Polarity

"Many phenomena could not exist if their opposites did not also exist" (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, p. 43). We glean both the manifest and the nuanced meaning of one from the other: day helps to define night and *vice versa*; hot helps to define cold and *vice versa*; old helps to define young and *vice versa*. The individual is himself or herself "a never-ending sequence of polarities. Whenever an individual recognizes one aspect of him [or her] self, the presence of the antithesis, or polar quality, is implicit" (Polster & Polster, p. 61). People bear within themselves the latent and potential opposite of their external character, for example. The person who demonstrates kindness to others does so with the sense or knowledge of its obvious polarity, cruelty, or even of many possible related polarities, e.g., "insensitivity or callousness toward another person's feelings." Erving Polster has named these several related polarities "multilarities" (Zinker, 1978, pp. 196-197).

To more fully appreciate the tension built into a polarity, Rittel (1972) noted that there are tame problems, which are solvable, and there are wicked problems, which are unsolvable. Wicked problems are not evil, even though they might seem so. In this context wicked problems are ones that become more complex and possibly more unsolvable with each attempt toward resolution—paradoxical. The wickedness of the situation is the developing awareness of the complexity of the web that the organization has spun in creating itself. In many ways, it has created a catch-22 wherein no matter which way it turns to find a solution, the organization runs into itself.

Rittel (1972) developed a list of traits that correspond between tame (solvable) problems and wicked (unsolvable) problems.

Situation	**Tame Problem**	**Wicked Problem**
Problem Formation	can be exhaustively planned and written down on paper	has no definitive conceptualization
Relationship between problem and solution	can be forged separately from any notion of the solution	cannot be articulated separately from the solution. Understanding the problem is synonymous with solving it
Testability	the solution can be tested and mistakes can be pinpointed and corrected.	there is no single correct answer. There is only the degree of good or bad of each solution in comparison to one another.
Finality	Have a clear solution; an endpoint, closure	with no clear solution, it is an endless loop of trying to improve upon what cannot be solved

Tractability	Known steps can be used to solve the problem	exploring the known in attempts to define let alone solve the problem
Explanatory characteristics	"what is" versus "what ought to be" is clear and correctable	multiple perspectives leading to multiple explanations leading to multiple solutions
Level of analysis	the root cause is clear and where to address the problem is clear.	The root cause is unknown and therefore where to attack the problem is unknown; e.g. individual, group, etc.
Reproducibility	the problem can be isolated and attempted to be solved until final solution is found	no trial and error. Each solution is live, cannot be undone, and impacts the entire organization
Replicability	the problem may occur over and over.	basically a unique situation
Responsibility	blame is not burnished onto someone for not solving a problem, but acclaim is given to those that do.	responsibility is clearly borne and blame is burnished onto someone for failing and praise is never granted as it is not clear the problem was ever solved.

Rittel, H. (1972) *On the Planning Crisis: Systems Analysis of the 'First and Second Generations'. In Bedriftsokonomen.* No. 8. pp. 390-396.

"Opposites come into existence by differentiation of 'something not differentiated'...[T]he two (or more) branches of a differentiation develops simultaneously, and..., generally, the extension is equal on [all] sides. (Perls, 1969, 19) Preferring one pole of a polarity over another, either on an individual or organizational level, can make the polarity itself a bone of contention. In attempting to define and assess the poles, one might discover that "competing commitments" based on "big assumptions" underlie the conflict. However, moving beyond the presumption of Gestalt resistance theory and of Kegan and Lahey—"awareness creates resolution"—one might also discover that the competing commitments are actually sufficiently based in organizational reality to be something other than merely "big assumptions." In this case, we have competing realities whose resolution cannot be reached through the "either/or" format of problem solving, but rather demands the "both/and" format of managing a significant polarity (Johnson, 1992).

The significance of the polarity to be managed can be gauged by the degree or extent that the warring parties tend to disown, or at a minimum to discredit the validity of, the opposing reality. Since both poles of the polarity are founded in organizational reality, to reject or close off one pole inevitably means that the organization is diminished. The ability of the organization (or the individual, or the group) to realize its greater or full potential is seriously crippled. "The organization does not see how it creates its own difficulties by blocking expression of parts

of itself. It is unaware of how it 'interrupts' itself" (Merry & Brown, 1987, p. 154).

