

# **Beyond Either-Or and Both-And: Polarity Management as a Key Tool to Spark Collaboration and Deeper Engagement**

*Martín Carcasson, Ph.D.*

*Director of the Center for Public Deliberation  
Professor, Department of Communication Studies*



**CENTER FOR  
PUBLIC DELIBERATION  
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY**

*Dedicated to enhancing local democracy through improved public  
communication and community problem solving*

*EMAIL: [mcarcas@colostate.edu](mailto:mcarcas@colostate.edu)*

*Twitter: [@mcarcasson](https://twitter.com/mcarcasson)*

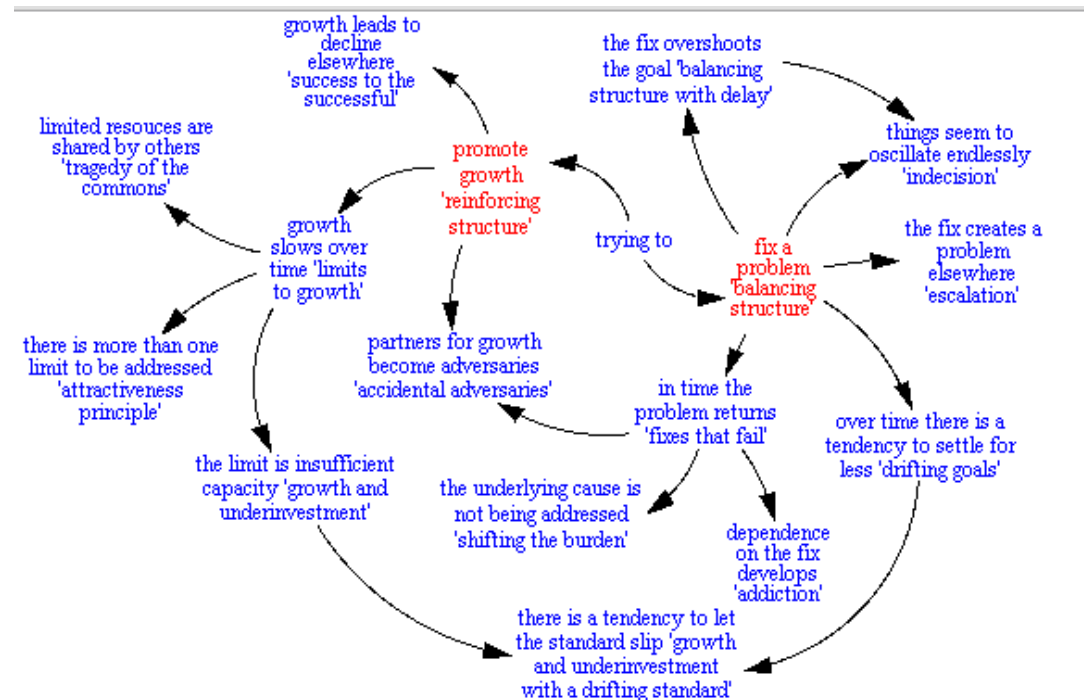
*CPD website: [cpd.colostate.edu](http://cpd.colostate.edu)*

# CPD Projects, 2006-2018

- Civic mission of schools
- Grade configuration of Poudre School District schools
- Statewide dropout rate
- Colorado Health Care Reform
- Student housing
- Improving higher education
- Childhood obesity
- Bicycle safety
- Diversity Dialogues at CSU Diversity Conference
- STEM education in K-12
- Arts Engagement Summit
- UniverCity Connections (CSU/Old Town collaborative project)
- School budgeting issues/school closures
- Medical Marijuana
- Regional visioning process
- Water and growth issues
- Poverty in Larimer County
- PSD Student Think Tank facilitator group
- K-12 school improvement
- Improving higher education through student-faculty reciprocity
- Politics of food
- Issues surrounding aging
- Early childhood education
- On campus stadium proposal
- Senior transportation
- Campus smoking
- School safety
- Bullying
- Mental health
- Nature in the City
- Larimer County Landfill/Wasteshed
- Diversity and Inclusion in Fort Collins
- CSU Innovation and Economic Prosperity
- CSU parking and affordable housing



# *Wicked problems* inherently involve **competing underlying values, paradoxes, and tradeoffs that cannot be resolved by science.**





