

Reflections – A Perspective on Paradox and Its Application to Modern Management

By Barry Johnson

Barry Johnson, author of *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems* and founder of Polarity Partnerships LLC, shares his evolving model and set of principles that have been in use for nearly 40 years (Johnson, 1992).

I appreciate the invitation to share my reflections in this special issue from the lens of a practitioner who has for decades supported organizations and leadership to better manage paradox and polarities. I will begin with a brief description of the model and set of principles I have been using with organizations. Then, I will illustrate how this model and set of principles can be applied, using the case study from one of the articles featured in this special issue as an example

The Underlying Phenomenon: The Interdependent Pair

Whether we call it Paradox, Dilemma, Polarity, Tensions, Dual Strategies, Positive Opposites, The Genius of the “And,” Managing on the Edge, Yin and Yang, Interdependent Pairs, or some other name, there is an underlying phenomenon that works in predictable ways.

The more we understand about the elements of this phenomenon and the dynamics by which it functions, the more effective we can be at leveraging its energy. This leveraging can support us in pursuing our most expansive dreams and addressing our most chronic issues – as individuals, families, organizations, nations, and humanity.

The Polarity Map® and set of “realities” that we have been developing is one of many incomplete efforts to describe and access this phenomenon. I would like to describe the structure and dynamics that have evolved for us in the polarity thinking community. Rather than use either paradox or polarity, I will use the term *Interdependent Pairs* because I think it is more descriptive of the central phenomenon.

Interdependent Pairs Are Energy Systems in Which We Live and Work

Interdependent pairs are a ubiquitous reality that has been with us since the beginning of time. We are born into them with our first breath—Inhaling AND Exhaling is an interdependent pair. Organizations and nations are born into them from their first day of existence—How do we Centralize to coordinate our Parts into an integrated Whole AND Decentralize to allow our parts the freedom to be responsive and take initiative?

Since they are a part of every person, organization, and nation’s reality, all these levels of system have had to come to terms with them. Some have been better at leveraging these energy pairs than others and it has contributed to their effectiveness and sustainability.

Interdependent Pairs

Our most basic picture of the interdependent pair includes two poles and an energy system that flows between and around them in the form of an infinity loop. I draw from the article featured in this special issue that illustrates the case of Singapore Airlines (Heracleous & Wirtz, 2014). The authors of this article highlight the interdependent pair of Cost Effective AND Service Excellence (Figure 1.). I will attempt to show how the wisdom within this article would be viewed through our lens.

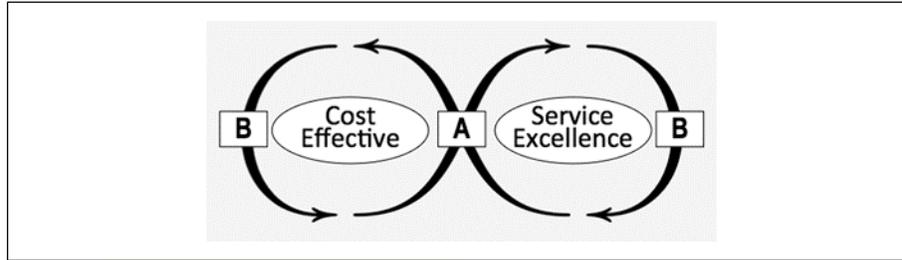


Figure 1. Central focus for Singapore Airlines.

As the energy crosses between the two poles (A), it separates them. This reflects the reality that the two poles never collapse into one. They are always differentiated. As the energy wraps around each of the poles (B), it holds them together as an interdependent pair. This reflects the reality that the two poles come as a set and need each other over time. They are always connected.

When the energy crosses between the two poles, it is experienced in the system as “tension.” With this tension, we often assume that we must choose one of the poles as a “solution” to the tension. This is a false choice because the poles are inseparable. The tension is *unsolvable* in that one cannot choose either pole as a sustainable “solution.” This interdependent pair is also *unavoidable*. All organizations sit within this interdependent pair. The tension is there and they must address it. How should any organization deal with the inherent tension between Cost AND Quality? Singapore Airlines understands that not only can you do both, you must do both. Building a culture that is effective at both gives any organization a competitive advantage.

