

POLARITY THINKING IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

"Tensions to Manage, Not Problems to Solve"

In this session, we will explore a critical leadership skill: managing polarities.

In local government, many of the challenges we face are not simple problems with clear solutions — they are ongoing tensions that require leaders to manage competing truths with wisdom and intentionality. This workbook is designed to give you simple, powerful tools you can apply immediately in your council chambers, boardrooms, and organizations.

Section 1 — Understanding Polarities

What is a Polarity?

- A polarity is an ongoing tension between two interdependent values.
- Both sides contain wisdom.
- The work is not to solve one or eliminate the other, but to find a healthy balance that leverages the strengths of both.

Why Polarity Thinking Matters:

1. Moves leaders beyond either/or debates.
2. Builds trust across perspectives.
3. Supports stronger, more sustainable decisions.
4. Helps navigate complexity and avoid conflict gridlock.

Section 2 — Common Polarities in Local Government

Polarity	Pole 1	Pole 2
Core Services vs. Community Aspirations	Essential services (roads, water, sewer, protective services)	Recreation, arts, culture, social well-being, climate action
Short-Term Responsiveness vs. Long-Term Sustainability	Immediate action, public pressure	Strategic, future-focused planning
Political Leadership vs. Administrative Expertise	Representing constituents	Providing professional advice and operational management
Community Engagement vs. Efficient Decision-Making	Transparency, inclusion, public trust	Timely, decisive action
Fiscal Responsibility vs. Service Expectations	Financial stewardship, balanced budgets	High-quality, accessible services
Risk Management vs. Innovation	Caution, protection, liability avoidance	Bold, creative approaches
Local Autonomy vs. Regional Collaboration	Tailored local solutions	Shared services, coordinated regional efforts
Consistency vs. Flexibility	Fairness, predictable policy	Adaptive, case-by-case responses

Polarity	Pole 1	Pole 2
Transparency vs. Confidentiality	Open processes, public access	Privacy, legal compliance, sensitive negotiations
Preservation vs. Growth	Protecting heritage, environmental stewardship	Economic development, population growth

Section 3 — The Polarity Map

Many tensions can be visualized using a simple tool called a **Polarity Map**.

Use the template below to practice mapping any polarity you're facing:

Polarity Name: _____

Pole 1: _____

Pole 2: _____

Upsides (Benefits):

Upsides (Benefits):

Downsides (Over-focus Risks):

Downsides (Over-focus Risks):

Action Strategies: How can we leverage both?

Section 4 — Leadership Reflection

Use these questions to reflect on your personal leadership practice:

- Where in my leadership have I been stuck in either/or thinking?
- Where do I see my council, board, or organization struggling with these tensions?
- What conversations could shift if we named the polarity openly?
- How can I personally model polarity thinking in my leadership role?

Section 5 — Closing Thought

"Most governance conflicts aren't about right vs. wrong — they're about competing rights. The leaders who can see, name, and manage polarities will build stronger councils, stronger organizations, and stronger communities."

This workshop is inspired by the foundational work of Dr. Barry Johnson, creator of Polarity Management™. His work has significantly informed the practice of polarity thinking in leadership, governance, and organizational life.