BRIDGEPOINT COACHING & STRATEGY GROUP

Problems to Solve, Tensions to Manage

Why the Hardest Leadership Challenges Keep Coming Back, and What to Do About Them

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Executive Summary

Every leader has one: the issue that keeps coming back in a slightly different outfit. You fixed it last year. Your predecessor fixed it before that. It is back on the agenda anyway.

Usually nothing is wrong with you or your team. You have been treating a tension as if it were a problem.

A problem has an answer. Choose the vendor, fix the process, close the plant, and it stays done. A tension is a pair of good things that need each other over time: centralize and decentralize, standardize and customize, safety and production, candor and diplomacy, mission and margin. Pick one side and it works for a while. Then it produces the opposite complaint, and the organization swings back. Every swing feels like a decision. None of them hold.

Barry Johnson's Polarity Map gives leaders a way to see the whole tension at once: what each side does well, and what it costs to lean on either one too long. Once the whole picture is on the wall, the argument changes from who is right to how to get the best of both.

The pages ahead offer a two-question test for spotting a tension, a walk through the map, an honest look at why pressure pushes leaders toward either/or, and two composite cases where the question was "which one?" and the answer was "both, on purpose." The hard part, in both, was leading it.

Problem or Polarity?

Johnson called these situations polarities: interdependent pairs that cannot be solved once and for all, only managed (Johnson, 1992). Treating them as solvable is where the damage starts. Researchers use the word paradox. Wendy Smith and Marianne Lewis define it as elements that

contradict each other yet are interrelated, exist at the same time, and persist over time. Each side seems logical on its own and absurd when set against the other (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Different vocabulary, same animal.

	PROBLEM TO SOLVE	POLARITY TO MANAGE
Is there an answer?	Yes. One option is better, and analysis can find it.	No single answer. Both sides are needed over time.
Once addressed	It stays solved.	It comes back, often as the opposite complaint.
Thinking it needs	Either/or.	Both/and.
If you pick one	You are done.	You get the upside for a while, then the downside.
Example	Choosing a vendor.	Standardization and flexibility.

The two-question test

When something lands on your desk for the third time, ask two questions.

1. **Is the difficulty ongoing?** Does it resurface despite real fixes, and does the complaint swing between opposites? Too centralized, then too fragmented. Too cautious, then too reckless. Too many meetings, then nobody knows what is going on.
2. **Are both sides genuinely necessary over time?** Would you be in trouble if you lost either one for good?

Two yeses mean you are holding a polarity. Stop looking for the answer. Start looking for the map.

Most big situations contain both kinds. A plant closure is a problem with a decision at the end of it. Inside it sit polarities that will outlast the decision: cost and capability, speed and care for the people affected. Solve the problem. Manage the polarities inside it.

Seeing the Whole Tension: The Polarity Map

A polarity cannot be argued into submission. It can only be seen. Johnson's map puts the two poles in the middle, the upsides of each above, and the downsides of over-relying on each below. Across the top sits the greater purpose both sides serve. Across the bottom sits the deeper fear that both sides are trying to avoid (Johnson, 1992, 2020).

