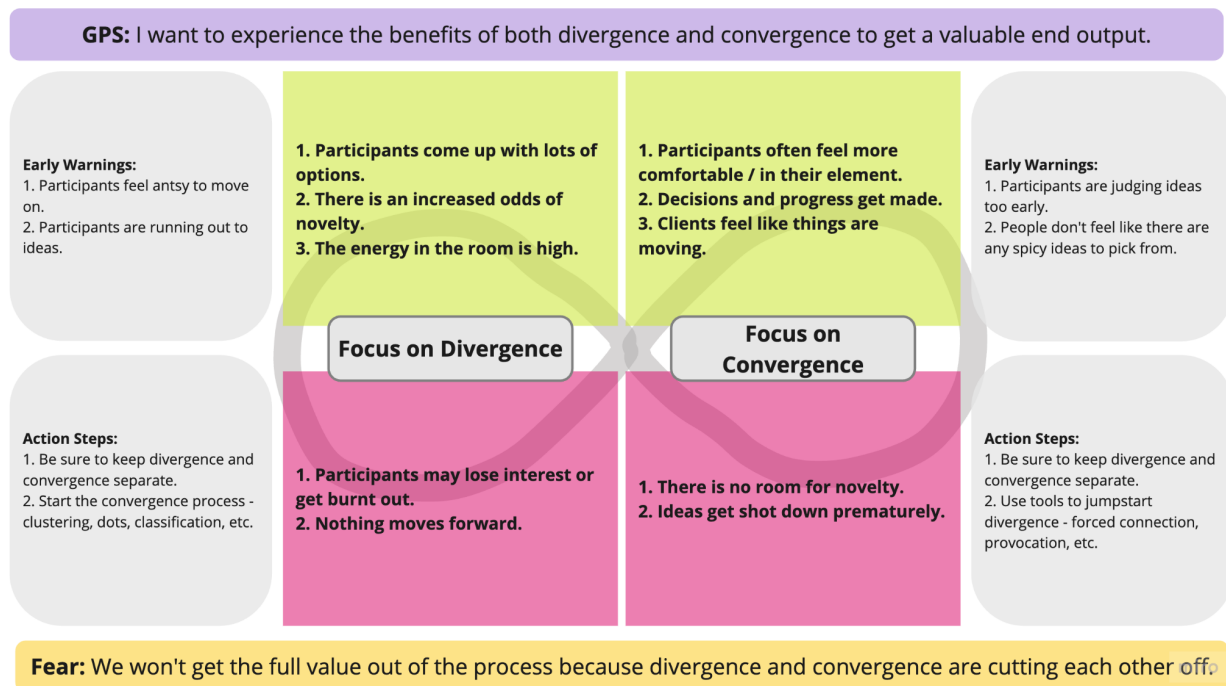
Focus on Divergence & Focus on Convergence

I chose the polarity of divergence and convergence (Figure 8) because I see it as one of the most basic polarities of the classic Creative Problem-Solving process (Osborn, 1979). In my experience, I have found that people find the convergence side of this polarity easier and more natural. In our day-to-day lives, we spend a lot of time converging. However, divergence is equally important, especially for creativity. In a workshop, we have various tips and tools to help people with divergence, but the biggest challenge isn't getting people to diverge, but rather to keep them there long enough given that they often want to converge far too early. Creating this polarity map highlighted why this is an issue; participants have the urge to move to convergence before they have experienced the full upside of divergence. They don't generate enough options, they haven't reached novelty, and they aren't enjoying the high energy of

divergence. Creating this map helped me see that it is just a matter of pushing participants to spend a little more time and energy on the divergence side of the pole.

Figure 8.