# Water in Northern Colorado as a Wicked Problem

Some things we care about:

**Healthy river with  
healthy ecosystems**

**Recreational  
opportunities**

**Economic vitality**

**Water for homes &  
lawns**

**Open space and  
wildlife habitat**

**Low cost of living**

**Water for local  
farms**

**Local food  
economy**

**Freedom of choice  
of where to live**



# FOOD AS A WICKED PROBLEM

WE WANT OUR FOOD TO BE:

Inexpensive

Fresh

Nutritious

Safe

Long lasting

Delicious

Convenient  
(Accessible, Easy to prepare)

Ethically grown  
(labor/animal welfare)

Our choice

Supportive of a  
local economy

Supportive of a  
agriculture  
community

Grown and  
delivered in a  
environmentally  
responsible manner

Supportive of  
efforts to reduce  
hunger locally and  
globally





# HEALTH CARE AS A WICKED PROBLEM



**High Quality**

**Accessible**

**Low cost**



# Competing Values in Downtown Fort Collins

- Aesthetics/Beauty
- Compassion
- Diversity/Inclusivity
- Economic health/vitality
- Effective use of public resources
- Equality
- Excitement/fun
- Family
- Individual freedom
- Individual responsibility
- Individual rights
- Justice/Fairness
- Public health/environment
- Respect for law
- Respect for others
- Safety





# Parking at CSU as a Wicked Problem

Some things we care about:

**Low cost**

**Fairness**

**Safety**

**Work productivity**

**Flexibility**

**Aesthetics/  
Campus beauty**

**Convenience/  
Low time cost**

**Low community impact/  
Good neighbors**

**Employee morale**

**Environment**

**Consistency/Ease of use**

**Works for staff**

**Works for faculty**

**Works for visitors**

**Works for students**

**Works for working  
parents**

**Works for commuters**

# Capitalism or Sustainability as a Wicked Problem

- The “Triple Bottom Line” of
  - Profit (economics, also tied to jobs and taxes)
  - People (social justice, equality, fairness)
  - Planet (environment)



We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish **Justice**, insure **domestic Tranquility**, provide for the **common defense**, promote the **general Welfare**, and secure the Blessings of **Liberty** to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