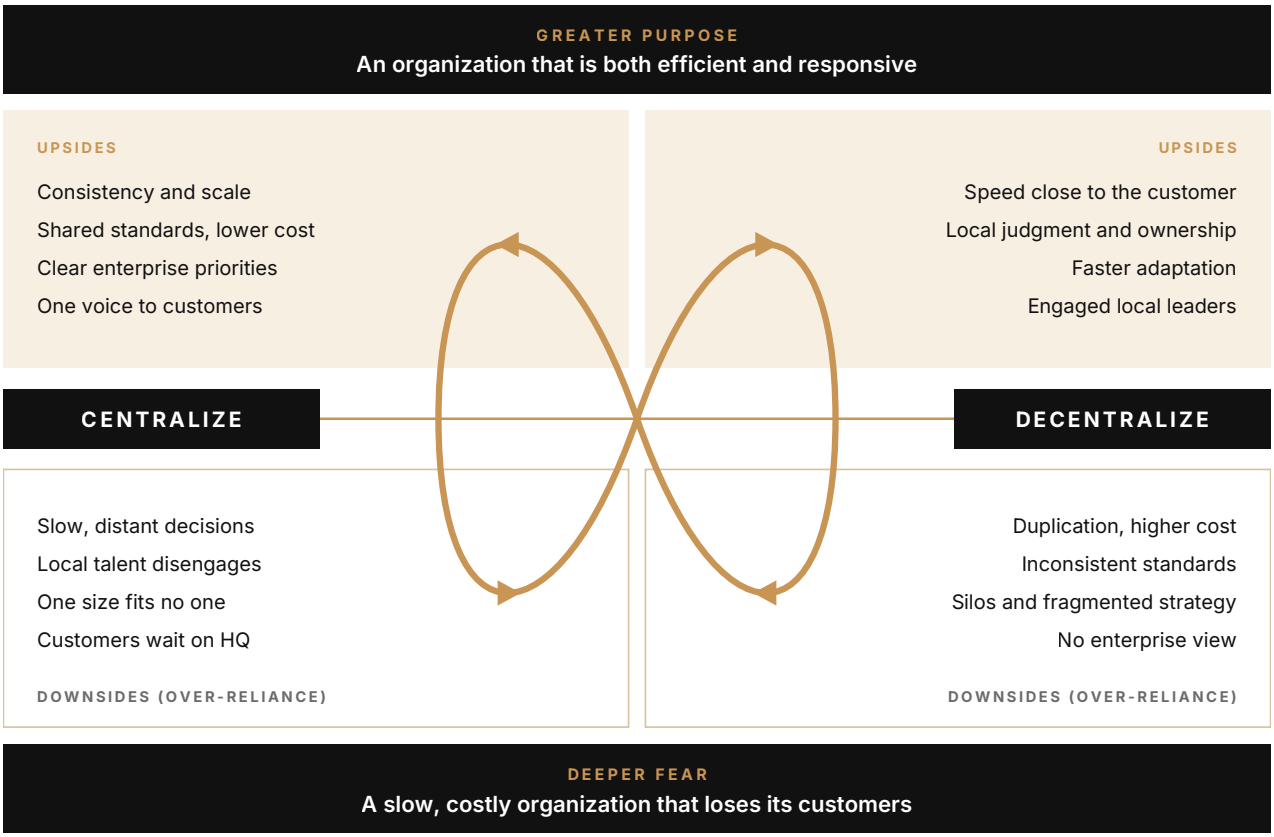


Figure 1. A Polarity Map for Centralize and Decentralize. Adapted from Johnson (1992, 2020). The loop shows the typical path: the upside of one pole, then its downside, which pushes the system to the upside of the other pole, then its downside, and back. Polarity Map is a registered trademark of Polarity Partnerships.

Read the map left to right and it is a debate. One side points at the bottom right and says, "That is the problem." The other points at the bottom left and says the same thing. Read it top to bottom and it stops being a debate. Each side holds half the truth and has been calling the other half the problem.

The loop

The infinity loop is what happens without a map. You lean toward one pole and enjoy its upsides. You keep leaning, and over-reliance brings its downsides. The pain pushes you toward the other pole, where the same cycle repeats. The goal is not to stop the movement. You cannot. The goal is to spend most of your time in the two upper quadrants and to notice early when you are sliding into a lower one. A tighter loop means less pain at the turns.

Why the map works

- **The argument changes shape.** People who disagree about the poles almost always agree on the greater purpose, and they share the deeper fear. That common ground is where the conversation starts.

- **The downsides fill in fast, from the other side of the table.** The people resisting your preferred pole know its downside better than you do. Johnson treats the wisdom of those resisting change as a resource for making the change better (Johnson, 2020). In my experience, resistance is information. It tells you exactly what you are about to break.
- **The conversation becomes repeatable.** A map can be revisited. An argument can only be re-fought.

Three ways leaders misuse the map

- **Using it to win.** A leader fills in the downsides of the pole they dislike and the upsides of the pole they prefer, then calls it alignment. The test is simple: would the people on the other side sign the map as written?
- **Treating it as an event.** A great session, a photo of the wall, and then the binder. A map that is never checked again is a poster. The value comes from returning to it when the next swing starts.
- **Mapping a problem.** Not everything is a polarity. Some questions have an answer, and wrapping them in both/and language is just a way to avoid a hard call. If the two-question test comes back with a no, decide.

Why Either/Or Wins Under Pressure

Either/or is the native language of a senior leader. A board wants a decision, not a map. Analysts want a direction. Under pressure, a clean choice feels like relief. That is exactly why the swing keeps happening.