Focus on Divergence & Focus on Convergence Polarity Map



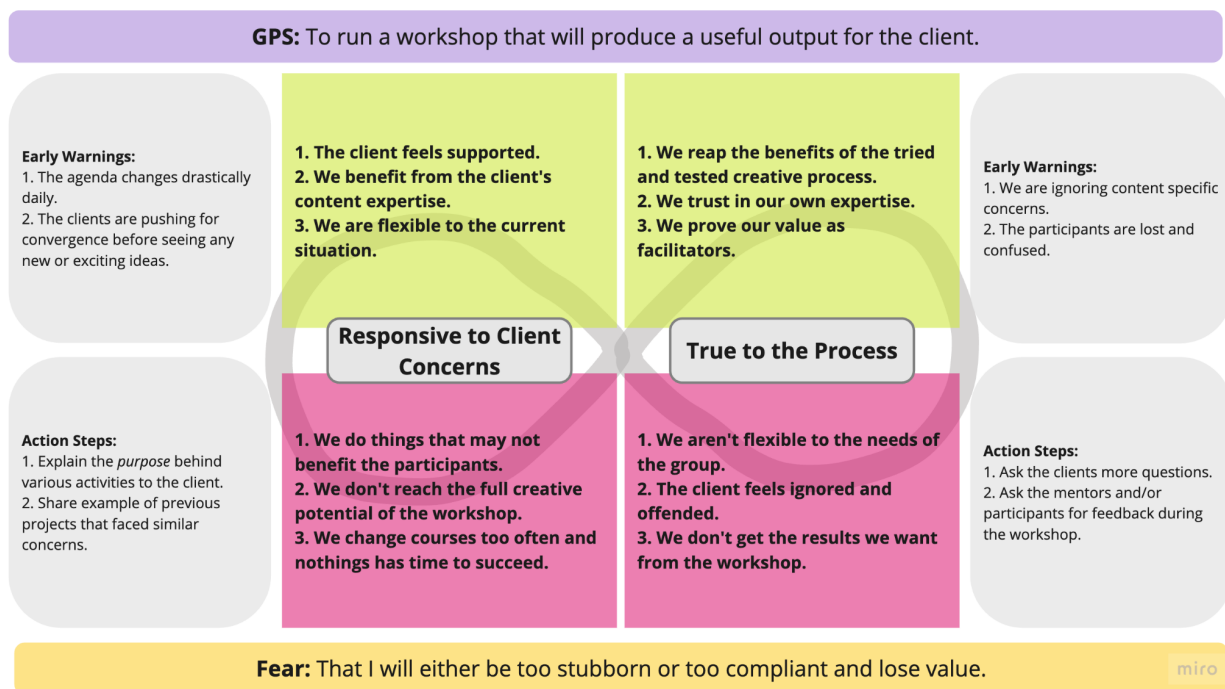
Responsive to Client Concerns & True to the Process

The next polarity I mapped is responsiveness to client concerns and staying true to the process (Figure 9). This is a polarity I often struggle with as a facilitator. As facilitators, we plan an agenda and process based on our expertise in creativity. However, creativity isn't the only factor that is important. At most of our workshops, the participants are scientists who are working on complex research challenges that we as facilitators know little about. Our clients, often program directors from government organizations, have content expertise which is extremely valuable to the planning

process. Therefore, there exists a polarity between trusting our own expertise in creativity as facilitators and leaning on our clients' expertise in the content. In my own experience, where I personally fall on this polarity varies by situation. Mapping out the polarity is really helpful in that it shows the complete picture of upsides and downsides of each pole. Oftentimes, the decision to change or not change the agenda based on client feedback seems small or inconsequential, but this map helps remind me of the consequences of those decisions and what factors to take into account.

Figure 9.

