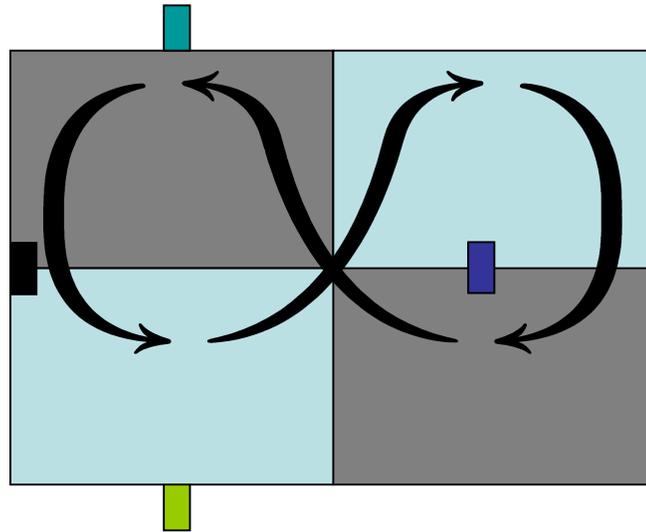# Polarity Management™

Identifying and Managing
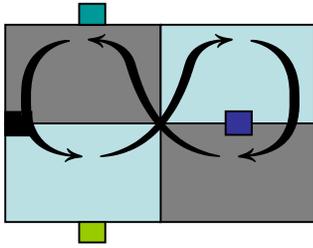## Unsolvable Problems
Barry Johnson

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Polarity Management™
A Summary Introduction

The **Polarity Management** framework and principles provide a practical set of resources for dealing with all polarities in life. Polarities are ongoing, chronic issues which are both unavoidable and unsolvable. Attempting to address them through customary problem-solving only makes things worse. These situations are not problems to solve; they are polarities which require effective management. Leaders, teams, and organizations become more effective as they learn to distinguish between the two and deal productively with both. Through this work, they can consciously use diversity and divergent thinking as resources for developing high performing cultures that promote community and productivity.

Polarity Management increases in value as an issue or a system increases in terms of:
- ❖ Complexity – by permitting a view of both the forest and the trees;
- ❖ Change – by converting resistance to change into a resource for stability and change;
- ❖ Conflict – by developing "Both/And" thinking, creating "Win/Win" outcomes;
- ❖ Diversity – by respecting, utilizing, and celebrating differences.

> For every complex problem there is a simple solution. And it's wrong.
> ➤ Anonymous,
> Cited by Barry Johnson

A fundamental question to ask when encountering a challenging situation is: "Is this a problem we can solve, or is it an ongoing polarity, paradox, or dilemma that we must manage well?" Polarities to manage are opposites which do not function well independently. These seemingly opposing ideas or actions are not customary problems to be solved with "Either/Or" thinking; they are actually polarities or dilemmas or paradoxes which must be managed with "Both/And" thinking. Because the two sides of a polarity are interdependent, one cannot choose one as a solution while neglecting the other – without experiencing negative outcomes. The point of **Polarity Management** is to leverage the best of both opposites, while avoiding the limitations of each.

Consider how common it is for us to send someone for training. One common example is sending managers off to "charm school" because they are too rigid (a problem), and their employers want them to be more flexible (a solution). Imagine the resistance on the part of such managers! The most common reason for managers to balk at such training is that there is something that they value about what is called "rigid." They value clarity. Furthermore, there is something that they fear in the press for "flexibility." They fear ambiguity. Those who resist know that flexibility alone does not serve as a

solution. An effective leader is clear and flexible. This situation presents a polarity to manage, not a problem to solve. The challenge becomes two-fold.

1. "How to bring sufficient clarity to a situation without bringing rigidity?"
2. "How to bring sufficient flexibility to the same situation without being ambiguous? "It is only possible to view the situation in this "Both/And" way when we have let go of the problem-solving paradigm in which the problem is a *rigid manager*, to which the solution is to *cause the manager to be more flexible*. The **Polarity Management** perspective moves beyond the "Either/Or" viewpoint to one of "Both/And" thinking. Through the lenses of **Polarity Management**, we see a more complete picture and create the opportunity to respect the wisdom of those who resist the "solutions" which are decided by others.

