

Communities Get The Best of Both Worlds With Polarity Thinking

By Abby Straus & John Findlay

One group of people in your community believes it's best to concentrate on developing the regional economy. They believe that when you do it well you create a richer pool of jobs and business opportunities, make it possible to benefit from shared infrastructure and services and share best practices. They argue that "localization" leads to a lack of critical mass for key services and infrastructure, the loss of talent to more interesting regions and an inability to scale up what works.

*Why won't the resisters get on board? What are they worried about? Can't they see how a **regional focus** supports the greater good of the entire community?*

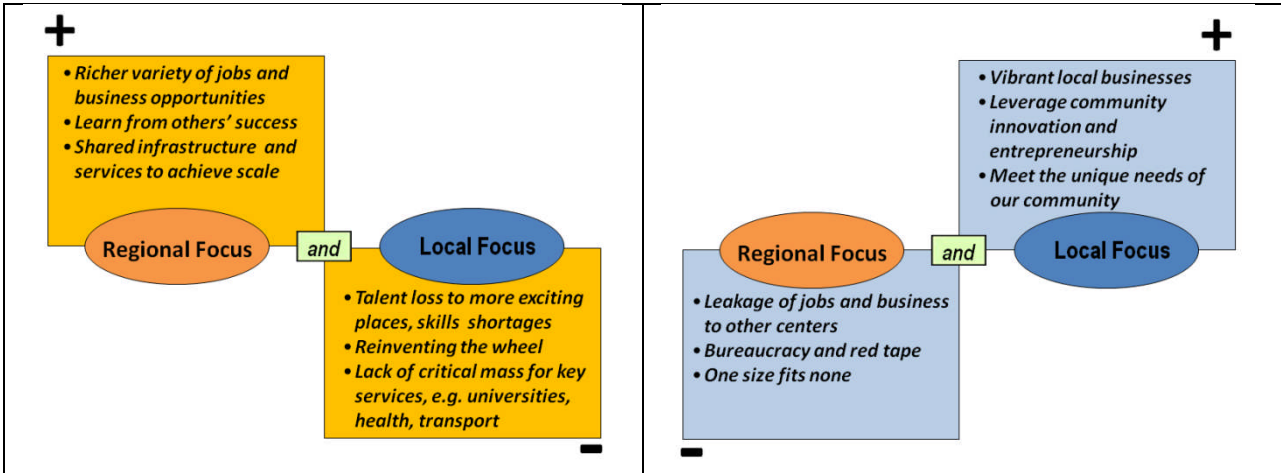
But others see things differently. Regionalization, they say, will lead to a loss of local identity, a remote bureaucracy that does not understand local issues, one-size-fits none

and loss of vibrant local business community. They don't want to lose their ability to respond to the unique needs of citizens and the capacity for local innovation.

*Why can't those regional zealots see how **local focus** supports the greater good of the entire community?*

And so it goes. Round and round. If "regional and local" isn't your community's issue, pick another one. How do you provide jobs now for those with today's skill sets while also helping people develop the skills they'll need for the jobs of tomorrow? How do you make big changes *and* provide the continuity people need to implement them? How do you ensure that leadership is clear and consistent *and* that the voices of the community are heard and incorporated into strategic plans?

Here's the regional/local issue mapped out the way each side sees it.



Looked at from one side of the argument or the other, it's easy to see these issues as “problems to solve”, an “either/or” with one right answer. And when this happens, people who need to collaborate with each other end up in conflict, each group arguing that its position is the right one.



So who is right?

They both are. Each point of view is only half of the story. Using our example above, in order to be successful you need the best of regional focus *and* the best of local focus. You need to take advantage of economies of scale *and* be responsive to changing community aspirations.. It's important to have an effective way to leverage what works well *and* support entrepreneurial initiative. It's a “both/and”, not an “either/or”.

This isn't a problem to solve. It's a polarity to manage.