Responsive to Client Concerns & True to the Process Polarity Map



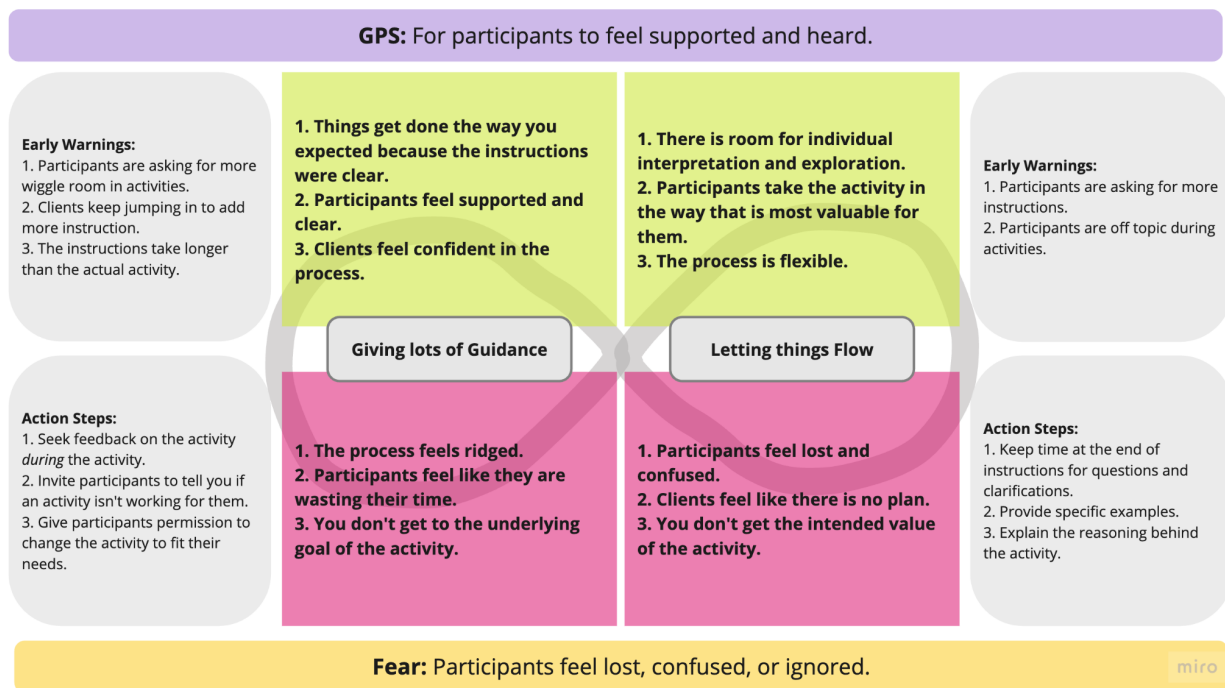
Giving Lots of Guidance & Letting Things Flow

The third polarity I chose is between giving participants a lot of guidance and letting things flow naturally (Figure 10). When giving workshop participants instructions

for activities, I have seen some facilitators give lots of instructions, guidance, and examples. On the other hand, I have seen other facilitators give the bare minimum of guidance and let the participants figure out what works best for them. I had often thought of this as different facilitation styles, but it was really interesting to reframe it as a polarity and see what insights that gave me. Mapping this polarity helped me see that each pole has its own upsides and downsides and that it is not good enough to choose only one pole or another. Going too far in either direction ends up hurting the participants and workshop as a whole. I think the early warning signs and action steps are especially useful for this polarity because they can help you course correct quickly during a workshop.

Figure 10.

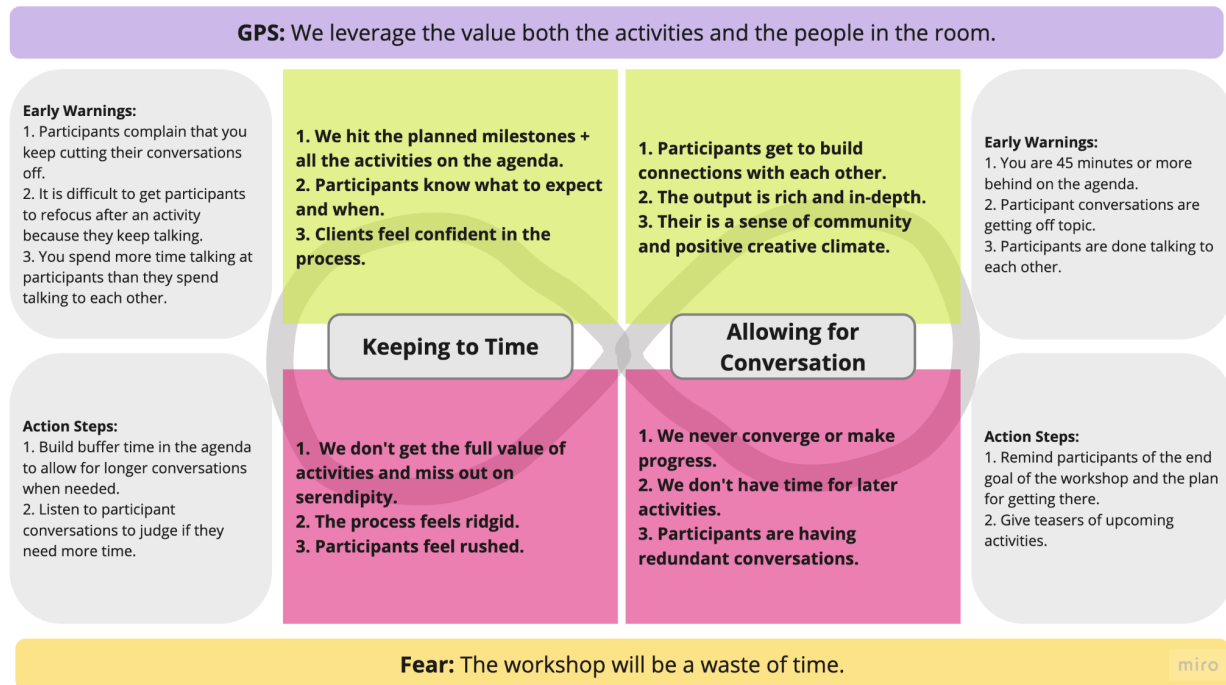
Giving lots of Guidance & Letting things Flow Polarity Map



