



Turn Conflict into High Performance with Polarity Thinking

By Abby Straus

One group of people in your organization believes it's best to centralize operations. They believe that when you do it well, costs go down, processes can be standardized, and best practices can be leveraged across the entire organization. They argue that decentralization leads to silos, redundant systems and divisions that are more committed to their own needs than those of the whole organization.

*"Why won't the resisters get on board? What are they worried about? Can't they see how **centralization** supports the greater good of the entire organization?"*

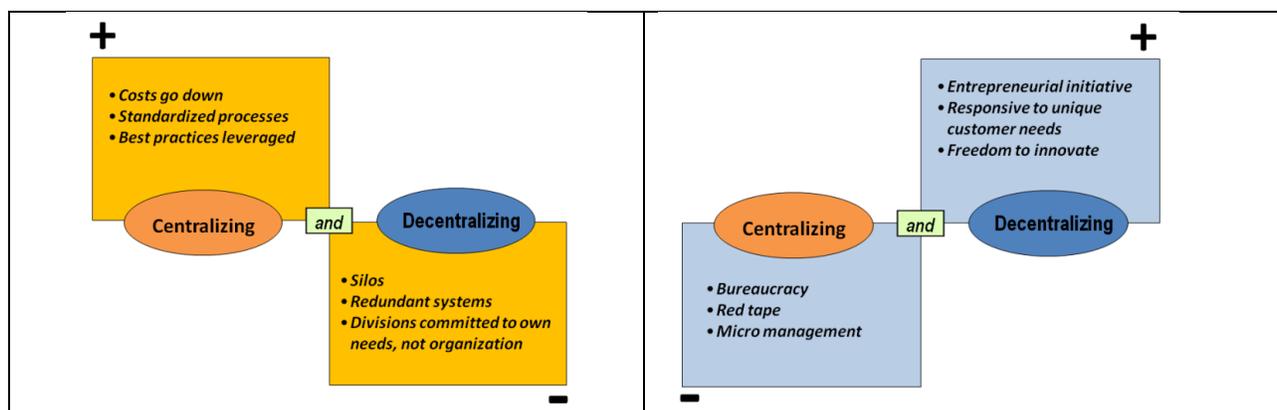
Meanwhile, others in the organization see things differently. Centralization will lead to a mountain of bureaucracy, red tape and micro management from people out of touch with the realities in the field. They don't want to lose their entrepreneurial initiative, ability to respond to

customers' unique needs or freedom to come up with better ways of getting the job done.

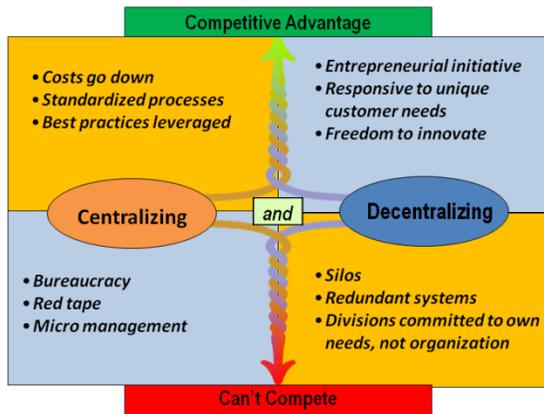
*"Why can't those centralization zealots see how **decentralization** supports the greater good of the entire organization?"*

And so it goes, round and round. If "centralization and decentralization" isn't your organization's issue, pick another one. Do you struggle to deliver short term results while investing in long-term development? How do you make big changes *and* provide the continuity people need to implement them? Do you pay more attention to setting the right strategy or to making sure you have smart tactics? Do you focus on developing your people or developing your product?

Here's the centralization/decentralization issue mapped out the way each side sees it.



Looked at from one side of the argument or the other, it's easy to see these issues as "problems to solve", an "either/or" with one right answer. And when this happens, people who need to collaborate with each other end up in conflict, each group arguing that its position is the right one.



So which is right?

They both are. Each point of view is only half of the story. Using our example above, in order to be successful you need the best of centralization *and* the best of decentralization. You need to keep costs down *and* be responsive to customers. You need to have an effective way to leverage best practices *and* support entrepreneurial initiative. It's a "both/and", not an "either/or".

