

Polarities: Differences to be Managed

- Learning to identify polarities
- An approach for managing them



Copyright © 2011 by CREDO Institute, Inc., et al. All rights reserved.

Polarities: Differences to be Managed - 1

Fresh Start[®]

Talking Points

In the passage we just read from Acts, the young Christian community was faced with a complaint that widows were not receiving their daily rations. Yet the twelve disciples had other priorities. What the community was facing was a polarity – the need to balance both waiting on tables and preaching and prayer. We, too, frequently find ourselves faced with similar polarities. Unfortunately we don't always resolve them in ways that respect the other's point of view and engage everyone in coming up with a solution as the disciples did.

Some of our most heated disagreements are about polarities, ongoing differences which may never be fully resolved and which need to be managed. We will be looking at the characteristics of polarities – and how to identify them – and then at an approach for dealing with them in community.

Characteristics of Polarities

- Two opposing viewpoints, neither of which is “right” or “wrong,” but which may cause tension or strong feelings between proponents of one viewpoint and the other.
- Those involved understand that both perspectives have some merit – an “either/or” solution will not work. You need the benefits of both while minimizing the limitations of each.
- Issues are usually complex, long-term and involve strongly held values and/or beliefs.
- These conflicting ideas require ongoing management, and the balance between the two may shift over time.

Polarities: Differences to be Managed - 2

Fresh  Start

Talking Points

When we have disagreements in the church (or the workplace or home) our first instinct is often to force a solution that usually entails trying to get others to see things our way, to convince people that one side is “right” and another “wrong.” That might be appropriate if there is a factual answer to a question or disagreement, but more often than not there is some aspect of truth on both sides. Here are the characteristics of polarities.

Polarities do not lend themselves to an “either/or” solution because there is something of value on both sides; both must coexist. Even if there is a temporary “fix” with a tilt toward one end of the pole or the other, the polarities do not go away since you need the benefits inherent in both poles. Because all parties involved can see the advantages to both points of view, they wrestle with the inherent tensions and want to achieve some type of balance. When polarities are present, the issues are complex and may involve strongly held values and beliefs.

Sounds complicated, but . . .

**We Manage Polarities in Our Lives
All the Time**

A BIG one
is
Work vs.
Personal/Family Life



Polarities: Differences to be Managed - 3

Fresh Start

Talking Points

. . . In reality, we balance polarities in our lives all the time. Work/life balance is a classic example.

We all need the resources necessary to provide us with food, clothing, and shelter, as well as the satisfaction that comes from contributing to society – and we need time for ourselves, our families and friends. Neither work nor personal life is “right” or “wrong” but we can get our balance out of whack.

Another polarity with which we are all familiar is individual rights vs. the good of the community. And in the reading from Acts, the polarity was the need to provide food to the widows and find time for prayer and evangelism. That polarity may very well still exist in our congregations.

Another example in congregational life might be the role of children in worship services. Parishioners often have deep differences over this issue. Some value a quiet, meditative atmosphere during worship and do not want this disturbed by the presence of children. Others prefer having services designed to include children’s participation. Neither of these viewpoints is “right” or “wrong,” both are important and valuable. So the question is how to manage and balance these polarities most effectively over time, not how to “solve this problem.”

What are some other polarities in congregational life? **Facilitate a brief brain-storming session, capturing the ideas on a flip chart and probing to be sure participants understand the idea of polarities. Some examples are: tradition vs. innovation; “high” vs. “low” styles of worship; outreach vs. “inreach”; clergy vs. lay authority.**

Both/and thinking is the kind of tension that keeps our hearts pumping and mission thriving. It's also the kind of tension that drives some of us crazy – what's more important – justice or mercy? Inclusion or orthodoxy? Ministry grounded in bishops or in baptism? Most of those polarities are false choices. The long view says that if we insist on resolving the tension we'll miss a gift of the spirit, for truth is always larger than one end of the polarity. Tension is where the spirit speaks. Truth has something to do with that ongoing work of the spirit, and it can only breathe in living beings capable of change and growth.