Effective leaders, teams, and organizations manage the clear/flexible polarity on a continual basis. The clear/flexible challenge is one which is both unavoidable and unsolvable – a polarity. In facing this polarity and all of the others which we encounter, the question is not <u>if</u> we will manage them, but <u>how well</u>.

Interestingly, "Either/Or" thinking and "Both/And" thinking form a polarity in themselves. We need both. Either alone will prove dysfunctional. The rejection of "Either/Or" thinking is in fact an example of "Either/Or" thinking.

Problems to solve are seen in situations in which there is one right answer, or two or more right answers which are <u>independent</u>. Many problems, or questions, to which there is only one right answer are essential to the passing of culture from one generation to the next. "How do you spell_____?" "Who was the first President of the United States?" "According to the Ten Commandments, is murder right or wrong?" All three of these are examples of single-answer questions.

In contrast, polarities have two or more right answers which are <u>interdependent</u>. These, too, are essential for one generation to socialize another in significant cultural ways. Examples are "how to

> The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.
> ➢   F. Scott Fitzgerald,
> Cited by Barry Johnson

survive," "how to be successful," and "how to get along with others." We teach children to share, as part of getting along with others. Sharing involves an important polarity because it includes two right and interdependent answers to the question: "As I get along with my friend, should I be concerned about her, or should I be concerned about me?" Satisfactory relationships require that we attend to our own needs <u>and</u> to the needs of others.

Effective leadership requires proficiency in seeing and integrating multiple interdependent perspectives through "Both/And" thinking, as well as proficient problem-solving with "Either/Or" thinking. The **Polarity Management** framework and principles provide powerful resources for meeting this challenge.
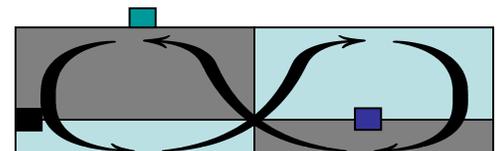
Guidelines for Creating a Polarity Map

- **Identify a key polarity.**
    This is done through dialogue to create a non-blaming description of the issues, opportunities, and polarities present in any given situation.

- **Agree on names for the poles.**
    Remember both poles are necessary and interdependent.

- Write the pole names on the map.

- **Brainstorm together the content for each quadrant.**
    Aim for four to eight entries in each quadrant. Identify both upsides. Then identify both downsides. (Can modify this order to meet individual and group needs.) Oppositional values and fears get identified and respected as important.

- **Agree on a higher purpose and deeper fear.**
    Agreeing on a higher purpose integrates oppositional views and provides a reason to manage the tension between the two views.

Tips for Using Polarity Maps

- Remember that to pursue the benefits of one pole, you must also pursue the benefits of the other pole. The solution is not static.

- A suggestion is to identify indicators for each pole, which will let you know when you are experiencing its downside. Putting feedback mechanisms in place aids in managing the polarity. (Example: using conversation maps and tools)

- Listen deeply and facilitate dialogue, especially with "nay-sayers."

- Brainstorm strategies for staying in the upside of both poles.

Breathing is a Metaphor for all Polarities.
Polarities to Manage = Issues with 2 or More Right Answers That are Interdependent.