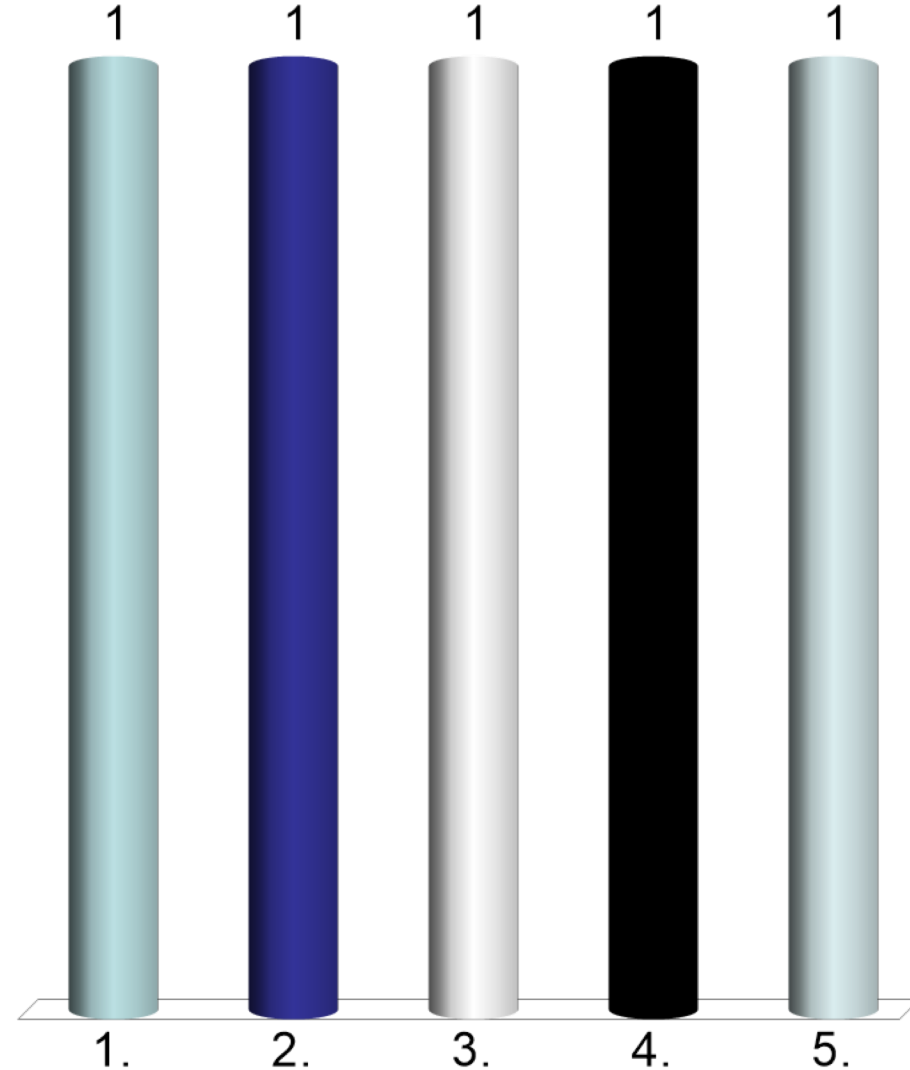


# Key American Values

Preamble	Current Phrasing
Justice	Justice
Domestic Tranquility/ Common defense	Security/Safety
General Welfare	Equality
Liberty to ourselves	Freedom (for us)
Liberty for our posterity	Freedom (for future generations)

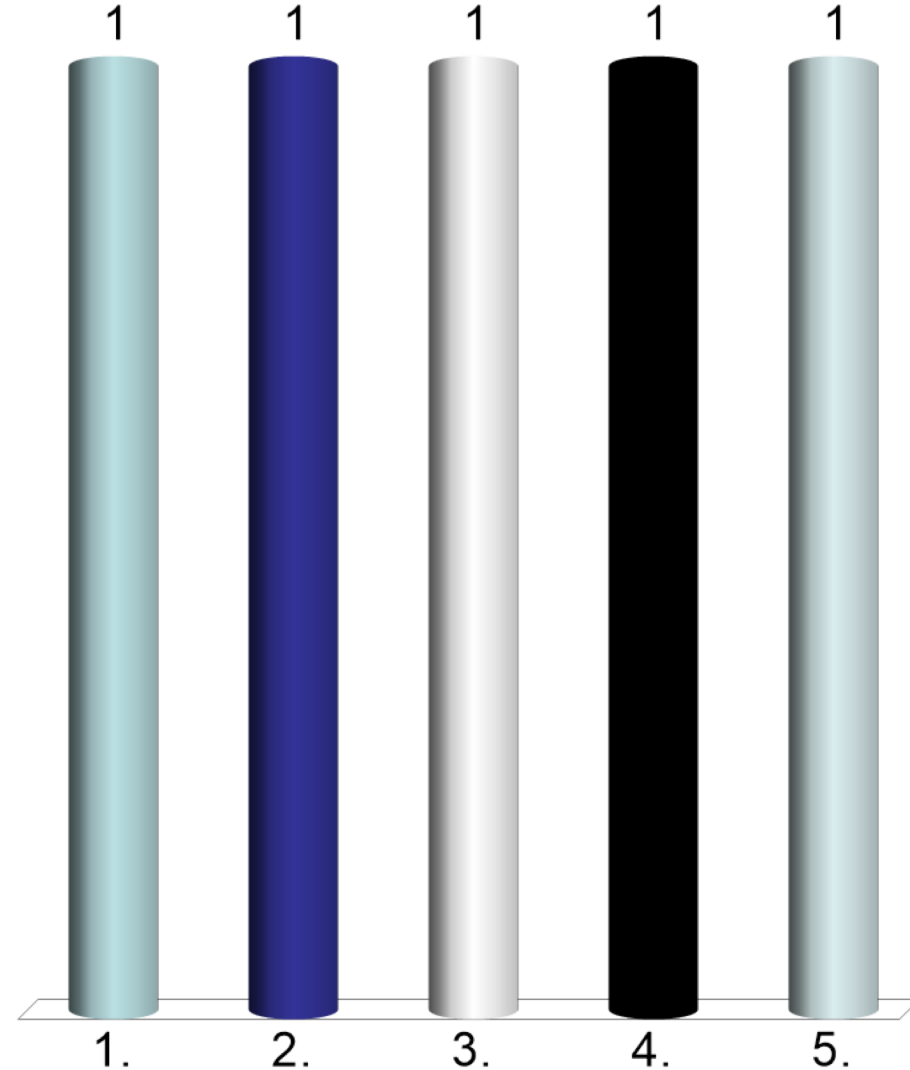
# Which is most important to you? (choose only one)

