When should I use this tool?

Many of the issues leaders face are not problems to be solved; they are paradoxes to be balanced. A paradox is a seemingly contradictory situation that is nevertheless true. A paradox contains elements that appear to be mutually exclusive and that appear to operate at the same time. Some leadership problems can be addressed with "either/or" thinking, but paradoxes must be addressed with "both/and" thinking. When you experience that, "damned if I do, damned if I don't" feeling, you have encountered a paradox. Common leadership paradoxes include the following:

- Focus on the individual; focus on the team
- Take short term profits; invest in the long term
- Centralize/decentralize the organization
- Ensure the success of your department; ensure the success of the company

The Polarity Map tool is especially helpful in deciding whether the issue to be addressed is a problem to be solved or a paradox to be balanced. Further, this tool is helpful in understanding the nature of the paradox and how to address it. Use this tool when you want
- To provide an alternative, more successful, approach to dealing with difficult and ambiguous situations
- To encourage everyone involved to take a broad perspective on difficult situations

Why is using this tool important?

No matter how convincing your case for change, some people will disagree with your direction or your leadership. Additionally, significant change generally brings with it a number of difficult or ambiguous situations that are troublesome to deal with. When the going gets tough, don’t throw up your hands in despair or defeat. You can use the Polarity Map tool.

A paradox is not a problem. When you use problem-solving techniques on a paradox, you will probably
- Revisit issues often and experience little progress
- Create more problems than you solve
- Let disappointments turn into character assassinations
- Eat up huge chunks of time and feel that you are getting nowhere

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1 Much of this material was taken from Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems by Barry Johnson
Every leader encounters paradox. Knowing and understanding the cycle of a paradox enables you to curb your use of negative energy and survive.

The Polarity Map is uniquely suited for thinking through paradox and seeing the big picture that is behind it. Here are a few important points about paradoxes:

- Paradoxes exist at the organization, role, and personal levels
- Paradoxes consist of two opposing perspectives, or polarities.
- Each of the polarities, at some time (past, present, or future) is both beneficial and problematic.
- Whenever they have positioned their thinking at either end of a paradox, people are likely to strongly defend the correctness of their opinions.

Tell me more about this tool

How do I proceed?

There are four steps in the process that leads to balancing a paradox.

**Step 1. Describe the issue**

If you have experienced an issue that has been difficult to resolve, bring the various parties together. Encourage people to tell their “stories” about the struggle that is taking place. If two people “see” the same issue differently, wonderful! Ask the group to pay particular attention to both sides and the efforts that have been made and have failed to resolve the issue.

**Step 2. Determine whether the issue is a problem to be solved or a paradox to be balanced**

How you address a paradox is different from how you solve a problem. Therefore, you have to differentiate the two. You are addressing a paradox if

- The issue is recurring
- Efforts at solution result in more problems
- Both sides of the issue are critical for long-term success
- People fail to recognize the importance of the other side

When all four conditions prevail, you have a paradox to balance. Do not try to use standard problem-solving methods to resolve it!
Step 3. Describe the paradox by creating a Polarity Map

A Polarity Map (see Figure PM1) shows you how a paradox cycles from one polarity to the other over time. To develop a Polarity Map, use two flip charts side by side or create an empty Polarity Map on the floor using masking tape. The procedure for filling in the model is as follows:

1. Discover what circumstance people are afraid of and want to avoid, and place that information in the bottom middle of the map.
2. Discover what circumstance people desire and want to achieve, and place that information in the upper middle of the map.
3. Name the two ends of the paradox. These are the polarities. Place their names at either end of the horizontal line.
4. In box 1, list the negative aspects of the left-side polarity.
5. In box 2, list the positive aspects of the left-side polarity.
6. In box 3, list the positive aspects of the right-side polarity.
7. In box 4, list the negative aspects of the right-side polarity.

Step 4. Determine how to balance the paradox

In the final step, the leader and the planning group determine how they will actively manage the polarity to achieve the result they intend. They complete the balancing-polarity graphic in Figure PM2.
The group addresses the following questions and records their responses in the appropriate areas of a flipchart on which the Balancing Polarities graphic has been drawn (see Figure PM2).

- Where are we currently positioned on the positive half of the continuum that includes both ends of the polarity?
- What do we need to do to achieve the positive results we desire, and how will we manage the positive aspects of both ends of the polarity?
- Who will do what, by when?
- What do we need to do to avoid the negative aspects of both ends of the polarity? What red-flag indicators will show us that we are moving too far toward what we don’t want? Who will recognize the red flags? What will we do then?

**Hints and troubleshooting tips**

1. *Involve people with various perspectives in this process.* By including people who favor both sides of the issue, the leader builds deeper understanding and greater commitment to the action plan. When dealing with paradox, those who represent opposing perspectives are especially helpful to balance it in the longer-term.

2. *Properly categorize the issue* as a problem or a paradox. Treating a problem as a paradox or a paradox as a problem creates greater difficulties.
3. **Establish a clear understanding** of what we want and what we wish to avoid. This is a helpful way to encourage people with different perspectives to develop a better understanding of the larger goal. They will realize that they desire similar outcomes and that the means for achieving them is the source of conflict.