You cannot solve the Inhale/Exhale polarity by choosing to either inhale or exhale. You manage it by getting the benefits of each while appreciating the limits of each. It's not a static situation. It is a process, an ongoing flow of shifting emphasis from one to the other and back again. Managing this polarity requires choosing both inhaling and exhaling.
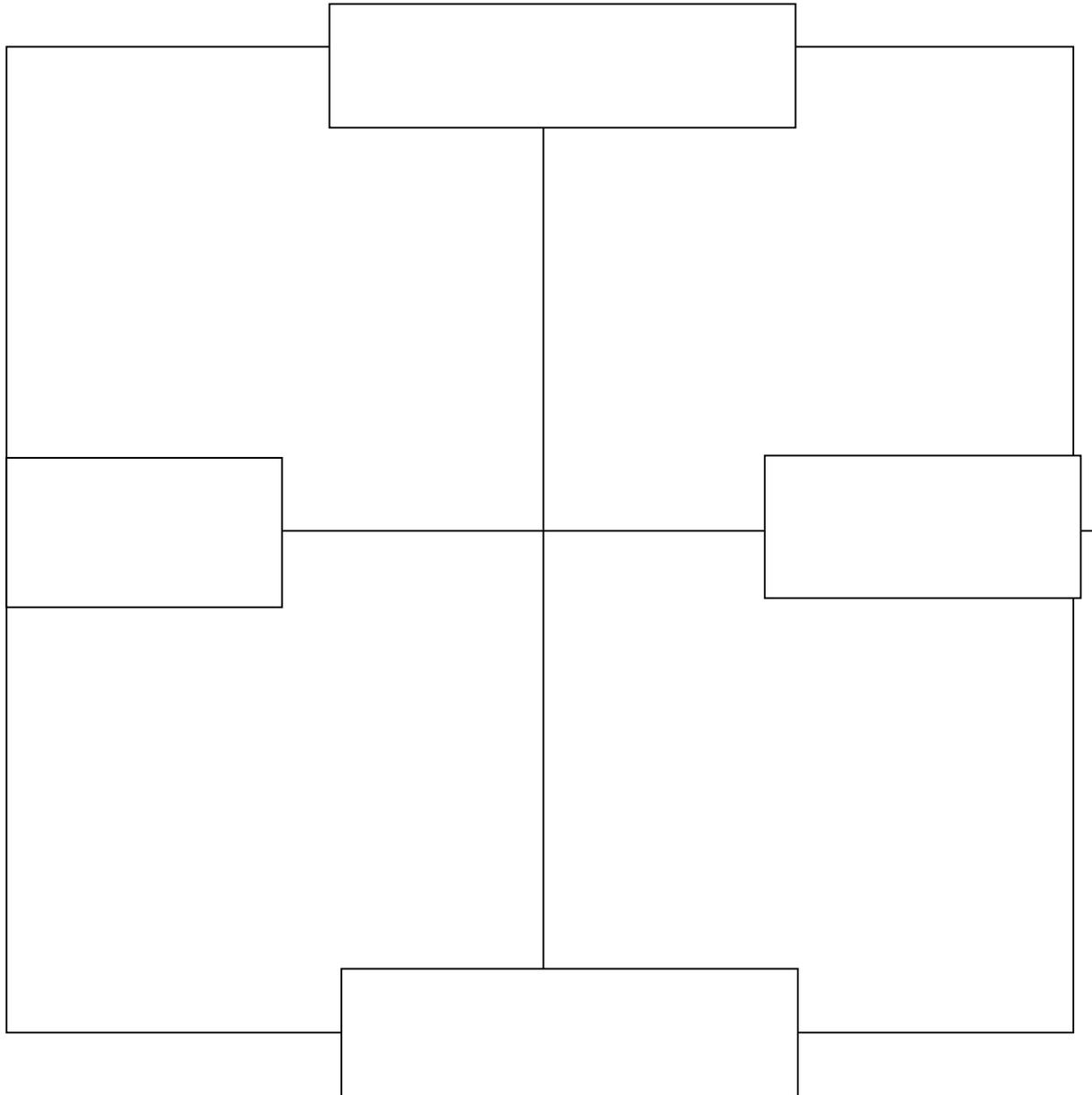
# Distinguishing Problems to Solve From Polarities to Manage

Problems to Solve	Polarities to Manage
They are not ongoing. There is an endpoint. They are solvable.	They are ongoing. There is no end point. They are not solvable. They must be managed together.
Independent Alternatives	Interdependent Alternatives
They can stand alone. There is no need to include an alternative for the solution to work.	They cannot stand alone. The alternatives need each other to optimize the situation, over time.
Often contain mutually exclusive opposites.	Always contain mutually inclusive opposites.
1. *Should* we promote Bill? 2. *What* should we include in our customer survey? 3. *Should* we buy the 200 ton press? 4. *When* was the War of 1812? 5. *Should* we remove one level of management?	1. Tough Love **&** Gentle Love 2. Recognize the individual **&** Recognize the Team 3. Reduce Cost **&** Improve Quality 4. Competing with Others **&** Collaborating with Others 5. Work Commitments **&** Home Commitments.