Each Pole Brings Something Positive to the Pair and Each Pole Becomes a Liability Without Its Interdependent Pole Partner

As we expand our model to include two positive upsides (D and B) and two negative downsides (A and C), we get a more complete picture of what is happening in this energy system (Figure 2).

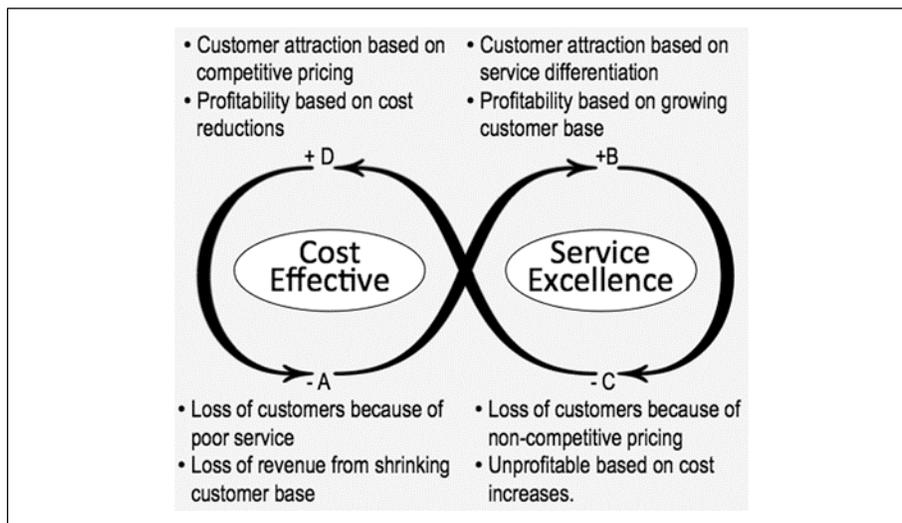


Figure 2. Polarity Infinity Loop With Upsides and Downsides.

Starting with (–A), we see the limits of focusing just on Cost to the neglect of Service. A loss of customers and revenue generates energy to move toward (+B) to get the benefits of Service Excellence, which includes customer attraction and a growing customer base. It is easy to see (–A) as a “problem” and (+B) as a “solution.” This partial seeing of the energy system will set the organization up to overfocus on Service to the neglect of Cost. When that happens, the Service focus will become a “fix that fails” as the organization experiences (–C) the limits of focusing on Service alone: loss of customers

because of noncompetitive pricing and decreased profitability. When this is experienced, it gets identified as a “problem” and the obvious solution is (+D) as the energy shifts naturally to get the benefits of the Cost pole: customer attraction from competitive pricing and cost reductions leading to profitability.

Maximize Both Upsides and Minimize Both Downsides

Once you see yourself within this energy system, it makes no sense to look at either upside (+D or +B) as the “solution” to a problem. The attention of the organization can shift from fighting over the two poles to “Mastering the Paradox” by building a culture that pursues both upsides (Heracleous & Wirtz, 2014). At Singapore Airlines, they call this a “Dual Strategy” as they go after the benefits of both poles. Any organization that treats this interdependent pair as an either/or choice will pay three times for the misperception: The first time they pay is when they invest time and energy into fighting over which pole to choose (Cost or Service). The second time they pay is when those supporting one pole “win.” When that happens the organization will get the downside of the “winner’s” preferred pole (if Cost wins you get -A). The third time they pay is when the sustained focus on the winner’s preferred pole (Cost) leads to getting the downside of the Service pole as well (-C). This is why it is such a competitive advantage to understand these interdependent pairs in which our organization sits.

Virtuous Cycles and Vicious Cycles Within a Polarity Map®

When an organization, like Singapore Airlines, creates a culture that pursues both upsides of Cost Effective AND Service Excellence (Figure 3), they create a positive reinforcing, virtuous cycle (A) that lifts it toward peak performance and “Sustainable Competitive Advantage.” We call this the Greater Purpose Statement or GPS (B). When an organization treats either pole of an interdependent pair as a solution to a problem or fights over the false choice between them, it creates a negative reinforcing, vicious cycle (C) that undermines the organization toward poor performance and “Competitive Disadvantage.” We call this the Deeper Fear (D).

