Managing Polarities
An Interview with Barry Johnson, Ph.D.[1]

RICK MAURER, M.A.

Rick: Barry, tell us a little about your background and how you came to focus on polarities.

Barry: It began when I was working as a seminarian in opposition to the war in Vietnam. I wrote an article as a graduate student at Union Theological Seminary about the tension between what I called the "Bondage of Action and the Bondage of Inaction." I was struck by how simplistic my colleagues and I in the peace movement had become in order to support our actions. At the same time, I was concerned about those unable to act at all because the situation was too complicated and they didn't want to make a mistake. Grace was what freed us to act without pretending to have all the answers or being too simplistic, including dehumanizing our opposition. It was a way to talk about the paradox of grace and law. We are loved unconditionally (grace frees us to act), and we're also accountable for our actions (law holds us accountable for our actions). So that tension between those opposites was something I was aware of in the mid-1960s. It was called a polarity when I got into Gestalt therapy. Identifying and addressing these opposites became figural in my Gestalt training.

Rick: You begin your book, *Polarity Management,* by saying you've got some bad news and some good news.

Barry: The bad side of the news is that there are a whole host of issues we face in our organizational lives that are completely unavoidable and unsolvable. The good news is that we can identify these particular issues that I have called polarities. They also have been called paradoxes, or dilemmas. By addressing these sets of interdependent opposites, we can manage them and actually create a synergy for the benefit of the individual parts of the system as a whole.

Rick: Can you give an example how that might play out in an organization?

Barry: One of the central issues in organizations is, do we centralize or do we decentralize? Do we centralize to coordinate for system integration, or do we decentralize in order to get close to the customer and empower people to be decisive on the front line? That is a polarity to manage. We need to be effective in our centralized coordination—and we need to be effective in our decentralized decision making. If we can do both of those well—which are inherently in tension with each other—it will be beneficial for everyone involved in the system. It will be beneficial to those who are interested in the centralized coordination (usually the administration), and it will be beneficial to people who are on the front line because they feel like they've got an ability to be responsive to the customer and to use their own ingenuity and creativity.

Rick: But are you suggesting that these dilemmas or polarities often get treated like problems that can be solved?

Barry: Yes. If it gets seen as a problem to solve, especially by people in power, an either/or mindset gets triggered. Either we're going to be centralized, or we're going to be decentralized. A strong advocate for centralization may have the power to get the system to focus on that one pole. And over time, that system will experience the limits of centralized coordination.

On a polarity map you would find yourself in the downsides of that pole. And this downside is predictable. Whenever you focus on one pole to the neglect of the other, you get its downside. Whenever you have a polarity to manage, by focusing on one pole to the neglect of the other, you will first get the downside of the pole where you focused, and then you will get the downside of the neglected pole. You end up over time getting the downside of both poles. Paradoxically, if you try to get the best of centralization by focusing on centralization to the neglect of decentralization, you first lose the benefits of decentralization and then you lose the benefits of centralization. The change becomes dysfunctional because you're getting the downside of both poles.

Rick: Let's get specific and apply the polarity map to a real organization.

Barry: I was working with the advanced engineering staff at a major automotive company. An information technology (IT) company was just moving in to handle all their information technology. As with all information technology systems, you're dealing with tension between (common) centralized coordination and integration of the system on one hand and (custom) the very specific needs of individuals and units on the other.

They were discovering that there were managers in various parts of the auto company who were going to the local Tandy shop (a computer retailer) and buying their own little computers to do the kind of custom needs they needed because the central IT organization was not being responsive to their unique needs for information and for data among themselves. So the system was overfocused on the common pole or centralized coordination pole and not adequately paying attention to the custom pole or decentralized needs within parts of the system.

They could buy a computer and programs and set up their own independent action much cheaper than it would be to get a day or two of consulting with the IT internal consultants. And central IT couldn't help them anyway because the system was overly focused on the centralized common database coordination. This issue came up in the midst of my working with the advanced engineering staff and introducing polarity management. They said, "Might there be a polarity here?" And I said, "Definitely."