The Most Rev. Dr. Katharine Jefferts Schori

Talking Points

If we can learn to live with the tension of polarities we can find, as Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori noted in her address at the opening of the 2009 General Convention, the place “where the spirit speaks”.

Stuck Conversations

- Broken record: The conversation is predictable and unvarying.
- Emotional: Rational discussion may be replaced by emotional reactions.
- Closed minds: Genuine questions are rarely asked. There is little attempt to really understand the other's point of view.
- "Right" vs. "wrong": Each side is convinced of being right and wants their position to prevail no matter what the cost.

Polarities 1: Differences to be Managed - 5 Fresh Start

Talking Points

But the voice of the Spirit is often drowned out when we are dealing with polarities, and the conversations often become “stuck.” Every time there is a discussion, the same arguments and ideas are heard. The tone may become emotional and lead to labeling “right” (to my side) and “wrong” (to yours). Around what kinds of issues have you experienced stuck conversations? **Facilitate a brief discussion.**

It is important to note that there can be stuck conversations around problems for which there is a single “right” solution or differences in deeply held values that will never be totally resolved (in which case, you may want to engage in dialogue*). So when stuck conversations occur, it is essential to step back and reflect on what kind of conflict you are dealing with.

One test in identifying a polarity is to ask yourself whether it is realistic to envision people adopting one of the viewpoints at the expense of the other as a “solution,” or if it is more likely and even preferable that both viewpoints will continue to co-exist. For example, can you imagine all music throughout the Episcopal Church being EITHER traditional OR contemporary? Of course not! It’s important to have the best of both traditional and contemporary available. Since our musical preferences often reflect some of our deeply held values, however, these can become a source of conflict which may appear to require an “either/or” resolution. In fact it needs to be addressed by a process which honors and seeks to understand all preferences.

To take this example a step further, polarities are sometimes masked by disagreements about surface issues. An argument about how often or at which services either traditional or contemporary music should be offered may appear to be about the “problem” of quantity or scheduling, but actually be about a polarity; i.e., values regarding music and worship. You can be quite sure this is the case if such an argument continues to resurface in stuck conversations which are broken records with no new ideas or attempt at mutual understanding and no resolution. When that happens, it’s time to look for a different approach.

***Note: if the group has not had the session on dialogue, you may want to explain a bit more about this concept and when it is used.**

Using a Polarity Matrix

- Define the polarities
- Identify the key stakeholders
- Brainstorm the upsides and downsides of each polarity
- Come up with strategies to maintain balance and agree to follow through

Polarities: Differences to be Managed - 6

Fresh Start

Talking Points

Have a flip chart ready with a full sheet covered by a four-square grid. Above the top left hand square, write “Work” and above the top right square “Personal/Family”. Label the two top squares with a “+” and the two bottom with a “-”. Distribute Handout 1, which is a model for your flip chart grid.

One way to manage polarities is to use a matrix like this one to help us think through the upsides and downsides of both poles and some strategies for restoring or maintaining an appropriate balance. Let’s see how this works, using our example of work vs. personal/family life. For the moment, assume we each have a stake in this. We will come back to talk about who other key stakeholders might be in a minute.

Let’s start with work – what are all the positive things about work? ***Facilitate the brainstorming, capturing the ideas in the upper left square on the polarity map.***

Now, what are the positive things about personal/family life? ***Facilitate as before, listing the ideas in the upper right square.***

OK – what happens if life is “all work and no play” – what are the downsides to “work”? ***Facilitate as before, listing the ideas in the lower left square.***

How about personal/family life – what are the downsides of focusing too much on this aspect of life? ***Facilitate as before, listing the ideas in the lower right square.***

Using A Polarity Matrix (cont.)

- Maximize the advantages of each and minimize the disadvantages
- What is working in your favor now?
- What else could you do?