The swing

Every reorganization I have seen that reversed the previous reorganization was a polarity treated as a problem. Centralize to fix duplication. A few years later, decentralize to fix slowness. Each move was sold as the answer. Each was really a turn of the loop, taken late and at full cost.

The resisters are right about something

> **"Tie a change effort to one pole and you have guaranteed its failure."**
>
> DEAN MILES

When a change is framed around one side, the people who value the other side have to push back. They are protecting an upside you just declared worthless. Pushing harder only proves their point. The fix is to name what they are protecting, out loud and in specific terms, before you ask them to move. People follow a change more readily when they can see that what they valued is coming with them.

The leader gets the wrong feedback

Once a leader picks a pole, the room tends to line up behind it. The downside does not show up in the leadership meeting. It accumulates out in the business, in the plants, the field offices, and the customer calls, and it gets filtered on the way up. By the time it reaches the top, it looks like a new problem instead of the predictable cost of the last decision.

What the research says

James March described one of the most important tensions in organizations: exploring new possibilities versus exploiting the ones you already have. His analysis showed that organizations tend to refine exploitation faster than exploration, which pays off in the short run and can become self-destructive over time (March, 1991). Roger Martin's work on integrative thinking describes leaders who hold two opposing ideas in tension and, instead of choosing one at the expense of the other, build a better answer that draws on both (Martin, 2007).

Organizations that last find ways to hold two good things at once. Leaders who last learn to tolerate the discomfort of not picking. That is, at bottom, a self-regulation challenge: managing your own urge for closure long enough to see the whole map. It is one reason self-regulation sits at the center of my doctoral research.

Polarities Everywhere

In the organization

Once you know what to look for, you will see them on every agenda: stability and change, centralized and decentralized, standardization and local flexibility, candor and diplomacy, individual and team accountability, planning and action, mission and margin, safety and production, short-term results and long-term capability.

Inside the leader

The most important polarities may be the ones you carry with you. Seven show up again and again in my work with senior leaders:

1. **Expert and beginner.** Expertise got you here. As the context widens, the job keeps shifting between knowing and learning.
2. **Consistent and flexible.** When the information changes, your mind should too. Holding a bad call to look decisive is its own failure.
3. **Tactician and visionary.** Too much vision and your team has no idea what to do on Wednesday afternoon. Too much tactics and they hit every milestone walking in the wrong direction. Zoom in and out.

4. **Teller and listener.** Much of the intelligence you need is already in the room. Staying silent wastes your experience.
5. **Commander and delegator.** Insisting on being in charge disables a team. Pure delegation reads as absence.
6. **Instinct and evidence.** Instinct is pattern recognition. Data is context. You need both.
7. **Perfectionist and accelerator.** Stop asking "Is it good enough?" Start asking "Good enough for what?"

If you recognize yourself on one side of any of these, you are normal. If you are on one side of all of them, you have a map to draw.

Sidebar: Two Composite Cases

Both cases are composites. I have combined and altered material from more than one engagement so that no organization or individual can be recognized. The tensions and the lessons are real. The particulars are not.

Case A: Exploration and exploitation in an R&D organization

An R&D organization inside a global industrial company lived on March's tension every day. Lean toward exploration and the business units stop trusting you. Lean toward exploitation and there is nothing in the pipeline five years from now. Every planning cycle replayed the same fight. The business wanted delivery. The scientists wanted room. The leadership team spent its time refereeing instead of leading.

Three things changed. First, the team mapped the tension on one wall. The downside quadrants filled fastest, and they were filled by the people arguing for the other pole. Agreement on the greater purpose came faster than anyone expected. Second, the team fixed decision rights for the few calls that shift the balance between the poles, naming who recommends, who must agree, who gives input, who decides, and who carries it out, in the spirit of Bain's RAPID roles (Rogers & Blenko, 2006). Several of those calls had been made by whoever cared most on the day. Third, the leaders protected the conditions exploration needs: small teams, real autonomy, short decision chains, distance from the organization's antibodies, and a leader willing to absorb pressure for a full quarter. Culture is downstream of conditions.

The planning cycle stopped being a referendum. It became a map check.

Case B: Many maps in a heavy-industry division

A multi-unit regional operating division in a heavy industry was a polarity machine: safety and production, cost control and investment, standard processes and local judgment, pricing discipline and customer relationships. Every solution seemed to last about a quarter.