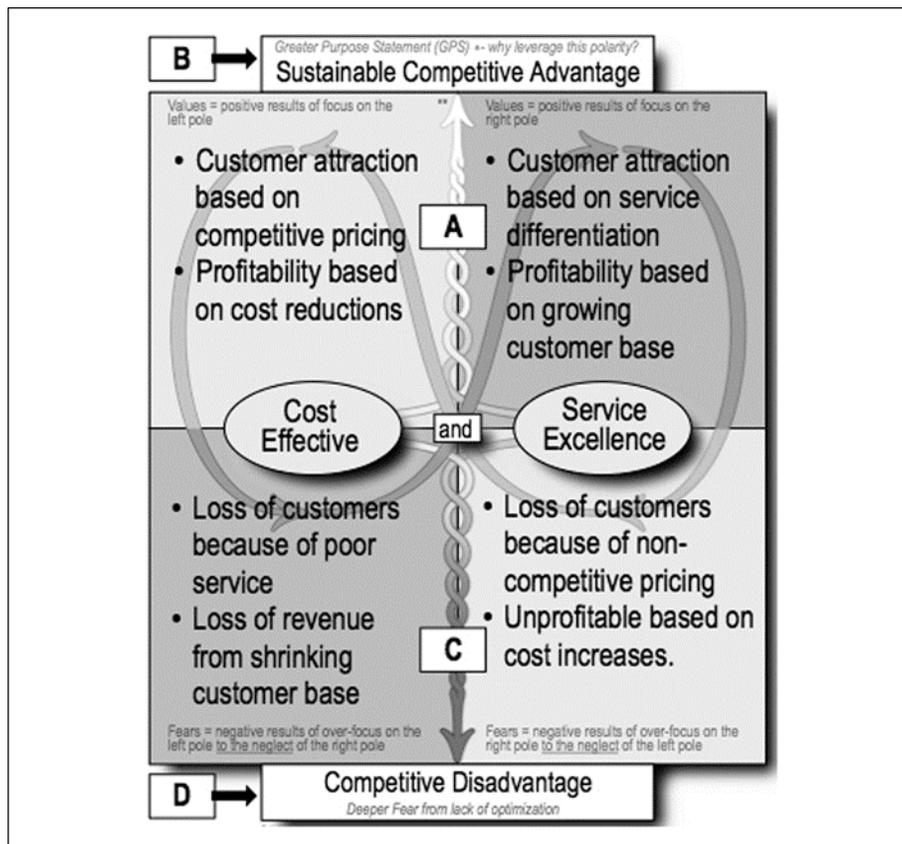


Figure 3. Polarity Map®.

Notice that the infinity loop goes high into each upside, which depicts maximizing the benefits of each pole. The loop also goes only slightly into each downside, which depicts minimizing the limits of each pole. The authors of the Singapore Airlines article (Heracleous & Wirtz, 2014) have captured a very important point about the organization: It is not just leadership or a part of Singapore Airlines but the whole culture that works in support of both poles. Those who might think that “Mastering Paradox” or “Leveraging Polarities” is just a way of thinking or a tool for a leadership tool kit may miss the full benefit we can all gain from paying attention to this article and Singapore Airlines (Heracleous & Wirtz, 2014).

Leveraging Interdependent Pairs: Our Application Experience

Leveraging the potential from the interdependent pairs requires the engagement of key stakeholders in two processes. The first is the creation of Action Steps to maximize the upside of each pole. The second is to identify Early Warnings that will let us know, as early as possible, when we are getting into the downsides of a pole so that we can self- correct to minimize our time in either downside.

In Figure 4, below, you can see the Polarity Map including Action Steps alongside each upside and Early Warnings by each downside. The Action Steps come from the Singapore Airlines article and are stated in summary form (Heracleous & Wirtz, 2014).