1. Justice
2. Security/safety
3. Equality
4. Freedom (for us)
5. Freedom (future generations)



# Which is least important to you? (choose only one)

1. Justice
2. Security/safety
3. Equality
4. Freedom (for us)
5. Freedom (future generations)



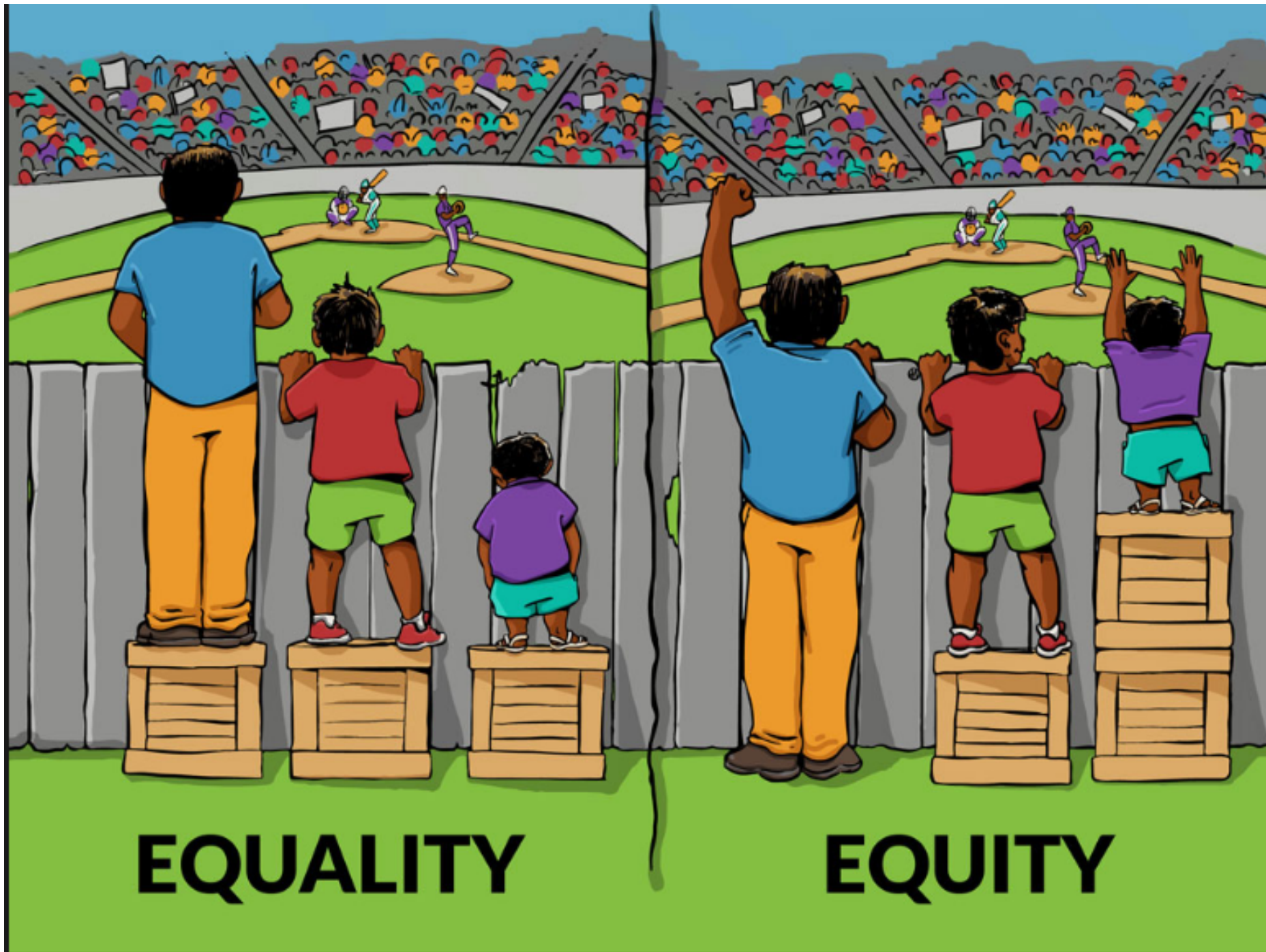
# Inherent Democratic Tensions

- Freedom and Equality (and between equality and equity)
- Our Freedom and Freedom of Future generations
- Freedom and Security
- Justice is a tension within itself (justice as the ideal between too much and too little credit or punishment)

## Some others

- Short term and long term