"INDIVIDUAL" POLE   **"TEAM" POLE**

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| **INDIVIDUAL** | **TEAM** |

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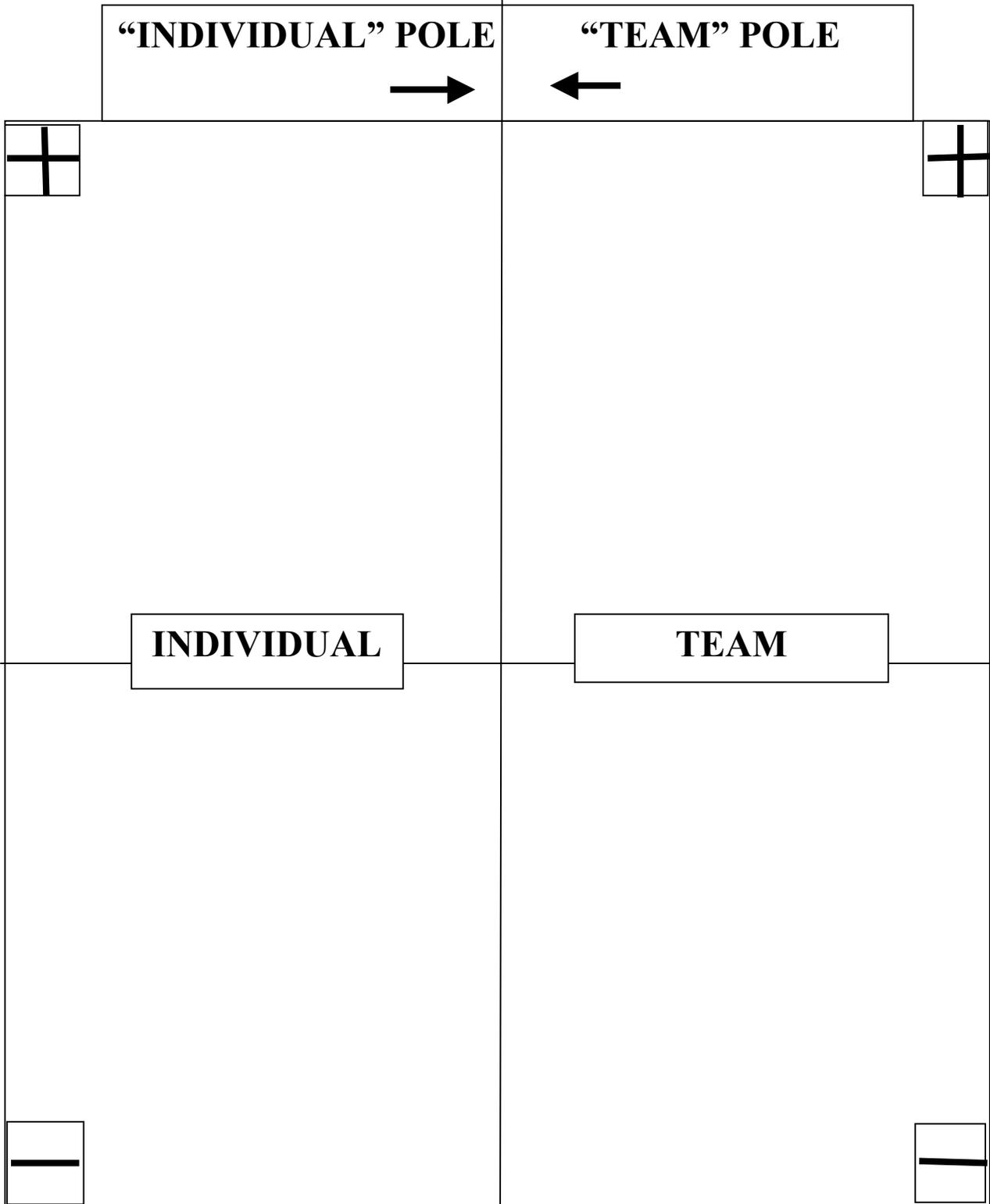
Well Managed Polarity
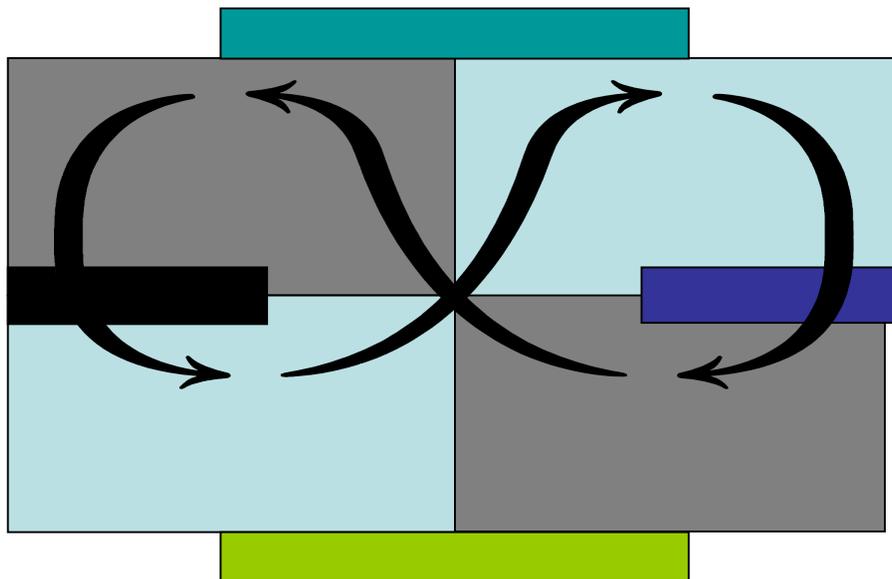