

Polarities: Differences to be Managed



Purpose

To introduce the concepts of polarities and demonstrate an approach to address and manage them in community.

Theological Understanding

In the passages from Acts the twelve disciples model an approach to resolving issues that keeps community together. They acknowledge the validity of the Hellenists' complaint about failure to serve the widows, as well as their own priorities of "prayer and ...serving the world" (Acts 6:4). They then engage the Hellenists in coming up with a solution. Such integrative thinking requires us to see and respond to people who are different than we as equals.

Gregory Jones, Dean of Duke University Divinity School, has written, "...though we are created with the capacity for integrative thinking, one of the conditions of original sin is our tendency to define ourselves over against others, whether we think of enemies or simply of opposing ideas."¹ The polarity matrix is an effective way to practice integrative thinking in order to *understand* ideas different from our own and to integrate them into our own thinking even if we do not agree with them.

Special Instructions

If you are not familiar with the concept of polarities or the use of a polarity matrix, read *Managing Polarities in Congregations: Eight Keys for Thriving Faith Communities* by Roy Oswald and Barry Johnson before leading this session. It provides a clear description of polarity matrices and good examples that you could use to illustrate the concept. Key to making a polarity matrix work is being able to accurately define the two poles and the superordinate or overarching goal. Have some good ideas in mind for the examples you intend to use.

The polarity matrix is helpful when the two poles represent things which must both be accommodated (e.g., the need for service and prayer) – and when all parties can acknowledge that there is some truth on both sides. It helps leaders come up with approaches that will maximize the benefits of both, while minimizing the down sides.

¹Jones, Gregory. "Of Two Minds," Christian Century, March 25, 2008; p. 35

Because polarities are in constant tension, and the balance can swing from one side to the other over time, the matrix is not helpful for decisions that are finite in nature (e.g., whether to do build a new parish hall).

Participants may raise as examples of polarities issues around gender or sexuality. While bias, fear of the “other,” and prejudice are elements of these concerns, they may also, at heart, involve polarities such as tradition vs. innovation, literal vs. interpretive readings of the Bible; valuing of differences vs. the need for commonalities to bind us together. When phrased as polarities of this type, they can be discussed using the polarity matrix.

However the polarity matrix in general is not a method to use with issues such as gender, sexuality or abortion or under any circumstances where people on opposite sides of an issue cannot see value in the other person’s point of view. When very deeply held values are at stake, people are not usually open to change. Our challenge under these kinds of circumstances is how to balance and manage these differences so congregations can live in harmony without members feeling pressured to change their opinions. The more appropriate way to handle such issues is through a process of dialogue which is covered in Dialogue: Seeking Common Ground.

Related Modules

Conflict Module I: Conflict Awareness
Conflict Module II: Conflict Management
Dialogue: Seeking Common Ground

Bibliography for This Module

Gilliam, W. Craig. “Communications Strategies for Addressing Conflict in Congregations”, Leading Ideas: A Resource for Church Leaders, Online. November 5, 2008. (www.churchleadership.com – click on Resources, then “Leading Ideas E-Newsletter” and search by author’s name) – a brief essay on the importance of connection and of silence in effective communication; a good overview of the steps for effective listening.

Johnson, Barry H. Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems. Amherst, MA, HRD Press, 1996 – Johnson discusses polarity management primarily in the context of secular organizations but provides examples which may be found in churches as well. The Polarity Matrix is a simplified version of his model.

Jones, Gregory. “Of Two Minds”, Christian Century, March 25, 2008, p. 35 – a short essay on the need for integrative thinking as a way to hold diverse convictions in harmony.

Mogabgab, John S., ed. Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life. March/April 2009, *Standing in the Tragic Gap* – this issue of Weavings explores polarities of many kinds and has a wonderful case study of John Woolman, the 19th century Quaker abolitionist with a reflections piece that raises questions of relevance to issues dividing the church today.

Oswald, Roy M. and Johnson, Barry. Managing Polarities in Congregations: Eight Keys for Thriving Faith Communities. Herndon, VA, The Alban Institute, 2010 – an excellent introduction to Johnson’s Polarity Map model and how it applies to a number of polarities commonly encountered in congregational life.