- Individual rights and community good
- Unity and diversity
- Cooperation and competition
- Structure and agency (or opportunity and individual responsibility)
- Flexibility/Innovation and Consistency/Tradition
- Best use of resources (money, time, people)

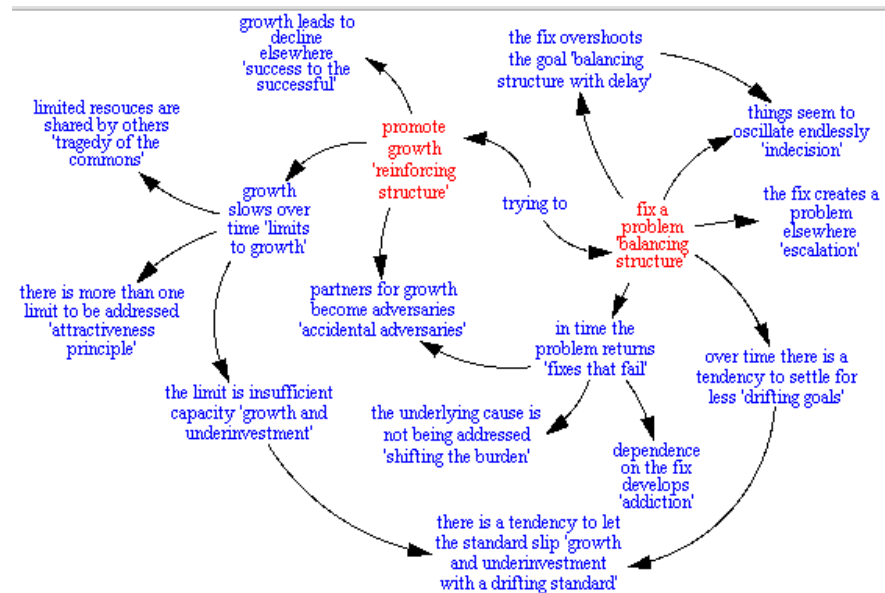




**EQUALITY**

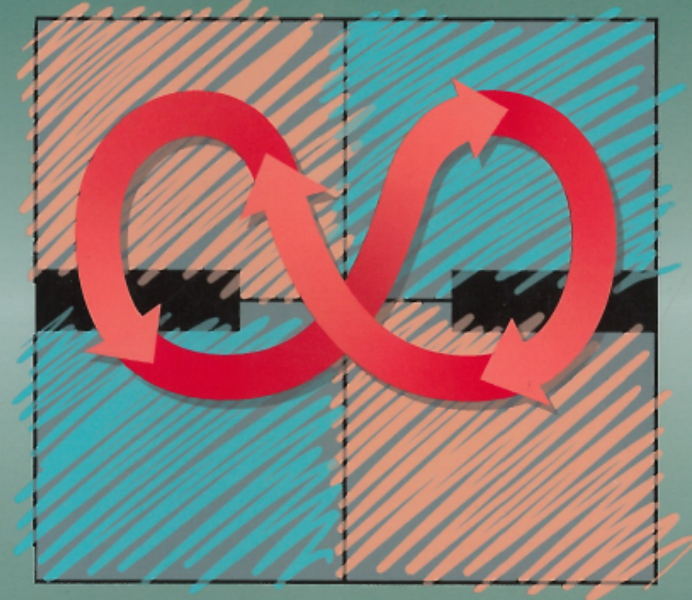
**EQUITY**

*Wicked problems* inherently involve **competing underlying values**, paradoxes, and tradeoffs that **cannot be resolved** by science. They call for ongoing high quality **communication, creativity**, and broad **collaborative action** to manage well.