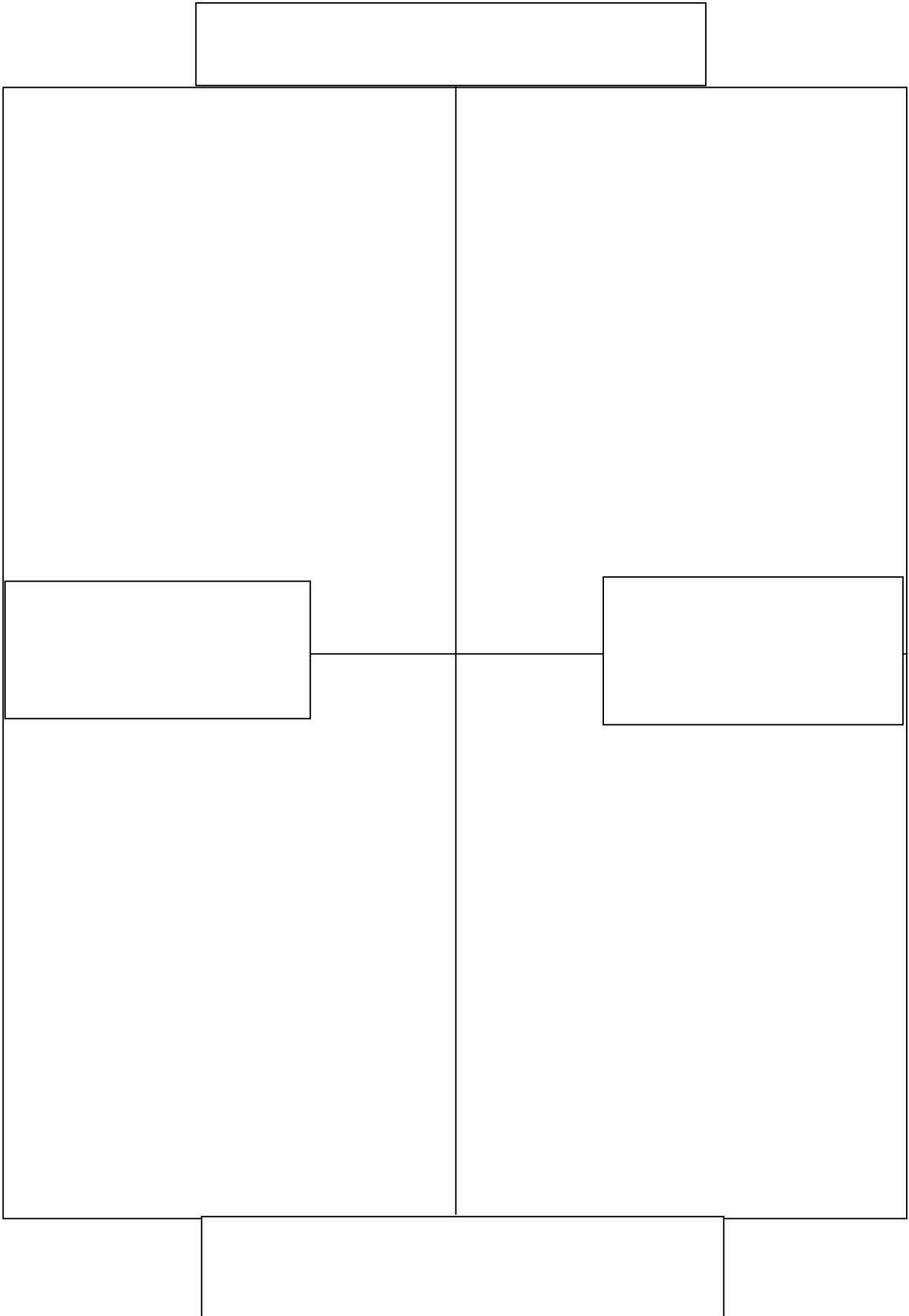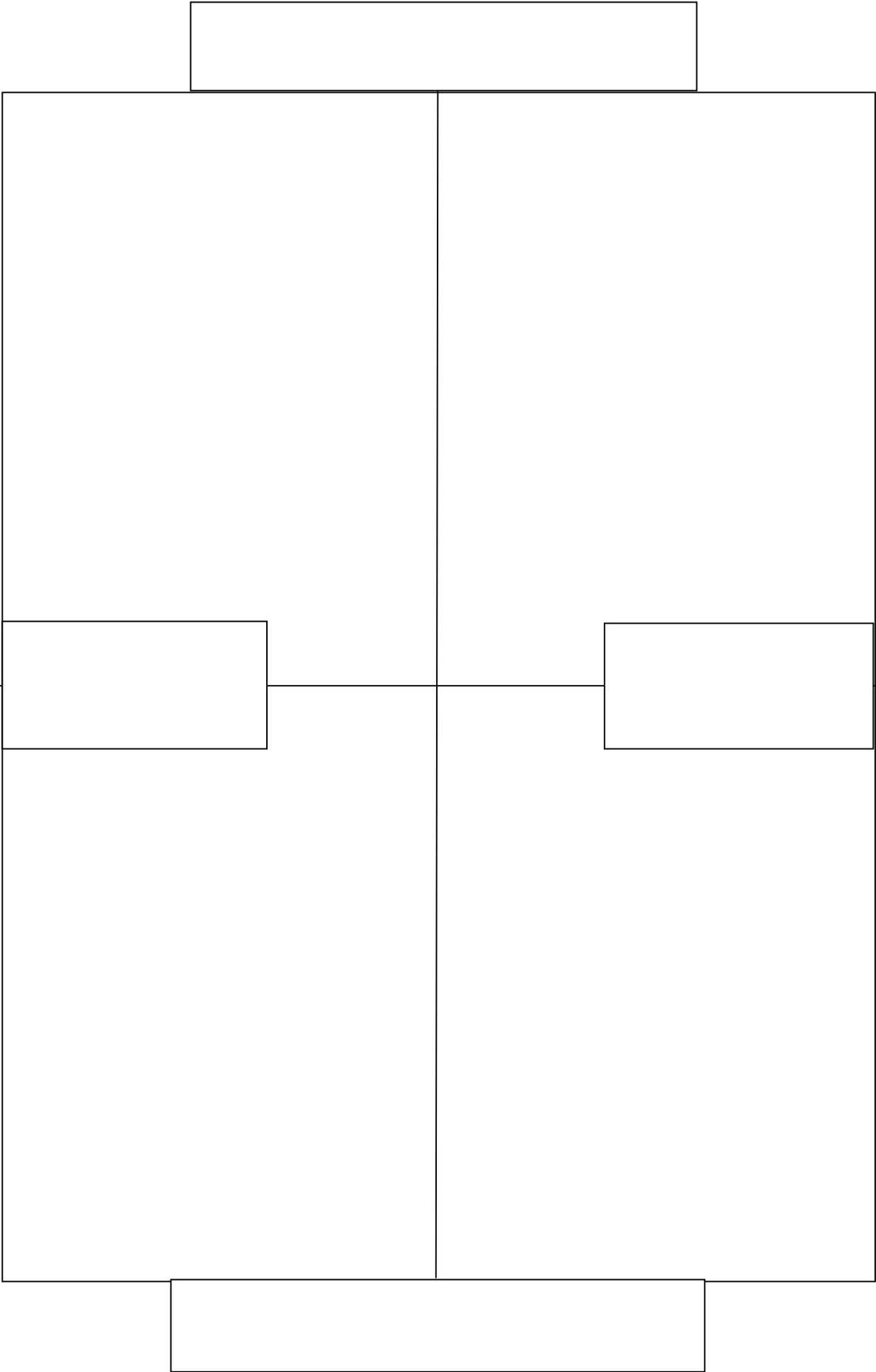
Listening for and Communicating Polarities