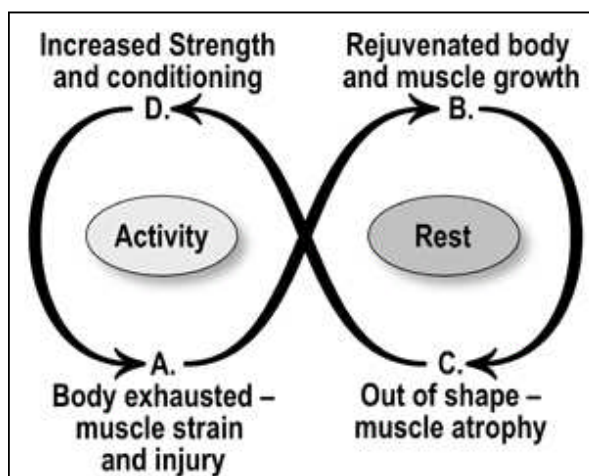
Polarities—sometimes called dilemmas or dynamic tensions—are interdependent pairs of values that support a common purpose and each other over time. Like regional focus *and* local focus, both are needed to sustain thriving communities. When you over focus on one to the neglect of the other, you get the downsides. Leverage the benefits of both and you tap into an unlimited supply of energy that works for you. Every time.

How polarities work using the example of Activity and Rest

The “infinity loop” in the following example is a simple way to picture the energy that flows

between and around both poles of a polarity. This is energy you can make use of. We're all managing this polarity every day. We can't “solve” it by choosing either **Activity** or **Rest**. Polarities are neither avoidable nor solvable. But we can choose to leverage them to improve performance.

For example, if you were training for a marathon, you might overdo your workouts and find yourself exhausted. This exhaustion (**A**) is the downside of focusing on activity to neglect of rest, and can be seen as a “problem” with the “solution” being *get some rest* (**B**). However, too much rest and you get out of shape and experience muscle atrophy (**C**). This becomes a new “problem” where the “solution” is to get off the couch and do something (**D**). If, on the other hand, you manage this polarity well by getting just the right amount of each, you stay fit, rested and ready to run your marathon.



Polarities are dependable.

Polarities work the same way, every time, all the time. Learn how to tap the energy in one polarity and you'll know how to tap the energy in every polarity.

Here are the steps:

1. **See it** – Know when you've got a problem to solve (Which sneakers will I wear when I train today?) Know when you've got a polarity you need to manage over time (How can train hard for this marathon and get plenty of rest?) When it's a polarity you can...

2. **Map it** – See the whole picture. Your point of view. Others' points of view. How you can achieve your common goal together by realizing the benefits of both. What action steps can you take to realize them? What happens when you focus on one to the neglect of the other? How can you anticipate this and stay on course? Then you...
3. **Leverage it** – Take action to generate and sustain success by tracking your progress and self correcting over time.

For more information about Polarity Thinking and related learning and consultation activities, please contact Abby Straus at Maverick & Boutique. www.maverickandboutique.com

Here are some common polarities we encounter in economic and community development.

- Providing continuity *and* Fostering innovation
- Finding jobs for people now *and* Preparing people for the jobs of the future
- Planning and Implementing
- Efficiency (doing things right) *and* Effectiveness (doing the right things)
- Quantitative data (what's happening or is working well) *and* Qualitative data (how we feel about it or deal with it)
- Being visionary *and* Being based in current reality
- Providing direction *and* Inviting participation
- Preserving tradition *and* Stimulating change
- Long-term focus *and* Short-term focus
- Individuals acting to achieve their full potential *and* Communities acting to achieve their full potential, and the now familiar....
- Regional *and* Local

The benefits of polarity thinking are numerous, but the most obvious is that we can avoid wasting our energy attempting to “solve” problems or issues that aren't solvable. We can let go of a whole layer of conflict, support people in identifying and working toward common goals and start achieving what we set out to do in the first place: helping our communities develop and sustain social well being *and* economic success.