# POLARITY MANAGEMENT™

*Identifying and Managing  
Unsolvable Problems*



BARRY JOHNSON P.H.D.

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# Polarity Management

# Addressing Key Tensions

**Freedom**

**Security**

**Freedom**



**Anti-freedom**

**Security**



**Anti-security**

**Polarized:**

**“I am for security,  
you are anti-security (i.e. pro-terrorism)”**

**vs.**

**“I am for freedom,  
you are anti-freedom (i.e. pro-long lines)”**

All Freedom  
No Security

Freedom  
>  
Security

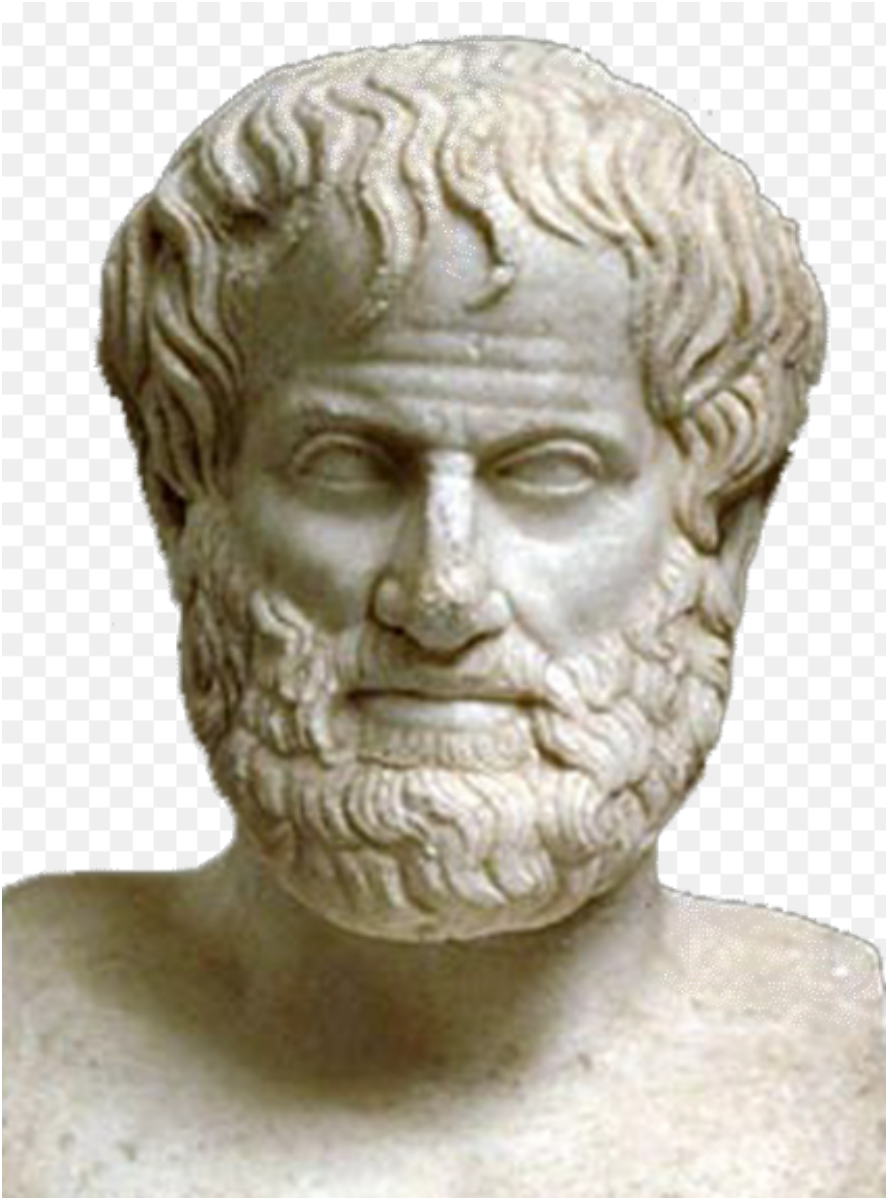
Balance  
Security  
and  
Freedom

Security  
>  
Freedom

All Security  
No Freedom







# Aristotle's Theory of Virtues

Aristotle defined a virtue as “a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect...virtue both finds and chooses that which is intermediate”