1. **To what are you listening?**
   A. Listen for natural tensions (divergent and opposing views, polarizations, "sides"…) in conversations and interactions. Also, attend to non-verbals.

   B. There are some common polarities that individuals and organizations face in their quest for wholeness-embracing both autonomy and interdependence (holonomy)-which are necessary for community building; staying viable and productive; and dealing with life, change and transitions. Know these.

   Examples: intellect and intuition; self and group; ambiguity and certainty; knowledge and action; thing and energy; self-assertion and integration; solitude and interconnectedness; macro-centric and micro-centric; tight and loose; effective and efficient; inner focused and outer focused; ego-centric and allo-centric; home and work; change and stability; planning and action; clear and flexible; individual responsibility and group/organization responsibility; and honor and challenge.

2. **Mediate and normalize tension by paraphrasing.**
   Paraphrase polarities.
   Example: "You're wondering how you might honor the friendship and be honest about your feelings."

   The shift conceptual focus paraphrase is invaluable for integrating seemingly competing values and views-elevating conversation to a common *higher purpose*.

   Example: "Some of us feel strongly about tightening rules for student hallway passing while some believe that students need to be taught how to use freedoms to self regulate. It is apparent that a goal that we all hold is how to support students in exhibiting more productive behaviors.

3. Inquiry is powerful. Facilitate groups to consciously and skillfully lift, explore and challenge beliefs and assumptions.

4. Mapping the polarity is useful. Mapping allows groups to see the whole picture of a dilemma and provides a structure for collaboratively examining and managing the polarity.

5. Support individuals and groups in getting *"unstuck"*.

6. Support groups in generating strategies for managing polarities.

7. Support groups and leaders in normalizing tension/conflict and view as it as a resource. Use and elaborate language such as: *natural tensions; engage cognitive conflict; both/and thinking, diverse beliefs, values and practices; differing ideas/views; group dynamics; opportunities for expanded options and ownership; higher purpose, etc.*

Carolyn McKanders, 2009
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