The very next day they were going into a meeting that they anticipated was going to be a shouting match over the insensitivity and nonresponsiveness of IT, with people trying to defend their managers who were going out and buying independent computers. They put it together as a polarity map and brought it to the meeting. They realized that they had to manage both poles. The whole conversation shifted when they changed from seeing the issue as a problem to solve to seeing it as a polarity to manage. They began to ask, "How do we get both?" The polarity map principles and action steps provided a user-friendly way to differentiate and then to proactively address the paradox or polarity.

Rick: Would you agree that these polarities could occur at any level of system from organizational to groups to interpersonal?

Barry: Yes. Another significant generic polarity is part and whole, and one way to talk about systems theory is about how parts relate to parts and parts relate to wholes over time. An example of this in the part–

whole polarity is that this is highly scalable. So the part could be an individual team member, and the whole could be the team. Or the part could be the team, and the whole could be the department, or you can scale up and down however you want. It could be one state in the United States as a whole or the United States as a part in the United Nations. One of the things we can learn about in terms of part–whole relationships is that there are certain benefits to paying attention to the part that parts demand and that they need to sustain their partness.

Two fundamental dimensions are the uniqueness of the part and its freedom to be creative or innovative. Its freedom and uniqueness become two positive elements that parts will clamor for. When you focus on the whole, you're focusing on the connectedness or community. Its connectedness is in contrast to uniqueness, and its equality is in contrast to freedom. So the question is, how do we manage the tension between parts and wholes in any system?

When Saturn was created at GM, it emphasized its uniqueness to the whole world. "We're a different way of building and selling cars." As a new company, they were trying to focus on their uniqueness. But whenever you overfocus on uniqueness—you begin to assert yourself and your own initiative—the downside of overfocusing on uniqueness and freedom is isolation from the whole and inequality. I call it the Joseph Syndrome from the Old Testament. Give one kid out of 12 a coat with special colors. Overemphasize his uniqueness and his brothers will sell him into slavery.

Saturn was getting itself isolated from the rest of General Motors. They had created an isolation of the part by overemphasizing its uniqueness with underemphasizing its connectedness. By emphasizing their own uniqueness, it raised the question, what does this say about Cadillac and Buick?

Rick: So how do you help people recognize that there are polarities that need to be managed?

Barry: I help people get in touch with the fact that they've been managing polarities all their life. They're ubiquitous. They're all over the place. So it's not like they haven't been managing polarities. It's just that they haven't had that language about the phenomena or my particular model or somebody else's model and set of principles to explicitly address it. The combination of experience and intuition has led them to be effective at managing polarities without even knowing they're doing it.

For example, say it is Hanukah or Qwanza or Christmas or some time in your family's tradition in which all the children get presents. You have three children. What is it that you think about—considerations you give—in getting presents for the kids?

Rick: Fairness.

Barry: How would that be demonstrated?

Rick: In my family, my parents spent about the same amount of money and gave the same amount of attention to our respective gifts.

Barry: What else?

Rick: Uniqueness. It was clear that our parents thought about us as individuals.

Barry: Exactly, those two thoughts come up very early and they show up in different forms. People talk about the equality (whole) and unique-ness (part) polarity. They want each child to experience his or her uniqueness in the gift, and somehow you need to simultaneously pay attention to the fact that it needs to be equalized. This tension between equality and the reasons you need it to be equal comes from knowing at some level that, if it were too unequal, you'd create friction between the kids. Why are we doing that? Connectedness gets spoiled by overfocusing on the uniqueness of the children.

Working with polarities is something you are doing all the time. I'm just helping you get a handle on it rather than letting it be driven by some intuitive hunches so it can be much more explicitly addressed strategically and tactically addressed with other people and tapping their intuitive wisdom. The shift is from tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge.

