

PRO-TIP: HOW TO LEAD THROUGH POLARITY

BARRY JOHNSON'S POLARITY MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

OVERVIEW

Barry Johnson's framework of *Polarity Management* helps leaders recognize that many of the tensions they face are not *problems to fix* but *polarities to balance*. Problems have clear endpoints: once solved, they disappear. Polarities, however, are ongoing and interdependent—like breathing in and breathing out. You can't choose one over the other; life depends on the rhythm between both.

CHANGE AND STABILITY

Both are essential to the health of any system. When we lean too far toward *change*, we invite creativity, innovation, and growth—but risk fragmentation, fatigue, and chaos. When we cling too tightly to *stability*, we ensure consistency and safety—but risk rigidity, stagnation, and irrelevance. Leadership failure often arises when one side of this polarity is treated as the enemy of the other.

PRACTICAL RHYTHM

MAP THE POLARITY

Name both poles and identify the benefits and risks of each

SPOT EARLY WARNING SIGNS

Notice when the downsides of one pole are starting to show-- burnout on the change side, complacency on the stability side.

DESIGN BALANCING ACTIONS

Introduce small corrections: rituals that restore stability (reflection, clear agreements) or sparks that re-energize change (pilot projects, new partnerships).

COMMUNICATE THE "BOTH/AND"

Replace either/or thinking with language that honors both needs.



CYCLES

Polarity Management invites us to picture these dynamics as a **cycle, not a line**. Each pole has an **upside and a downside**. The goal is not to choose but to keep moving between them consciously.

MANAGING TENSION

In loosely coupled systems, this tension is constant. Teams and communities need enough *stability*—shared purpose, clear communication, agreed-upon norms—to stay connected. But they also need *change*—experimentation, local autonomy, and innovation—to stay alive. The art of leadership lies in sensing when to lean into one pole and when to swing back to the other.

CONCLUSION

When leaders practice this rhythm, chaos becomes less of a crisis and more of a **signal**—an indicator that the system has drifted too far toward one pole. The work then is not to “fix” the chaos but to **rebalance** the system.

In this way, polarity management reframes chaos as feedback. It tells us that something vital has been neglected—either the structure that holds us or the freedom that moves us. By recognizing this, leaders transform chaos from a destructive force into a teacher that points the way back toward equilibrium.