Since both poles have their own particular values and strengths, re-establishing contact between them is the crucial first step in being able to use all their values and strengths in the best interest of the individual, group, or organization. Creating an awareness that "a polarity to manage" exists instead of "a problem to be solved" helps to open the doors to a "both/and" solution. As Polster and Polster point out, this awareness allows the warring parties to "become allies in the common search for a good life, rather than uneasy opponents maintaining the split" (p. 248). Once the situation is clearly established, the focus turns towards unfolding how the opposing forces of the polarity depend upon each other.

In organizations, more often than not, polarities are viewed as problems to be solved, whereby the polarity seems to demand choosing either one pole or the other as the "best" or the "right" way to go. But true polarities are never solved — they can only be managed. "It is a 'both/and' difficulty. Both one pole and its apparent opposite depend on each other. The pairs are involved in an ongoing, balancing process over an extended period of time. They are interdependent. They need each other" (Johnson, p. 82)[1]. For example, a recent organizational focus is on team-directed *versus* individual-directed project management. Generally, a decision is made to use one or the other, and the organization moves quickly to institute that decision company-wide. However, polarity management would not conclude that an organization must use one or the other format. In fact, both types of project management are useful and are dependent upon each other. The orientation towards polarity management creates an awareness whereby the organization can move to a "both/and" approach to project management: where individual initiative is needed for a specialized project, it might be assigned to a project manager; where a cohesive unit reflecting the larger organization is needed, a project team might be established (Johnson, p. 11).

Bob de Wit and Ron Meyer (1999) continue the application to policy planning and strategy problems, albeit by replacing polarity with paradox. In their analysis, paradoxical problems, Rittel's wicked problems, reflects that organized complexity inherently becomes more complex with each attempt toward resolution. As such, they exhibit the following paradoxical characteristics.

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1 Similar developments have surfaced under paradox management. Specifically, Bob de Wit and Ron Meyer (1999) note that "a paradox is a situation in which two seeming contradictory, or even mutually exclusive, factors appear to be true at the same time. A problem that is a paradox has *no definitive solution*, as there is no way to logically integrate the two opposites into an internally consistent understanding of the problem. As opposed to the either/or nature of the dilemma, the paradox can be characterized as a *both-and* problem—one factor is true and a contradictory factor is simultaneously true. Hence, the problem-owner must resolve a paradox by trying to find a way to reconcile the opposites in the most productive manner." (p. 18)

1. *Interconnectedness*: Strong connections link each problem to other problems. As a result, these connections sometimes circle back to form feedback loops. 'Solutions' aimed at the problem seem inevitably to have important opportunity costs and side effects. How they work out depends on events beyond the scope of any one problem.

2. *Complicatedness:* Wicked problems have numerous important elements with relationships among them, including important 'feedback loops' through which a change tends to multiply itself or perhaps even cancel itself out. Generally, there are various leverage points where analysis and ideas for intervention might focus, as well as many possible approaches and plausible programs of action. There is also a likelihood that different programs should be combined with a given problem.

3. *Uncertainty:* Wicked problems exist in a dynamic and largely uncertain environment, which creates a need to accept risk, perhaps incalculable risk. Contingency planning and also the flexibility to respond to unimagined and perhaps unimaginable contingencies are both necessary.

4. *Ambiguity:* The problem can be seen in quite different ways, depending on the viewer's personal characteristics, loyalties, past experiences, and even on accidental circumstances of involvement. There is no single 'correct view' of the problem.

5. *Conflict:* Because of competing claims, there is often a need to trade off 'goods' against 'bads' within the same value system. Conflicts of interest among persons or organizations with different or even antagonistic value systems are to be expected. How things will work out may depend on the interaction among powerful interests that are unlikely to enter into fully cooperative arrangements.

6. *Societal Constraints*: Social, organizational, and political constraints and capabilities, as well as technological ones, are central both to the feasibility and the desirability of solutions. (de Wit & Meyer, 1999, p. 33)