Rick: How can we tell the difference between a dilemma and a prob-lem to be solved before it comes up and bites us?

Barry: First, how do you know if you've got a problem to solve? And what is the value and potential of the problem to solve? And then let's distinguish it from polarities to manage. The problem-solving mindset is a natural, unavoidable and important by-product of one generation passing its culture on to the next generation. You need to understand where the problem-solving mindset comes from and appreciate its power and its value. When we ask our granddaughter, Carly, "How do you spell cat?" She says, "c a t." We've given her a problem to solve. What she's learned in that process is that, if you solve it, you get re-warded. The name of the game through all our formal education is solv-ing problems quickly, and if you solve a high percentage of problems accurately, then you get an A grade. Poor problem solving leads to a poor grade, and it can determine your whole financial future. The SATs

are all either/or problems to solve. When we ask Carly what's four plus four and she says eight, or who was first president of the United States and she says Washington, we have created questions for our children as a way to see if they understand what we want them to understand. Are they learning our language, our history, our math?

There are two by-products from that whole process. We learn it is good to be a problem solver. You get a lot of credit for solving a lot of problems and doing it quickly. The second by-product is subtle and very powerful. We learn indirectly that when we are right, those who disagree with us are wrong. There's no way around this, and I don't think there should be a way around it, but we need to appreciate its power. If you and I disagree on who was the first president—you say it's Washington and I say it's Franklin—then this is a problem to solve. There is an answer to this question. You might bring a history book to me and say, "Barry, notice the list of presidents. The first one is Washington." In formal education, when given a problem, we go inside and ask ourselves—we tap our own wisdom if you will—"I remember this history lesson; Washington is the first president." To the degree that you think you're right is the degree to which you believe I'm wrong. So this is what we all learn through solving hundreds of thousands of problems that have one right answer.

Rick: Would you apply that to the centralized/decentralized example we've been exploring?

Barry: Let's say that I'm interested in decentralized initiatives and you're interested in a centralized way of working. You go inside and ask yourself the question, "Is there a necessity for centralized coordination?" You have all sorts of arguments why centralized coordination is essential. These arguments are the upside of centralization. You also have an equally long list of potential downside of overfocusing on decentralization. So your point of view has two of the dimensions of a polarity map: the upside of one pole and the downside of the other. If you believe you're right, I must be wrong. So you now gently or very powerfully, depending on your disposition, try to help me see the error of my ways. You are half right. The point is that I am also half right. We can't tap our combined wisdom from an either/or perspective in which either you are right or I am.

Rick: How do you know if the issue facing you is a polarity?

Barry: When you shift into polarities, you now shift into the world of interdependence. The primary criterion to tell if you have a problem to solve or a polarity to manage is the interdependence of the parts you

are looking at. Here are some criteria questions. Is it necessary over time to engage both of these opposites that are in contention? And the time dimension is very important because it's possible to focus on one pole for a brief period of time and say, "This is really terrific. This is it." But if it's a polarity, that pole is not sustainable because it's dependent on the other pole for its sustainability over time.

The model I use for that is breathing. Inhaling is great, and exhaling is great; however, if you just focus on inhaling, it's not sustainable. And it has nothing to do with inhaling being bad. It has to do with inhaling being a part of interdependent whole, and it needs its opposite for it to be viable over time. That's how you determine if you've got a polarity or not. Do the two parts need each other over time?

The choice whether we should merge or not merge is a problem to solve. There is nothing inherent in merging that says we have to not merge later. However, in the merging of two entities, it would be very helpful for those about to engage in the merger to pay attention to the key polarities in their two systems. They will either be on the same pole or on opposite poles. And if they're on the same pole, it looks like a marriage made in heaven, but they're vulnerable to the downside of the pole they both choose.

Rick: They both miss the same things?