Polarities: Differences to be Managed - 7

Fresh Start

Talking Points

When you think about our work/personal-family life matrix, you will realize it is in the nature of polarities to “tilt” toward one or the other pole at times. For example, you might concentrate on work when you are in training or just starting out (think about doctors going through their residency program) or if there is a major project due. You might swing the balance toward family when you have a new baby, a sick elderly parent, or a crisis of some sort. But most of the time if you experience the negative signs, particularly if the most important positive aspects of your life are being affected, you will want to adjust how your life is being lived.

Let’s look first at the up side of both work and personal/family life. Which of the advantages of work are most important for you to maintain? **Facilitate a brainstorming and star those aspects considered most important.**

Now let’s look at personal/family life. Which advantages are most important? **Facilitate as before, starring the most important.**

What are you doing NOW that helps you maintain the most important aspects of both work and personal/family life? **Facilitate a discussion on strategies that are working.**

What else might be done to strengthen the upsides of both work and personal/family life? **Facilitate a discussion, capturing the new ideas that surface.**

OK – so there are some steps that could be taken to improve the current balance. Now let’s look at the downsides of imbalance.

Using a Polarity Matrix (cont.)

- What are the signs that things are out of balance?
- What's most important to avoid?
- What strategies might work?
- Who are the stakeholders?
- Agree on what is to be done and set a follow-up date.

Polarities: Differences to be Managed - 8

Fresh Start

Talking Points

What tells you that things are out of balance? How do you know? **Facilitate a quick brainstorming.**

Now, just as we did with the positive aspects – which downsides of both work and personal/family life are the most important to minimize or even avoid? **Facilitate a discussion and star the relevant items. Pick one to use for the next step.**

OK, let's say that this is a threat right now. Think about a time in your own life when this has happened. What strategies did you use to rebalance your life then? **Facilitate a brief discussion and capture these on the flip chart.** Might you be able to use these now? What else might you consider? **Facilitate a brief discussion.** In this way, using a polarity matrix can lead to a solution of sorts – a set of agreed-upon actions – both the continuing and new strategies identified when we looked at the plus side of the matrix and the possible strategies we just identified when the balance was threatened -- that allows you to maximize the “plus” sides of both poles and minimize the “minuses”.

I mentioned I would come back to the stakeholder question. In this work/life balance example, who might some of your stakeholders be? **Probe for family members, friends, work colleagues.** If you were to engage them in this process, they might have a different perspective than you – and might help you find different “solutions.” So it is important to involve all stakeholders in this process.

Finally, select those strategies or action steps that might help restore the balance, agree to implement them, and set a follow-up time to evaluate whether they are working. Again, stakeholder representation is important since people are more likely to support what they have helped to develop. Here is a reminder of how the process works (**distribute Handout 2**).

Defining Some Other Polarities

- Story from Acts 6
- Music in worship
- Children in worship

Polarities: Differences to be Managed - 9

Fresh Start

Talking Points

It is critical when using a Polarity Matrix to accurately define the poles. So let's try a few more examples. Returning to the story from Acts, what are the two poles that are represented? **Facilitate a general discussion, probing for an accurate description of the two poles (service to the existing community vs. outreach to those beyond might be one; service vs. time for worship might be another)?**

Great, let's try a couple of other examples. How about music in worship? What might be some polarities there? **Facilitate a discussion as before; be sure you have thought through some possible polarities so you can critique what the group develops.**

How about children in worship? How might the poles line up around this issue? **Again, facilitate a discussion. If you have time, use one of these examples to have them complete the matrix as you did with work/personal-family life.**

Trying Another Example

- Take an example from your congregation
- Identify the two poles
- Brainstorm the pluses and minuses of each
- Identify possible action steps

Polarities: Differences to be Managed - 10

Fresh Start

Talking Points

If your group is large enough, divide them into small groups for this exercise. Otherwise have them work in pairs or in congregational teams if you are facilitating a mixed clergy/lay group.

