

# ARTICLE: POLARITY *basics*...Using Polarity Energy for Speed and Sustainability©

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If you had a choice to drown, survive, or thrive, which would you choose? The story below illustrates the nature of polarity “energy systems” that can be used to make critical differences in your Life And Work.

## Drowning, Surviving, Or Thriving?

A sign on the beach says, “Beware of Rip Currents.” Most of us know that a rip current occurs when waves break onto the shore from opposite directions, creating a powerful current. It’s like a river in the water that “rips” everything in it straight out to sea....and yes, that’s the opposite direction of where you want to go. If you aren’t familiar with rip currents and get caught in one while swimming, a perfectly logical decision based on might sound like this: “Yikes, I should either swim to the safety of shore **or** I’ll be carried further out to sea.” Following this either/or” logic can result in quick exhaustion and even fatal results. Over 200 people per year lose their lives to rip currents through logical misdiagnosis. Most of us learned that swimming “parallel to the shore” could help avoid such a disaster. Thanks to the past experience and wisdom of others, we can reframe the situation where the either/or option doesn’t serve us well, **and survive!**

However, people who have an even deeper understanding and experience with the “energy system” of rip currents can go beyond survival—like surfers. When an experienced surfer encounters life-threatening rip currents, s/he rides the rip current out to sea, surfs back to shore on the waves, and then rides the rip current back to catch the next wave. They **use** the energy system like a conveyor **and thrive** in what is life-threatening for those who don’t understand how the energy system works or don’t know how to play in it.

## STEPS

Determine when you have a problem to solve or a polarity to leverage. There are polarities behind problems that, when recognized and leveraged, can support better problem solving!

### SEE IT

With practice, you will improve in seeing and naming polarities. Remember, polarities are neutral to positive. Both poles have to be desirable.

### MAP IT

Map the polarity to see the two necessary and accurate truths AND the whole picture to provide critical insights into the upsides and downsides of both values, e.g., Stability and Change.

### ASSESS IT

First determine where you are by assessing current realities.

### LEARN FROM IT

From the map and assessment, you will start to learn more about the situation, a discussion that will help you leverage the polarity.

### LEVERAGE IT

Plan action steps to get the best from each pole and early warning signs to alert you to the over use of each pole define Action Steps and Early Warning Signs to maximize the benefits and minimize downsides to improve continuously.

<b><i>Problems to Solve</i></b>	<b><i>Polarities to Leverage</i></b>
<b><i>They are not ongoing. There is an end point. They are solvable.</i></b>	<b><i>They are ongoing. There is no end point. They are not solvable.</i></b>
<b><i>Independent alternatives</i></b>	<b><i>Interdependent alternatives</i></b>
<b><i>Often contain mutually exclusive alternatives:</i></b> <b><i>Should we buy a blue or gray car?</i></b> <b><i>Should we hire this person for this job?</i></b> <b><i>Should we pursue this acquisition?</i></b>	<b><i>Always contain mutually inclusive energies:</i></b> <b><i>Directive and participative leadership</i></b> <b><i>Stability and change</i></b> <b><i>Rest and activity</i></b>

### Leveraging Polarities for Sustainable Change

Learning to See and Map polarities are the first two critical steps. To leverage the energy of polarities you need to Assess where you think you are currently and then leverage their energy by defining clear Action Steps and Early Warning Signs and track them over time.

### Identifying Polarities

***Like problems to solve, polarities to leverage are everywhere. Therefore, it helps to focus on the ones that matter most. Here are some tips:***

*Look behind 'gap' statements.*

- “We need to be more like X.”
- “If only we had more X and less Y.”
- “There’s way too much focus on (this) and we’re not addressing (that) at all.” Look for frustration with the way things are.
- “So-and-so just doesn’t understand our concerns.”
- “We just can’t keep doing it this way.”
- “Things have got to change.”
- “I don’t understand why those people keep harping on that.”
- “We keep talking about this but nothing really changes.” Look for the wisdom behind stereotypes.
- Activists/Change Agents, who are always pressing the need for change, and Skeptics/Traditionalists, who seem unwilling to let go of the past.
- Often resistance can be a resource—it contains wisdom, an energy that can be leveraged. The Polarity Map acts as a wisdom organizer.

