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# Leveraging Polarities in Changing Organizational and Leader Identity

By Ann V. Deaton

Our identities, whether individual or organizational, are something we hold dear. Identity is the core of who we are and encompasses our values, our personality, our habitual ways of being and doing things, and our beliefs. Identity provides the strong foundation that enables our success. We tend to believe that identity is enduring, yet we all know that change is a given. What happens when who we've been up until now is not who we need to be to continue to thrive?

In using polarity thinking (PT) in my coaching and facilitation with individual leaders and teams, it is evident that PT is a powerful and impactful approach to supporting successful identity changes. While minimizing the stress and pain that often accompany such transformations, recognition of key polarities can facilitate the integration of core aspects of past identity along with the manifestation of essential, if less familiar, ways of being. In this short article, I share several examples of how understanding and leveraging polarities has contributed to the process of identity change for individual leaders and organizations.

## Polarities?

A polarity is a pair of interdependent values where both are essential, where neither alone will engender sustained success over time.

- » Whenever we feel a pull between competing values, and when that same pull seems to occur repeatedly, the likelihood is that we are experiencing a polarity.
- » When we face a complex challenge, and there are factions on each side convinced that they are right, there is the possibility that both sides are indeed right, yet neither alone is sufficient. It is likely to be a polarity.
- » When our organization adopts a set of values and they work for a while, but then no longer produce success, it's possible that we have a polarity to leverage instead of a problem to solve.

A polarity requires Both/And thinking, which is different than a problem that can be solved with Either/Or thinking.

We all successfully manage many polarities in our lives and work. Results and Relationships, Individual and Team, Planning and Executing are examples of polarities that most of us deal with regularly. Some

polarities we don't manage well, sometimes because we haven't recognized that a polarity exists at all, or when we have a strong preference for one of the values and that causes us to neglect the other. As Barry Johnson, father of Polarity thinking, said succinctly: "Polarities are unavoidable, indestructible, and unsolvable." Thus, a true polarity will routinely recur when we fail to acknowledge its existence.

### Leveraging Polarities in Changing Organizational and Leader Identity

The impetus for identity change typically occurs when growth and greater complexity are at play and more is being demanded of us. The challenge of evolving identity is felt by all of us as we develop throughout our lives. The organizations we are part of also experience identity change. The language and practice of polarity thinking offers a powerful approach to successful identity change. Let me share some short vignettes to give you a flavor of what this looks like:

- » A medium sized consulting company is challenged by its communication practices and lack of processes as it grows in size. Leaders have long held on to the brand of being agile and welcoming input from every single employee. Yet the leadership team is recognizing that more people makes agility and inclusive decision-making far more challenging. Leaders wonder whether growth will cause them to sacrifice their core identity. As they engage in individual reflection and team coaching and dialogue, leaders recognize that they don't have to give up on being agile and open to input. Using tools such as the Tannenbaum-Schmidt decision-making authority continuum, they begin to note that decisions need not always be participative, nor are they always made at the top. Rather, the identity change required is that they embody the entire range of decision-making authority and gain the benefit of:
  - Participative Decision-making AND Directive Decision-making
  - Agility AND Standardization
- » As the leadership team begins to create processes and routines that enable

greater ease and less stress, one leader observes: "This isn't so bad. I actually have the bandwidth to be creative when some things are clear and consistent." Others still struggle to adapt, noting that creating policies and procedures is time-consuming. Desired identity: we manage what we know works well, and we collaborate to creatively respond to new challenges.

- » A leader new to her position in a large technology company believes she can continue to focus on others in her new role. Long recognized for her commitment to the job and for being a "people person," it hadn't occurred to her that this new leadership role may challenge her established identity. Why delegate when you can do it yourself and avoid overwhelming others with too many demands? Can't she continue to be a selfless leader? Coaching this leader involved posing questions such as: "What is the cost, to your team and to you, of never delegating?" "What behaviors are most important to hold on to as you evolve?" and "How will your team let you know the impact of these changes?" As she became aware that focusing on herself does not mean she cannot also focus on others, she embraced a new identity: being a leader who cares for others AND takes care of herself. This is more sustainable in her new role.
- » A medium-sized company in the construction industry is shifting its core businesses. The company wants to ensure that it focuses its resources on continued excellence. That means some business units will close and it won't be possible to absorb all the people affected. The company, long known for its loyalty to its people, is faced with a change in identity. Though it's not easy, they transform themselves by consciously leveraging several key polarities:
  - Care for the People AND Care for the Business
  - Short-term Focus AND Long-term Focus
 To honor their value of people, they support leaving employees in finding

**Ann V. Deaton, PhD, PCC**, coaches leaders, teams, and organizations experiencing significant change and growth. Deaton earned her doctorate in Clinical Psychology at The University of Texas, and her Leadership Coaching Certification from the Newfield Network. A member of the Polarities Mastery VI learning community, Deaton can be reached at [Ann@wecanbounce.com](mailto:Ann@wecanbounce.com).

their next jobs. The evolving identity: creatively leading through changing times and being a positive example for others in our industry.

For each of these clients, an identity change that leveraged key polarities meant that their identities were enhanced rather than left behind or destroyed. The Both/And approach of polarity thinking created a bridge from a treasured identity that had served them well to an identity that was more flexible in meeting newly emerging challenges. Embracing polarity thinking ensures that the process of the next identity change will be met with awareness and greater facility and confidence.