Barry: Exactly. But imagine that their history is one of opposite pole preference. A Swedish company and a U.S. company merged. They fought for 3 years over decision making. The U.S. company was much more directive in its decision making; the Swedish company was much more participative. Both of them thought they were right, and 3 years later they decided to end their merger. Because they both were seeing it from an either/or perspective, it got to be a power struggle. They agreed to disagree, and neither tapped the potential of the other and so the company unmerged.

The complaints were quite clear. The complaints about the U.S. managers were that they were "cowboys" who shoot from the hip. They would make decisions without including key stakeholders and then have a terrible time "selling" the decisions to the stakeholders left out of the decision-making process. This is the downside of the directive pole. The complaint about the Swedes was that they took forever to make decisions. They were seen as indecisive and slow. So you can readily put that on a polarity map when you see it as a polarity to manage. You can say, "How do we synergize between the strengths of the Swedish culture around inclusion and involving people in decisions—the more participatory orientation. How do we combine that with a more directive kind of style that the United States brings?" And the

synergy between that could have been a net result that could have been what in systems theory is called a virtuous circle. But between the two, it became a vicious circle, and both of them blamed the other one for it not working. And they were both right.

Rick: When did the polarity map come into the picture and how?

Barry: It was in 1975 when I was seeing a client for the first time. Let's call her Ann. She began the session by saying she wanted to be more like me. When I asked her what she meant, she described me as what I would now call the upside of the aggressive pole: You are making a contribution, know what you want, and go after it. She then described herself as the downside of the passive pole: Don't know what I want and don't have the gumption to go after it.

I knew there was more to the picture so we created four quadrants on the floor representing the upside and downside of passivity and the upside and downside of aggression. We then moved through the four quadrants to identify and experience the content of each.

We started in the downside of passivity, which she knew well, and then went to the upside of passivity and she didn't have a clue about its content. We worked on it until we identified the benefits of being a receiver and willingness to learn from others, etc. Then we attempted to walk to the downside of the aggressive pole, and Ann stopped right at the imaginary boundary between the upside of being passive and the downside of being aggressive.

When I asked Ann what was going on, she said, "I'm not going there!" I asked her what was there and she said, "That's being a 'bitch.' " I asked her what that meant, and she said it was being a dictator or know-it-all, and she didn't want to go there. After some discussion in which I agreed to go with her and that she didn't have to stay, we did go to that quadrant, and she acted out what it meant to her to be "bitchy." We then went to the upside of the aggressive pole and explored ways in which that was already a part of her life and how she might experiment with holding on to the upsides of passivity while adding the upsides of aggression. The original polarity map was born.

We have learned a lot since then, but none of the learning has been inconsistent with the learning from that 1-hour session in 1975 when I was working as a Gestalt therapist. I was just completing my 2-year training program with the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland at the time.

Rick: You mentioned your training in Gestalt. I am struck by how well your polarity work fits into a Gestalt framework. What direct connections do you see between your model and Gestalt theory and practice?

Barry: I think the Paradoxical Theory of Change (Beisser, 1970) helps one understand the polarity map and the reverse is true. The map is a helpful way of getting an understanding of paradoxical change. For example, in order for Ann to embrace the aggressive pole, she needed first to embrace the passive pole. The positive aspects of the passive pole gave her enough footing to stand on to support her engagement in the aggressive pole. She wasn't aware that there was a downside to the aggressive pole until she experienced the upside of passivity. So seeing all of passivity—the positive and negative aspects of it—before we attempt to supplement it with the aggressive pole is important.

Three things happened when she saw that passivity had positive and negative sides. First, she became grounded in the upside of passivity. This gave her something positive to move from as a launching pad. When she got grounded in the upside of passivity, she became aware of the downside of the other pole. Having the solid support of the upside of passivity gave her support to engage the downside of aggressiveness. She was able to see and engage her "bitch." In Jungian terms she was doing the shadow work. Paradoxically, if you want to move to an opposite pole, you must first embrace both parts of the pole you are on. It fits exactly with paradoxical change.

