

The Polarity Exercise

An informed consensus around mission and the strategic pursuit of it is essential to the effectiveness of a parish. In some areas, however, an easy consensus is not a sign of health, at all, but rather of insufficient diversity of perspectives.

A dynamic tension between opposing perceptions is fundamental to healthy governance (governance = the primary purpose of a parish council). A parish council that accepts recommendations with little discussion and then accepts them unanimously is doing no better service to its fiduciary responsibilities than one that is unable to agree at all to a course of action.

Some differences can't—and shouldn't—be resolved, they can only be managed. In many nonprofits some parish council members serve out of deep commitment to the mission, but with little concern for the details of management or finance. Others may have been recruited specifically to bring financial, legal or other professional expertise to the parish council. These members are also devoted to the mission. Why else would they devote their time, energy and financial support to the parish?

When it comes time to discuss the budget, or to prioritize the strategic plan, or to distribute committee assignments, the parish council may find itself at an impasse. Those whose focus is financial sustainability or the importance of strengthening management resources may be unable to communicate effectively with those who see only the urgent need to apply all possible resources to programs and services. Those who see an urgent need to maintain or enhance facilities may be frustrated trying to discuss the budget with those for whom insufficient staff salaries and benefits, or financial aid, are the critical priorities.

In these situations, an exercise that allows all parties to see the virtues and drawbacks of their position along with the benefits of the opposing position can set up a much more productive discussion of issues.

A polarity exercise uses a matrix with columns for two opposing priorities and rows for positive and negative characteristics of each position in isolation. The matrix can be filled out in a group discussion, or subgroups can consider in turn each of the quadrants. If there are multiple polarities to consider, they can be addressed by separate breakout groups, but it is best if each participant has the opportunity to contribute to each quadrant of each polarity.

The result of this exercise is that reflexive conflict is diffused in favor of reflective discussions. By taking the issues out of their usual decision-making context and examining them dispassionately, all participants are enabled to see the necessity for balance.

Many of the issues priests 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. Common leadership paradoxes for priests in parishes include the following:

- Be more open to seekers and converts; preserve and promote the ethos of the parish
- Focus on a balanced budget; invest in the programs and ministries of the parish
- Grow the festival to make more money/shrink the festival through increased stewardship
- Parish council does “business” aspects of the parish; priest does “spiritual” aspects
- Relocate the parish; remain where we are

The Polarity Exercise 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 exercise is helpful in understanding the nature of the paradox and how to address it. Use this exercise 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

No matter how convincing the case for change, some people will disagree with the direction. 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. Use the Polarity Exercise.

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 are solved
- Let disappointments turn into character assassinations
- Eat up huge chunks of time and leave the feeling of feeling of little or no progress

Every priest encounters paradox. Knowing and understanding the cycle of a paradox enables one to conserve energy and survive.

The Polarity Exercise 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 all levels – the entire parish, position in the parish and personal interest
- 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

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

Step one: Describe the issue

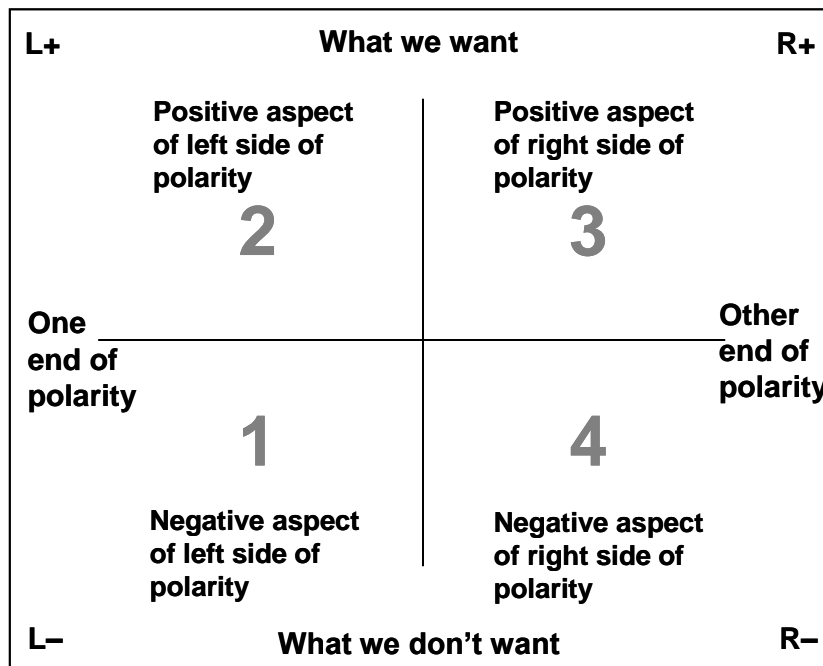
If you have experienced an issue that has been difficult to resolve, bring the various parties together. Encourage people to tell their “stories” about the struggle that is taking place. If two people “see” the same issue differently, wonderful! Ask the group to pay particular attention to both sides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

Step two: Determine whether the issue is a problem to be solved or a paradox to be balanced. How a paradox is addressed is different from how a problem is solved. Differentiate the two.

It’s a paradox if...

- The issue is recurring
- Efforts at a 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, there is a paradox to balance. Do not try to use standard problem-solving methods to resolve it!



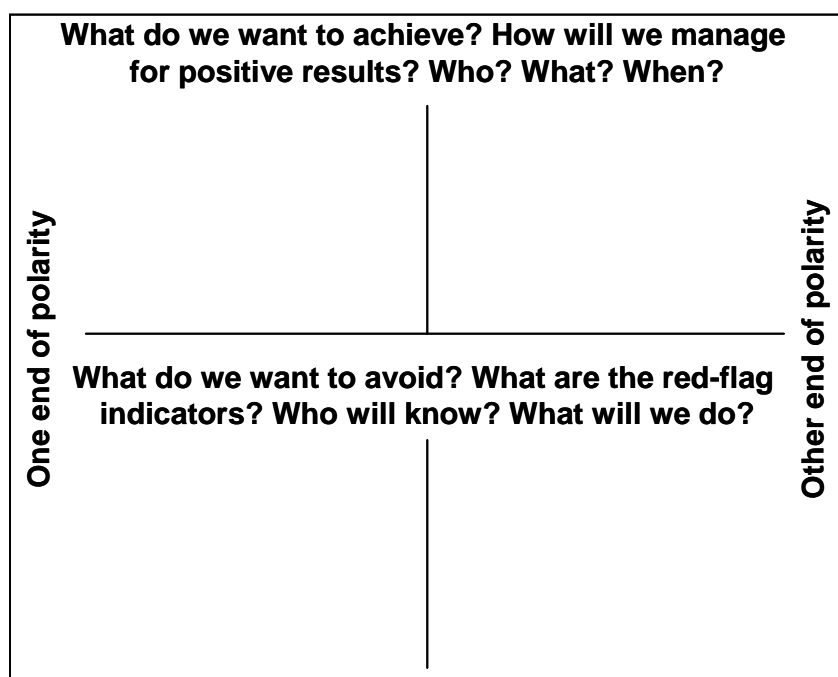
Step three: Describe the paradox by creating a Polarity Map

A Polarity Map (see above) shows how a paradox cycles from one polarity to the other over time. To develop a Polarity Map, use two flip charts side by side. 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 Four: 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 as in the figure below.



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.

- 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 an organization 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.

Balance Paradox Table

	Polarity 1:	Polarity 2:
What will we do to balance: Objectives		
Red flag indicators:		
Who will tell us?		