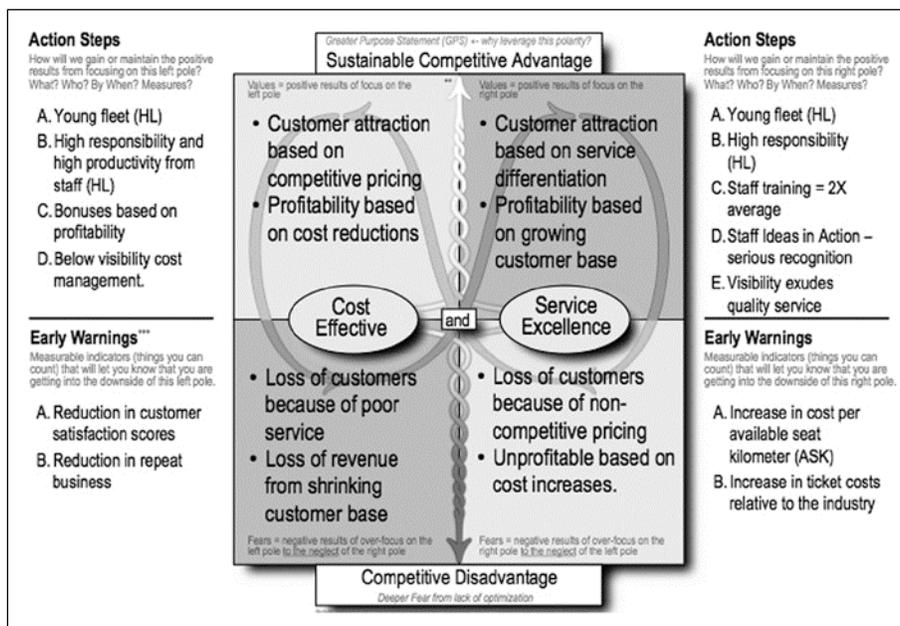


Figure 4. Polarity Map with Action Steps and Early Warnings.

You will notice that some steps have an HL by them. We call it a High Leverage Action Step, which has double value because it simultaneously supports both upsides. The same HL step appears in the action steps for both upsides of the map. Having a “Dual Strategy” is essential for making the most of interdependent pairs.

The Early Warnings are not listed in the article but are created by me based on content in the article. I believe having Early Warnings would be a value-add to the processes being used by Singapore Airlines in getting the most from this interdependent pair and the other three identified in the article.

The Map With Action Steps and Early Warnings Is a Wisdom Organizer

Because the phenomenon of interdependent pairs is so ubiquitous, we all have an experiential base

in dealing with it. At the same time, we have been trained to solve problems. This leads to addressing the tension within interdependent pairs by choosing the “right” or “best” answer as a “solution.” When we make explicit the two poles and the fact that there is an upside and downside to each, any group within an organization can readily identify what those upsides and downsides are. They can also identify, with a “Dual Strategy” orientation, what Action Steps would help maximize both upsides and what Early Warnings would let you know you are getting into the downsides.

What is special about the case presented in the article by Heracleous and Wirtz is the intentionality of building a culture in which maximizing both poles of the paradox is a way of life in the organization. I was inspired by this article because I believe that Singapore Airlines is a great example not just for other organizations but also for nation states and our humanity. This need not be just about competitive advantage for companies. This can also be about creating cultures in which we can reduce the suffering from vicious cycles caused by not seeing the paradox. Every day we waste energy and create pain from misdiagnosing a paradox and treating it as a problem to solve and then fighting over the two poles.

Our clients regularly express relief and an increase in productivity when a fight over an interdependent pair gets seen as something they can leverage rather than fight over. An application example is with the Deputy Chief Information Officer of the U.S. Department of Defense. There was a fight going on between those who were protecting the country by effective information sharing so the right hand knew what the left hand was doing AND those who were protecting the country by effective information security. Each was trying to protect the country from the other! It helped immensely to see that it was an interdependent pair in which both were required to map it in terms of upsides and downsides and to come up with action steps to maximize both upsides and early warnings to minimize each downside. What was a fight became an affirmation of both as essential—to each other and to the country.

Another important contribution in this article by Heracleous and Wirtz is the notion that I call “stacking” interdependent pairs. In this case the authors point out how three additional paradoxes are at play in supporting the primary paradox. The left pole of each of the additional paradoxes supports the left pole of the primary paradox. The same is true for the right pole of the additional paradoxes supporting the right pole of the primary paradox. Our clients often find it useful to stack interdependent pairs.

In conclusion, I appreciate the opportunity to learn from the articles featured in this special issue, to share our evolving model and set of principles at Polarity Partnerships, and to apply it to the special issue article featuring Singapore Airlines.

References

- Heracleous, L., & Wirtz, J. (2014). Singapore Airlines: Achieving Sustainable Advantage Through Mastering Paradox. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 50, 150-170.
- Johnson, B. (1992). *Polarity management: Identifying and managing unsolvable problems*. Amherst, MA: HRD Press.

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