Instead of one grand map, the leadership team built a separate map for each tension that kept returning, from downtime and turnover to operating cost, safety, and pricing. Each had its poles, upsides, downsides, and early warnings. The team preferred the word "paradox" to "polarity." The word mattered less than the discipline.

The division leader mapped his own polarity too: advocate for the division, and own the enterprise. Both were his job, and leaning on either one too long had costs he could name.

The clearest sign it was working: the model left the room without him. Within months, several unit leaders were running their own mapping sessions without being asked. The language showed up on operating calls. People started asking which pole they had leaned on too long instead of whose fault it was. The leader kept up regular visits to every unit, out on the sites and jobs, not in conference rooms. The maps told him which tensions to watch. The visits told him which quadrant each unit was actually in.

Leading the Both/And Conversation

A map on a wall changes nothing by itself. What makes it work is deciding, in advance, how you will know you are sliding and what you will do about it.

For each pole, name a few action steps that keep you in its upside. Then name early warnings: signs that you are drifting into its downside. Each warning should be something a colleague could see or count, owned by a named person, with a response agreed before it is needed. A warning nobody owns is a wish. A warning with an owner and a pre-agreed response is a management system.

Take the centralize and decentralize map in Figure 1. An early warning for over-centralizing might be the number of routine decisions waiting on headquarters for more than a week, owned by the head of operations, with an agreed response: push that category of decision back out. An early warning for over-decentralizing might be the number of local versions of the same process, owned by the enterprise process lead, with an agreed response: pick the best one and make it the standard. Neither signal settles the tension. Both tell you which way you are drifting while the turn is still cheap.

A FIVE-STEP SEQUENCE

1. **Name the tension.** "We keep cycling between X and Y. This is not a problem we will solve once. It is a tension we have to manage on purpose."
2. **Honor both poles.** Ask each side to describe the upside of the other pole before critiquing it.
3. **Build the map together.** Purpose, fear, upsides, downsides. Let the people closest to each downside write it.
4. **Agree on signals.** Two early warnings per pole, with a name next to each.
5. **Revisit on a rhythm.** Quarterly works for most leadership teams. Check the map before you reopen the argument.

If you are the leader, go first. Name the pole you personally lean on, and the downside your team has probably been too polite to mention.

How Coaching Helps

Polarity work is simple to describe and hard to sustain alone, because the leader is usually standing on one of the poles. My coaching follows three phases. For polarities, each has a specific job:

- **Discovery: find the loop.** We look for the issues that keep coming back and test them against the two questions. We also map the leader's own preferred poles.
- **Design: draw the map with the team.** Shared purpose and fear, both sets of upsides and downsides, early warnings with owners, and clear decision rights for the calls that shift the balance.
- **Development: hold both under load.** The leader practices tolerating the pull to pick a side, rehearses the hard conversations with the people guarding the other pole, and checks the map before reopening a decision.

For the complete Discovery, Design, Development method, see my first whitepaper, *Advising Leaders at the Point of Pressure* (deanmiles.com/whitepapers).

Reflection Questions

Pick one recurring issue before you start. Answer with that issue in mind.

1. What problem has come back to my desk three or more times?
2. When it swings, what are the two complaints? "Too ___" and "too ___."
3. Which pole am I leaning on right now, and for how long?
4. What upside of the other pole have I been treating as the problem?
5. Who resisted my last change, and what were they protecting?

6. What would a colleague see or count if we started sliding into a downside?
7. Who owns that signal? If nobody, that is my answer.
8. Which of the seven inner polarities am I standing on one side of?
9. Could my team describe our greater purpose in the same words?
10. When did we last look at the map instead of relitigating the decision?

If the same issue showed up in more than three of your answers, you have found your first map.

About the Author

Dean Miles founded Bridgepoint Coaching & Strategy Group in 2007 and has advised senior leaders since then, at organizations with more than $300 billion in combined revenue and assets under management. Polarity thinking has been part of his facilitation practice for more than a decade. Thinkers360 names him the #1 thought leader in the world for Business Continuity and a Top 10 for Coaching. At Liberty University he earned an M.A. in Executive Leadership and is now a PhD candidate in Organization and Management, with a dissertation on how self-regulation relates to premature scaling in startup failure.

Send Me the Issue That Keeps Coming Back

Every leadership team has a decision it keeps making and unmaking. Tell me what yours is. In a first conversation we will sketch its map together, name the pole you are leaning on, and identify the early warning nobody owns yet.

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