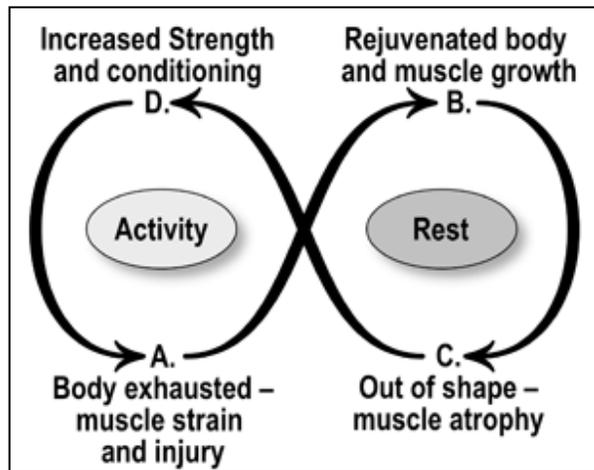
This isn't a problem to solve. It's a polarity to manage.

Polaritiesⁱ—sometimes called dilemmas or dynamic tensions—are interdependent pairs of values that support a common purpose and each other over time. Like centralization and decentralization, both are needed for sustained high performance in an organization. When you over focus on one to the neglect of the other, you get the downsides. Leverage the benefits of both and you tap into an unlimited supply of energy that works for you. Every time.

How polarities work using the example of Activity and Rest

The "infinity loop" below is a simple way to picture the energy that flows between and around both poles of a polarity. This is energy you can tap. We're all managing this polarity every day. We can't "solve" it by choosing either **Activity** or **Rest**. Polarities are neither avoidable nor solvable; and we can choose to leverage them to improve performance.

For example, if you were training for a marathon, you might overdo your workouts and find yourself exhausted. This exhaustion (**A**) is the downside of focusing on activity to neglect of rest, and can be seen as a "problem" with the "solution" being *get some rest* (**B**). However, too much rest and you get out of shape and experience muscle atrophy (**C**). This becomes a new "problem" where the "solution" is to get off the couch and do something (**D**). If, on the other hand, you manage this polarity well by getting just the right amount of activity *and* rest, you stay fit, energized and ready to run your marathon.



Polarities are dependable.

Polarities work the same way, every time, all the time. Learn how to tap the energy in a single polarity and you'll know how to tap the energy in every one.

Here are the steps for working with a polarity:

1. **See it** – Know when you've got a problem to solve (Which sneakers will I wear when I train today?) Know when you've got a polarity you need to manage over time (How can train hard for this marathon and get plenty of rest?) When it's a polarity you can...
2. **Map it** – See the whole picture. Your point of view. Others' points of view. How you can achieve your common goal by realizing the benefits of both? Then you can...
3. **Leverage it** – Develop action steps: What action can you take to realize the benefits of each pole? Identify early warning signs: What happens when you focus on one to the neglect of the other? How can you anticipate this and stay course? Then you take action to generate and sustain success by tracking your progress and self correcting over time.

Here are some common polarities in organizations.

- Mission *and* Margin
- Recruitment *and* Retention
- Leading *and* Following

- Cost *and* Quality
- Planning *and* Execution
- Sales *and* Service
- Develop Talent *and* Utilize Talent
- Continuity *and* Change
- Competition *and* Collaboration
- Individual Goals *and* Organizational Goals

Research has shown that organizations that manage polarities well over time far out-perform those that don't.ⁱⁱ

A tool for a complex world

Polarity Thinking gives us a reliable way to make sense of and take action in the midst of complexity and rapid change. It helps us look at the whole picture, build trust and cooperation across the boundaries of diverse points of view and engage people to achieve common goals.

The benefits of Polarity Thinking are numerous, but the most obvious is that you can avoid wasting your energy attempting to "solve" things that aren't solvable. And you can let go of a whole layer of conflict and start achieving what you set out to do in the first place: **run a great organization.**

ⁱ The term "polarity" was coined by Barry Johnson, PhD.

Johnson, Barry, [Polarity Management: Identifying and Leveraging Unsolvable Problems](#). Amherst: HRD Press, 1992, 1994.
Johnson shares a number of case examples in which the shift from seeing an issue as a problem to solve to managing it as a polarity added real value for individual leaders and for organizations.

See also:

Trompenaars, Fons. [Riding the Whirlwind: Connecting People and Organizations in a Culture of Innovation](#). Oxford: The Infinite Ideas Company Limited, 2007.

Trompenaars explores how individuals and teams become more successful innovators and collaborators when they integrate ideas (manage polarities) well, individually and collectively.

ⁱⁱ Quinn, Robert E. [Beyond Rational Management: Mastering the Paradoxes and Competing Demands of High Performance](#). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988.

Quinn asserts that mastering paradox (polarity) is the central to high performance.