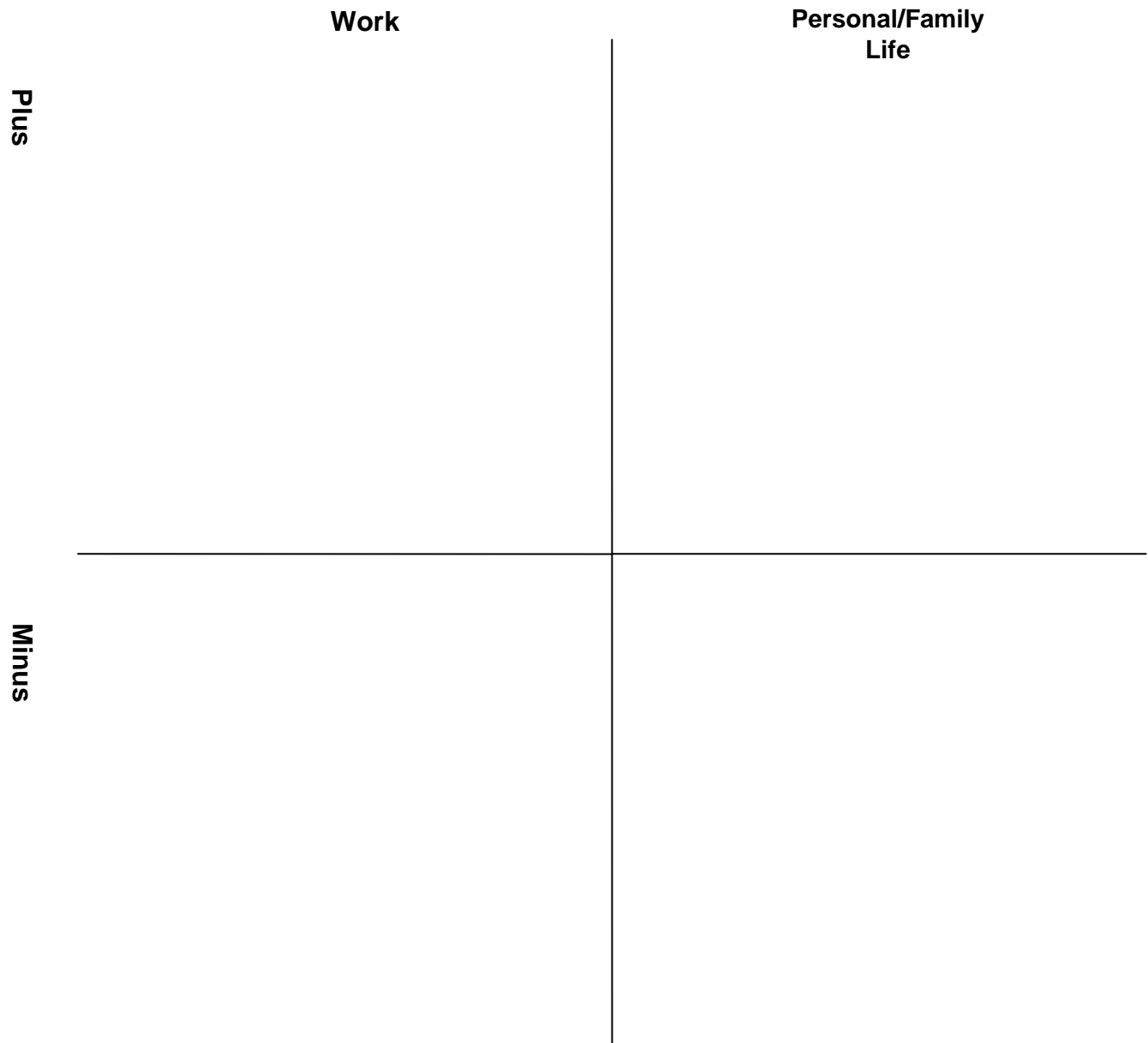
Web-Based Resources

Mennonite Peace and Justice Support Network: <http://peace.mennolink.org> – this website provides a wide array of congregational conflict and peacemaking resources, including a statement on how to agree and disagree in love that is theologically based. From the home page, click on Resources, then Resources for Congregations, and finally “Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love.” The statement is available in both English and Spanish. The Network offers training in conflict resolution and mediation.

General Outline of Session

1. Opening prayer/meditation (suggested reading Acts 6: 1- 7)
2. Introducing the concept of polarities (PowerPoint 1; Talking Points)
3. Characteristics of polarities (PowerPoint 2; Talking Points)
4. Polarities as a fact of life (PowerPoint 3; Talking Points; facilitated discussion and group development of examples)
5. Living with tension as place of the Spirit (PowerPoint 4; Talking Points)
6. Identifying stuck conversations and their causes (PowerPoint 5; Talking Points; facilitated discussion with examples)
7. Using a Polarity Matrix (PowerPoint 6-8; Talking Points; facilitated use of model; Handouts 1 and 2)
8. Defining the poles (PowerPoint 9; Talking Points; facilitated discussion and group development of examples)
9. Using a Polarity Matrix on a congregational situation (PowerPoint 10; Talking Points; small group work and report out)
10. Thinking about using the Polarity Matrix in your congregation (PowerPoint 11-12; Talking Points; facilitated discussion)
11. Wrap-up and closing prayer (PowerPoint 13; Talking Points)

Polarities: Differences to be Managed Handout 1



Polarities: Differences to be Managed Using a Polarity Matrix Handout 2

1. Identify the polarity using the polarity matrix:

- Who are the key stakeholders in this issue who should be part of this meeting?
- Clearly define the issues making sure all parties agree on the polarities.
- Decide on two different positions that clearly represent the polarity.

2. Map the Polarities:

- Identify the upside of each polarity. (It is important that both sides engage in filling out the potential advantages of each polarity.) Example: What are the positive results from focusing on _____? What are potential advantages in this polarity?
- Identify the potential downside of each polarity. (Again, it is important that both sides fill out the potential downside of each polarity.) What are potential negative results from over focus on this polarity?
- There should be agreement by both groups on the content of the matrix.

3. Gain/Maintain the upside:

- Both parties should identify the advantages on both sides that they want to keep. These can be prioritized.
- Identify what is already being done to obtain the benefits from each pole.
- Brainstorm what new things might be done to obtain the benefits of this pole.
- Choose 2 or 3 action steps that are doable, and will give the most benefit for the effort.
- Set time commitments and identify who will be responsible.

4. Minimize both Downsides:

- What indicators, or measurements, would tell us that we are entering a danger zone? What kind of alarm system can be used to monitor this?
- Prioritize on both sides of the bottom quadrants. What is it that most needs to be worked on to minimize the downside of this pole?
- Brainstorm a list of potential strategies for dealing with the items identified.
- Select two or three doable action steps and decide who will be responsible for carrying these out.

5. Follow up Assessment:

- Agree on a date, within 1 to 3 months, when the group can meet together and determine how things are going, and if more action is needed