Keeping to Time & Allowing for Conversations

The polarity of keeping to time and allowing for conversation is one that we actually looked at as a company in the previously mentioned polarity sessions with Ismet. I found the conversation around this polarity so interesting that I wanted to map it out as part of this project (Figure 11). In my mind, the main benefit of keeping to time is that you make it to everything that you planned to do; however, after experiencing several workshops, I have realized there is also something magical that happens in participant conversations that you can't just plan into an agenda. Mapping this polarity helped me see that both sides of the polarity have benefits and both are essential for a productive workshop. I think this polarity is especially useful, not only for our own understanding as facilitators, but also for showing clients to help explain why we are either deviating from the agenda or cutting off conversations.

Figure 11.

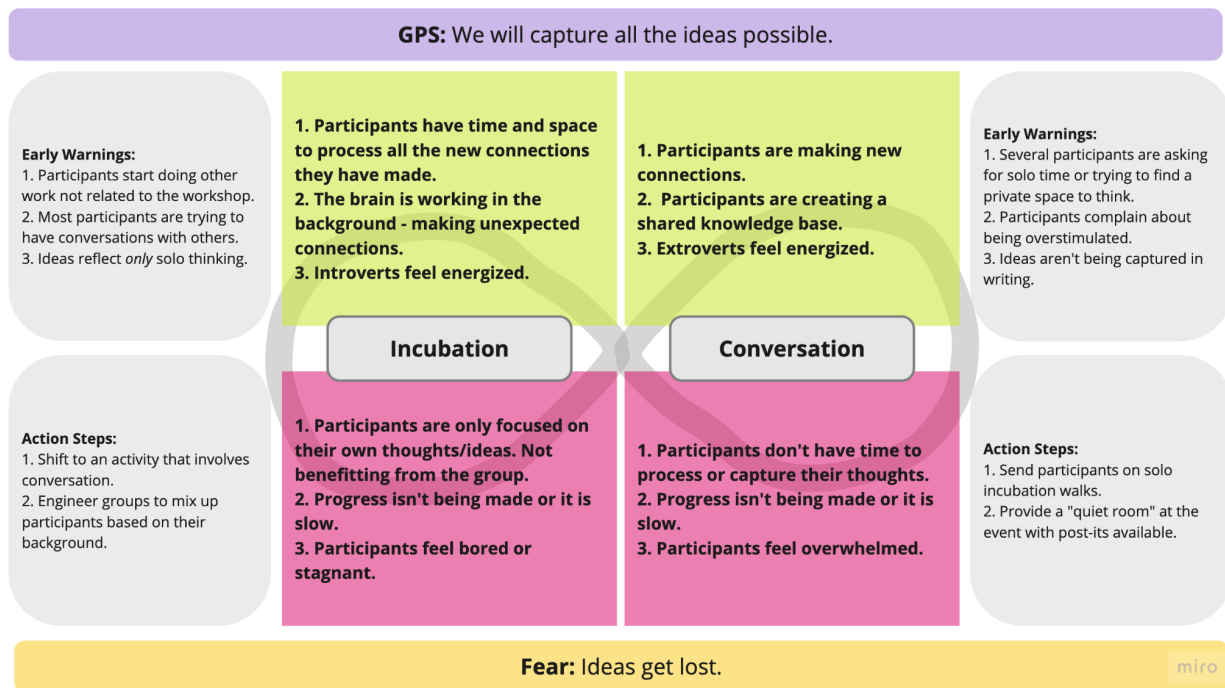
Keeping to Time & Allowing for Conversations Polarity Map***Incubation & Conversation***

The last polarity I mapped was incubation and conversation (Figure 12). This is a polarity I frequently hear from participants at our workshops. We often have participants either complain that they have no time to process and think or that they need more time to talk with the other participants. Mapping out this polarity helped me see that these complaints are not indicative of problems, but rather that participants are experiencing the downside of one of the poles. Both incubation and conversation are essential to the creative process and so it is important that we try to maximize the time spent in the upside of each pole. Here again, I find the early warning signs and action steps

especially helpful as they can help facilitators read the room and course correct throughout the workshop.