4. **Naming the two polarities** can be a more difficult task than it first appears. Both ends should have positive connotations and not be the names of a department or function.

5. In periods of change, **two factions** are likely to evolve: (1) the crusaders who champion the change and (2) the bearers of tradition who want to maintain the current arrangement. Involving both factions in Polarity Mapping minimizes the risk of failure and avoids the negative win/lose outcome.

6. The purpose of balancing a paradox is to achieve the **best aspects of both polarities**. If one polarity begins to dominate, red flags must be raised to avoid that polarity’s downside consequences.

7. For a **powerful team-building exercise**, create a large, blank Polarity Map on the floor (use masking tape). Elicit from the participants the characteristics of each quadrant of the polarity map. Write their responses on 4 separate flipchart sheets. Place the sheets on the appropriate quadrants on blank map. Invite the participants to act out the polarity. By playing out the negative aspects of the polarities in an exercise, the group will save the money, stress, and time of playing them out in real life.

*If it is a problem you are trying to solve, do not use this process*

**Case example**

The Corporate Facilities Department has already

1. Looked closely at its external environment and developed several scenarios

2. Determined that it must seriously determine whether to provide services to other corporations

3. Developed a communications plan to share its intentions with significant stakeholders

4. Determined the critical organization competencies required to expand its customer base and developed a plan to build them

Once past the initial excitement of creating and moving toward their new vision, the CFD leader and the planning group recognized the probability of experiencing an upside and a downside to their future path. They would have to tread carefully between the two poles of operating as a vendor that provides services to other companies, and operating as an internal department that provides services to their own
company. They needed to understand the upside and downside possibilities more fully. They decided to bring together the whole organization for the process of developing a Polarity Map.

**Step 1: Describe the Issue**
The CFD leader encouraged all employees to speak openly about their concerns. The leader explained the concept of paradox. The leader then asked one half of the group to develop a story about what it would be like to be a vendor and provide services to companies other than their own. They asked the other half of the group to develop a story about what it would be like to provide service to their own growing company in the future. They asked both groups to include positives and negatives in their stories.

**Step 2: Determine whether the issue is a problem to be solved or a paradox to be balanced**
The CFD leader asked the whole group to determine whether the issue was a problem to be solved or a paradox to be understood and balanced. The leader asked a few penetrating questions based on the information in Table PM1 and recorded the answers on a white board.

**Table PM1. Questions to determine if the situation is a paradox**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is the nature of our situation new or have we worried about our department a number of times before?</td>
<td>We have always worried about being viewed as a non-core function. We have also known that inefficiencies have existed in the department.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have previous efforts resolved the issue of our viability over the long term?</td>
<td>We have had many new programs and initiatives. The problem of our continuing existence remains.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is this concern important to us?</td>
<td>Yes, we must address it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can we achieve our objectives for the long term by focusing only on one end of the continuum?</td>
<td>The time has come when we must actively pursue both ends of the continuum. To accomplish one end without the other will not work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Step 3: Describe the paradox by creating a Polarity Map**
The group named the two ends of the polarity as *Operate as a vendor* and *Operate as a department*. On the white board they drew a blank
Polarity Map. They developed statements about what they desired and what they hoped to avoid: They desired financial success and opportunities for long-term employment. They hoped to avoid the flip side of both.

The group then developed and recorded the positive and negative aspects of each polarity. The results of their work appear in Figure PM3.

![Figure PM3. CFD’s Polarity Map](image-url)

**Step 4: Determine how to balance the paradox**

After they completed the Polarity Map, the group recognized that to become a successful vendor of facilities services to other companies and to continue to be a facilities service department to their own company required that they actively attend to both sides of the paradox. They completed Table PM2.
### Table PM2. CFD’s balancing paradox

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Become a Vendor</th>
<th>Operate as a Department</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Manage for positive results: who, what, when</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create new skill-development programs by 2(^{nd}) quarter</td>
<td>Establish a talent assessment and a performance-appraisal system for existing employees by 2(^{nd}) quarter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Install new project-management system by 2(^{nd}) quarter</td>
<td>Provide a performance appraisal to each employee and inform employees of their ranking in the department by 2(^{nd}) quarter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hire an external marketing consultant to work with the steering committee to research potential customers by 3(^{rd}) quarter</td>
<td>Establish a steering committee to research which department functions will be impacted and develop a plan to address their needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The red flag indicators: who will know and what will we do about it</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of service to our own company shows signs of having diminished</td>
<td>Our plans for improving employee competencies and department capabilities have not been implemented.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The installation of new systems and marketing efforts have taken so much time that we are losing credibility with our own company leaders</td>
<td>Our plans for improving project management and marketing capabilities have not been implemented.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To monitor either of the above, our internal audit group will monitor internal customer satisfaction levels and report to our vice president if there is an issue.</td>
<td>The department has few external clients by the 3(^{rd}) quarter and revenues from external sources have fallen behind projections.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To monitor these, the financial group will issue quarterly project reviews and reports regarding external revenue performance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>