The Gestalt notion of contact and contact being made at the boundary fits as well. The boundary got established between the two poles when she experienced both the upside and downside of the pole she was on. The first boundary she crossed was from the downside of passivity to its upside. In moving into the upside space, she made contact with more of the map. She got in touch with something about herself that she valued, which was the upside of the very thing she was complaining about herself.

The next boundary became obvious as she walked toward the downside of the aggressive pole. Ann stopped in her tracks right at the boundary between the upside of passivity and the downside of aggressiveness. She was making contact with her "bitch." The final boundary was experienced as we moved from the downside of aggressiveness to its upside.

In the process, she came up against something she valued (upside of passivity) and something she feared (the downside of aggressiveness)—neither of which had been in her awareness.

Experiment is also important. I provided a supportive context so she could experiment and experience different dimensions of the map. She was able to make contact with various parts of the map, and consequently, she began to see the whole picture.

Self as resource and other as resource is an important link. One of the many things Gestalt psychology adds to the field of psychology is

the pole of self as resource. In traditional therapy and consulting, the patient was the resource and focus of attention. The information comes from them while the consultant is to provide objective feedback on client-centered information. When the consultant can focus on what's inside him- or herself—and see this as a resource—this introduces the self/pole of the self, the other polarity. Gestalt has made a great contribution to consultants' need to manage the self other polarity in our work.

When Ann began by saying she wanted to be more like me and described me only in terms of the upside of aggressiveness, I knew there was a downside to what she was seeing because I had experienced it. This became important information about what was not in her awareness about my pole and raised the question about whether there was also more to be aware of in her pole.

Figure and ground show up for individuals and organizations. What's often figural is the upside of one pole and the downside of the other pole. The other up and downside are background. And in Ann's case, this ground was so much in the background that it wasn't even in her awareness.

The polarity map raises questions about probable background that needs to be made figural.

Seeing that the whole is more than the sum of the parts is a Gestalt principle that gets tapped within Polarity Management™ by fully acknowledging each section of the polarity map. So we begin to see that the map is more than the sum of its parts, but it is a dynamic balancing mechanism. The infinity loop on the map indicates an oscillation from one section to another that is quite predictable.

When you look at polarities using the cycle of experience, you create two cycles oscillating around the two poles. The infinity loop is a sigmoid curve that turns around and back on itself. The first cycle tends to show up as you are on the downside of one pole that drives you to action toward the upside of the other pole. If you stay there too long, the benefits start to dissipate. Awareness of the absence of other pole increases as you experience the downside. And the cycle moves back to action on the other pole. These two cycles are interwoven and perpetual. Gestalt contributes to learning with clients through discovery. While you have rules and principles, they are in service of discovery. This begins to give us choice (another dimension of Gestalt theory.)

In Gestalt, we appreciate resistance as a survival mechanism, as opposed to a dysfunction. Projection and deflection are yang resistance mechanisms, and introjection and confluence are yin energy resistances. As with yin and yang, they are in opposite poles with each other. Resistance is experienced when we attempt, as Ann did, to go from the downside of the pole that has served us in the past to the upside of the pole

we want to serve us in the future. There is wisdom in the resistance. The resistance contains the upside or value of the present pole and its historical contribution and the legitimate fear of the downside of the pole whose upside seems like the logical move.

For Ann, the move to the upside of aggression seemed like the logical move, which it was. The reason she could not "walk her talk" was because she had not tapped the wisdom in her own resistance to the move. That wisdom included the fact that passivity had served her well in the past through its upsides and aggressiveness had not always served her well, making her fearful of its downsides.

When you see all four quadrants, you've created a choice point. Instead of trying to overwhelm resistance, we can hold its wisdom and see its usefulness. Paradoxically, resistance becomes a resource for movement rather than an obstacle to it.

Rick: Barry, it's always a pleasure talking with you. Each time I hear you talk about your work, your work becomes richer for me. I hope the readers of this interview have that same experience. Thank you.

Reference

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