Figure 12.

Incubation & Conversation Polarity Map



SECTION FIVE: KEY LEARNINGS

Learnings from Readings

At the start of this journey, I expected that there would be a lot of little details and nuances that were essential to truly understanding polarities. I imagined that all the little pieces would finally click together for an ah-ha moment. Instead, that ah-ha moment really came at the beginning of my polarity journey. When I first heard about polarities years ago, they stuck in my mind and kept resurfacing, which is why this project came about. I can't claim that my literature review for this project was all-encompassing of every aspect of polarities; however, I do feel like I gained a relatively good view of the field. I reviewed some of the foundational resources including *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems* (Johnson, 2014), *And: Making a Difference by Leveraging Polarity, Paradox or Dilemma Volume 1* (Johnson, 2020), and *And: Making a Difference by Leveraging Polarity, Paradox or Dilemma Volume 2*. I also explored some more niche applications of polarities such as polarities in facilitation (Kahane & Schein, 2021) and the polarity personality type indicator (The Polarity Institute, n.d.).

After a certain point of literature review, I started to feel a bit stuck. After stepping back for a moment and talking things through with my sounding board partner, I saw that I wasn't stuck, but rather grounded. I realized that once you understand the basics of polarities, every application of them makes sense. When you see a new or niche use of polarities, it clicks quickly and is easy to understand. My big takeaway here is that polarities are foundational. By that, I mean they are such an integral part of our everyday lives that once you have the language to describe them, they just make

sense. You finally have the key that unlocks so many doors. You start to see polarities everywhere. It was really remarkable to me how quickly and easily polarities fit into my life.

Reflecting on this further, it makes sense that polarities fit so naturally into my mindset. Creativity has been a huge part of my life and managing, understanding, and navigating polarities requires many basic creative thinking skills. For example, many of the creative thinking skills identified by E. Paul Torrance (Torrance & Safter, 1999) such as keeping open, putting ideas into context, looking at things another way, being flexible, and more are essential to polarities. Learning about creativity and the Creative Problem-Solving Process (Osborn, 1979) has already brought so much into my life and the concept of polarities is a perfect addition to my creativity tool kit.

Learnings from Polarity Map Creation

The process of creating these maps taught me a few key lessons. First, I noticed that the polarities I struggle with in my personal life also affect my professional life. In hindsight, it seems like this should have been obvious, but for me it was an important insight. A mismanaged, or even a well-managed, polarity affects how I act in *every* aspect of my life because the polarities that I chose aren't restricted to only my personal life. This insight highlighted how fundamental polarities can be to our identity and behaviors.

Another key lesson I learned is how difficult but valuable it is to be specific and measurable in all sections of the polarity maps. My first drafts of the polarity maps were much more general because I wanted them to apply to a broad range of situations.

However, when I spoke with my sounding board partner, she pushed me to get more detailed and specific. For the inner quadrants, she suggested that I be more specific and illustrative with my language. For example, in my polarity of Candor & Diplomacy (Figure 7) instead of writing “empathy,” I wrote “I am empathetic to the people around me.” While this seems like a small change, it helped me get a better understanding and image of what that pole really looks like. For the outer quadrant, the early warning signs and action steps, having clear and measurable notes makes the maps much more useful. For example, in my polarity of Independence & Interdependence (Figure 3) the action step of “Learn new skills” became “Learn one new skill each month.” Again, this seems like a small change, but having a more specific action step is a lot more useful, especially when you are already burnt out from being stuck in the downside of a pole.