### 3 Tips to Leverage Polarities

1. Often we get into trouble when we misdiagnose polarities as problems to solve. However, don't make the reverse misdiagnosis—treating a problem as a polarity! Problem solving and leveraging polarities are both critical skills. The key is making the key distinction as to whether you are dealing with an “either/or” problem to solve or an ongoing “both/and” polarity to leverage. While understanding the dynamic tensions behind a problem will produce better decisions over time, we can never stop making clear choices.
2. Remember the Advocacy AND Inquiry Polarity. Individuals or groups often become scapegoats for an underappreciated value. It's easy to complain: “Why is Jeff always going on about the need to decentralize?” A way to reframe the complaint from a polarity lens might be: “Jeff probably values the benefits of decentralization and is concerned about slow response time and/or losing autonomy. Let's consider the benefits of both decentralization and centralization to leverage all concerns in the restructure.”
3. Don't stop at “balance.” Balance is about getting to stasis, which can be very beneficial when an individual, team or organization is out of balance. However, actively work toward the upsides of both values to create powerful innovation and engagement.

#### **“TOP TEN” PRINCIPLES of POLARITIES**

1. All values come in pairs and these pairs are interdependent.
2. When you actively work toward the upsides of both values in a polarity, you create a virtuous cycle leading to a higher purpose.
3. When you over-emphasize one value over time, to the neglect of its pair, you get
  - The downsides of the chosen value, and
  - eventually, the downsides of the other value as well.
4. When you are stuck in the downsides of both values, you create a vicious cycle leading to a deeper fear.
5. We tend to blame other individuals or groups for the values we don't like.
6. There are two truths in every polarity: both accurate and neither complete.
7. We get stuck in the downsides because we see our values as the whole truth.
8. Solving problems and leveraging polarities are BOTH critical skills.
9. Leveraging polarities well help you solve problems better.
- 10. Never stop at balance: Go for synergy for innovation and sustainability.**

## Transforming the Power of This Polarity

### Action Steps

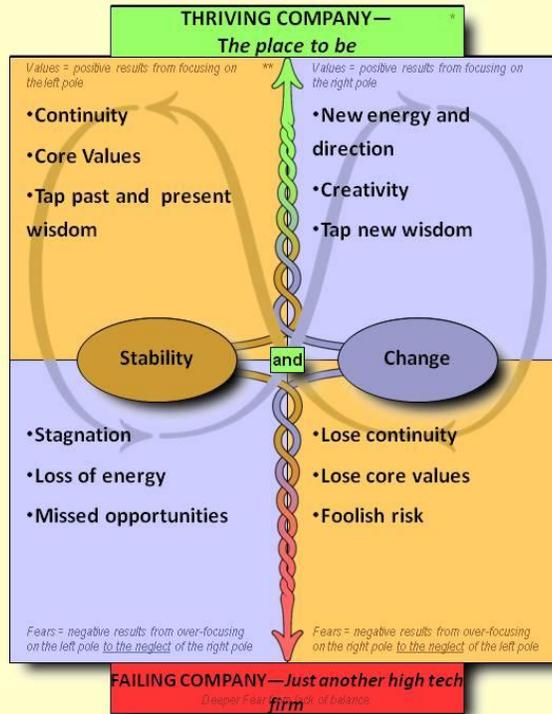
*How will we gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on this left pole? What? Who? By When? Measures?*

1. Communication about core values: say what is NOT changing
2. Make visible the way you are using the history and the present for the company: products, people, marketing

### Early Warnings\*\*\*

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

1. Number of innovation ideas decline
2. Key talent talks of leaving



### Action Steps

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

1. Make visible the change efforts and why they are championed
2. Hire selectively: who helps manage the polarity—leads innovation and honors stability

### Early Warnings

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

1. People say "it's the flavor of the day"
2. The old ways are blamed for current failure

Polarity Map ©Polarity Management Associates, Dr. Barry Johnson

*It's the difference between surviving a rip current and thriving with the energy system.*



# YARBROUGH *group*

## **The Yarbrough Group**

*We Create —*

customized solutions for innovative transformation to meet your needs, or needs of your team or company.

- **Authentic Leadership** Empowering leaders to develop authentic leadership styles and envision new possibilities while maintaining stability.
- **Conflict Transformation** The modern organization, under pressure of continual improvement, cannot operate efficiently with disputes sapping its strength. We help transform chronic conflict into productive action.
- **Customized Solutions** We do not believe in pre-packaged one size fits all solutions. We form relationships with our clients in order to understand the system wide needs and implications of our work. The processes we develop together produce powerful results.
- **Polarity Leveraging + Systems Thinking** Chronic and ongoing tensions in organizations require an innovative approach for transformation. We teach how leveraging polarities leads to sustainable solutions. Efficient thinking can be applied at all levels, from small teams to large organizations. Based in Boulder, CO and Washington, DC, we are excited to engage with you wherever you may be located. From Organizational Development, one on one coaching, or conflict transformation, we look forward to working with you.