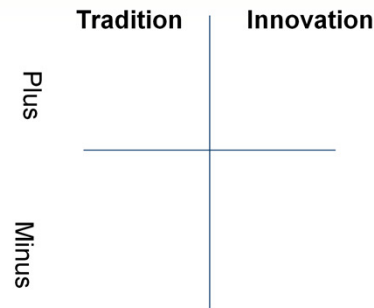
Now think of a polarity that is facing your own congregation where this matrix might be useful. Then in your groups (pairs), select one to work on. On a clean piece of paper, draw the matrix like the one used for work vs. personal/family life and label the axes appropriately. As a group, brainstorm the pluses and minuses of each pole. When you have completed that process, identify a couple of possible action steps that could be taken to maximize the plus side of both poles, while minimizing the negative sides. Be prepared to share what you have done with the rest of the group. You will have 20 minutes to complete your matrix.

As the groups or pairs begin to work, check in with them to make sure that what they have identified is truly a polarity to be managed.

At the end of 20 minutes, ask the groups (pairs) to share what they have done and ask the rest of the group for comments or suggestions for the presenting team (i.e., are there other pluses or minuses that could be added; how about additional ideas for action steps). Facilitate a discussion of how the process went.

A Final Note on Using the Polarity Matrix

- Be clear on the purpose
- Have both sides represented
- Engage both in developing goal and plus/minus parts of matrix
- Have ground rules for engagement



Polarities: Differences to be Managed - 11

Fresh Start

Talking Points

One of the powerful things about a polarity matrix is that it requires both sides to consider the positive aspects of the opposing point of view, as well as acknowledge the downside of their own – and come up with possible action steps. This can only happen if both sides are required to work together to complete the matrix. So it is important to make sure that both sides are represented in the session – and in approximately equal numbers. (In our example from Acts, the disciples didn't use a polarity matrix, but they did ask the Hellenists to help find the solution. Involvement of all parties in a controversy in determining the outcome is more likely to produce an acceptable solution for all.)

Be clear on the purpose of engaging in this kind of exercise: is it to generate ideas as input into decision-making, to come up with a decision on what to do, etc. Who will see the results? How will they be shared?

Some simple ground rules such as everyone participating, allowing others to have "air time," respecting the confidentiality of what is said, and treating all ideas with respect will help set the tone for the exercise.

Are there any questions about using a polarity matrix?

Using a Polarity Matrix in Your Congregation

- What are the polarities?
- What is your purpose for using the matrix?
- Who needs to be involved? A particular group (e.g., the Altar Guild, the Vestry, youth & their parents) or the whole congregation?
- How would you structure it (e.g., when to do it, how to use results)?

Polarities: Differences to be Managed - 12

Fresh Start

Talking Points

You just identified some of the polarities in your congregations and worked through a polarity matrix to identify ways to maximize the advantages of both poles and minimize their disadvantages. Now think about using this tool in your congregations. Let's take each of the polarities that were just presented and work them through one-by-one.

Take each of the polarities presented, as modified by the comments from the rest of the group, and facilitate a discussion about how this process might be used to confront this polarity in the congregation, working through the questions on the slide. Once the stakeholders ("who needs to be involved?") have been identified, discuss how the process might be structured (e.g., meeting after church on Sunday, holding a special meeting of the Vestry) and how the results would be used (e.g., become a firm decision, as input into a committee's process).

Lord God,
 As we walk the streets of our lives,
 help us to be alert to your presence
 in the obvious and the unlikely places.
 Help us to remember that wherever we go
 you are there before us.
 Give us respect for the ways
 people with different insights
 understand you,
 so that our sharing of good news
 will be an enriching of faith
 rather than a confrontation
 with what we think is unbelief.
 Draw us closer to each other
 as we draw closer to you. *Amen.*

Ann Lewin

Polarities 1: Differences to be Managed - 13

Fresh  Start

Talking Points

We've spent time looking at ways to engage people who have differing viewpoints on issues that are not problems to be solved, but differences to be managed. So let us end with this prayer from *Lifting Women's Voices: Prayers to Change the World* by Ann Lewin of Southampton, England, which speaks to enriching our faith rather than engaging in confrontation.

¹ Lewin, Ann. "Respecting Faith" in Rose, Margaret, et. al., ed. *Lifting Women's Voices: Prayers to Change the World* (Morehouse Publishing, New York, NY, 2009) p. 292.