A third key lesson I learned is that the upsides and downsides of polarities can often mirror each other. For example, my polarity map of Incubation & Convergence (Figure 12) has “Progress isn't being made or it is slow” as a downside for both poles. This happens across several of my maps and at first, I found it surprising, but after talking through it with my sounding board partner, I realized that it is not uncommon. When you are at the extreme downside of either side of a polarity, things can often look the same even if the reason you are there is different. That is one of the reasons why the early warning signs are so helpful; they can help you determine which side of the polarity you are on and remind you to take action before you get to the extreme downside.

Another lesson I learned from this experience is that, at least for me personally, the Greater Purpose Statement (GPS) is always about maximizing the benefits of the

two poles. At first, I was frustrated because for every GPS I wanted to write the same thing, “Find balance between pole A and pole B.” To me, this didn’t feel right because the word “balance” seems very static while the reality of polarities is that your energy is constantly moving between the two poles. From there, I realized that it’s not about maintaining some level of homeostasis or perfect balance at every single moment, it’s about finding the right rhythm and being in tune enough to understand where you are in a polarity and being able to course correct as needed. It’s about maximizing the time you spend in the upside of each pole and to do that you must recognize that you can’t solely stay put in one pole’s upside without eventually experiencing the downside. By reframing it as maximizing the benefits rather than maintaining balance, I better understood the dynamic nature of polarities.

On the flip side, although my Greater Purpose Statements were often similar, I did not have the same experience with my Fear Statements, specifically for my personal polarity maps. One would think that if the GPS is always to maximize the upside of each pole, the fear would be around spending time in the downsides of each pole; however, I did not find this to be the case. For my personal polarity maps, I found that my fears really reflected the downside I experience most based on the pole that I tend to prefer. For example, on my Future Planning & Present Moment map (figure 6), my fear is “I will spend all my time restricting myself and never have enjoyment.” This is clearly connected to the downside of future planning which is where I tend to spend more time. To me, the fears associated with the downside of that specific pole were much more motivating and impactful because they are the downsides that I often find myself experiencing. This wasn’t the case for my professional polarity maps because I didn’t

identify where I spend more time and energy because they weren't personal. Here, the fears were often around experiencing the downsides of both poles, as expected.

Project Evaluation

As my project comes to an end, I took some time to reflect on my goals that I outlined at the start of this process. Below is my evaluation of each of my goals.

Goal One: Recognizing Solvable Problems vs Polarities to Manage

I feel as though I have achieved this goal. This project has given me a strong understanding of polarities and I am now confident in my ability to recognize polarities when I see them. In fact, I had an experience with a coworker that made me feel assured that I had reached this goal. My coworker asked me to facilitate a session with our colleagues to help overcome a problem she was having. The problem was that our company needed to focus more on marketing, but our delivery team was resistant to marketing efforts. As she described her problem, I recognized that it could be reframed as a polarity. Instead of a problem of a stubborn delivery team, it was an off balanced polarity between delivery focus and marketing focus. I ended up guiding the group to fill out a partial polarity map of delivery focus & marketing focus and my coworker said the experience was extremely valuable and exactly what she needed. This experience made me confident that I am growing my skills in recognizing problems versus polarities.

Goal Two: Finding Balance in Personal Life

I certainly hit the first two milestones of this goal which were to identify polarities I struggle with in my personal life and create polarity maps with actionable strategies. These polarity maps are resources that will help me going forward in my life. The long-term milestone of actually putting these maps to use and acting on the strategies I identified will take much longer to evaluate, however, I feel confident that I have set myself up for success and will continue to make progress on this goal.

Goal Three: Building Skills as a Creative Leader

I have surely reached the goal of building skills as a creative leader. My concrete milestones here were to identify and create professional polarity maps, which I did achieve. Beyond just the maps, I think that learning about polarities in general has truly expanded my toolkit as a creative leader. I can now identify and manage a whole other sphere of creativity that I didn't have before. Practically speaking, I have already put polarities to use in my work life as described in the story with my coworker. I know that polarities will continue to help me grow as a creative leader.

Goal Four: Expand Curiosity in Creativity Field

This goal is easy to check-off. As I come to the end of this project, I feel even more energized and curious about the field of creativity. I am excited by all the connections I made during the project that I can't wait to further explore and I also feel optimistic about all the other connections I have yet to make. This is certainly not the end of my exploration of the field of creativity.

SECTION SIX: CONCLUSIONS

Future Exploration

My exploration of polarities is far from over and as I worked on this project, several ideas and suggestions came up that I unfortunately didn't have time to explore in this timeframe. Below is a list of applications of polarities that I plan to explore in the future.

- **Polarities and Foursight:** One application of polarities that I didn't get a chance to explore during this process is the polarities of FourSight. The FourSight thinking profiles (Puccio, 1999) are extremely interesting to me and I'm sure there is work tying them to polarities which I would love to explore.
- **Polarities and CPS:** I unfortunately didn't have time to explore the polarities involved in the Creative Problem-Solving Process (Osborn, 1979). One of my professional polarity maps explored convergence and divergence which is a core concept of CPS, but I'm sure there are other polarities to explore in this context as well.
- **Navigating Facilitation Polarities:** When I was talking through some of my professional polarity maps with one of my coworkers, she mentioned how every facilitator has different tools, techniques, and tips for navigating the polarities we see during facilitation. I think it would be a really interesting project to interview some of the facilitators at my company and compile strategies for navigating various polarities.

As I continue to use polarities, I am sure I will come across more and more applications that I want to explore.

Conclusion

My biggest takeaway from this project is that polarity management is an invaluable skill that I will certainly use going forward. I detailed some of my learnings in the Key Learning section of this paper. In addition to all my learnings about polarities, I leave this project with more excitement and open-mindedness about what else is out there. There are so many other tools, frameworks, and ways of thinking that I have yet to discover and I can't wait to continue learning. Overall, as this project comes to a close, I feel like I am not at the end, but rather the beginning of a lifelong journey of learning.

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Appendix A

Polarity Partnership Polarity Map Template

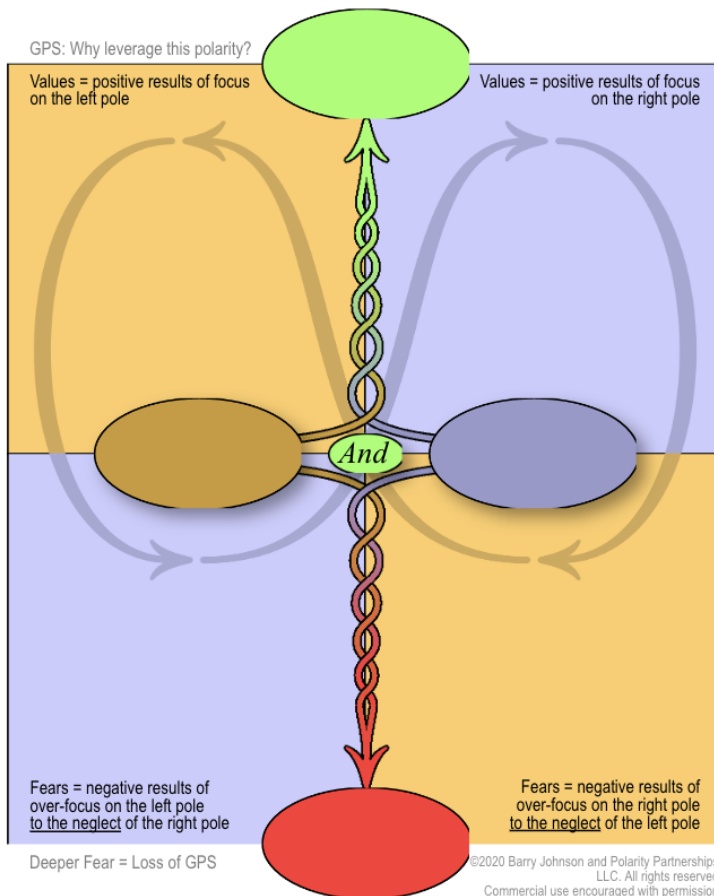
Polarity Map®

Action Steps

How will we gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on this left pole?
What? Who? By When? Measures?

Early Warnings

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



Action Steps

How will we gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on this right pole?
What? Who? By When? Measures?

Early Warnings

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

www.PolarityPartnerships.com

Polarity Partnerships. (n.d.). *Blank editable polarity map - locked* [PowerPoint Slides].

<https://polaritypracticetools.com/admin/resources#downloads>

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I hereby grant permission to the Department of Creativity and Change Leadership, Center for Applied Imagination at Buffalo State University permission to place a digital copy of this master's project, *Balancing Act: An Exploration of Polarities in Personal and Professional Life*, as an online resource.

Hana Mamnoon

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Hana Mamnoon". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

May 6th, 2024