# Aristotle's Virtues

Cowardice ← -----Courage----- → Recklessness

Lack of ambition ← -----(Ideal ambition) ----- → Excess of ambition

Apathy ← -----Gentleness----- → Short temper

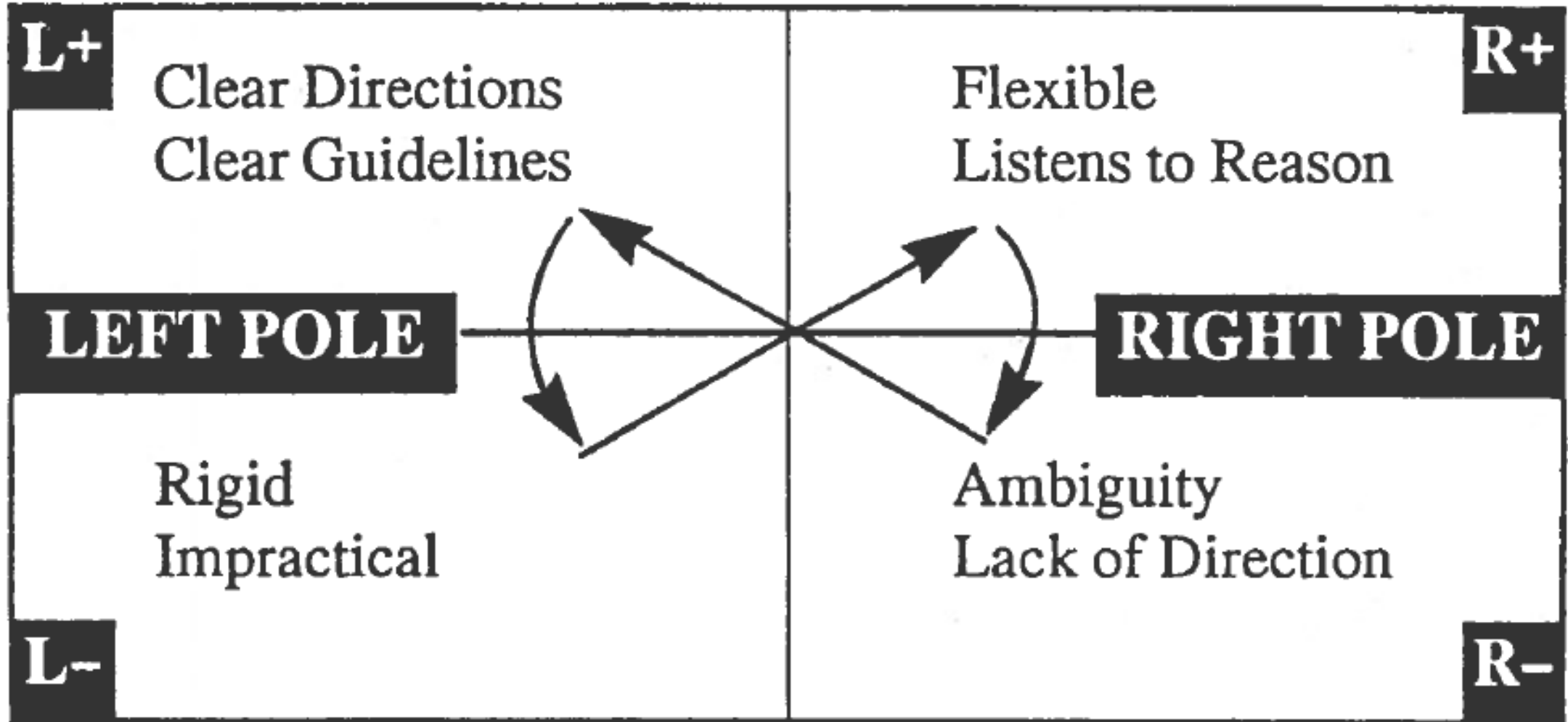
Grouchiness ← -----Friendliness----- → Flattery

Self-depreciation ← -----Truthfulness----- → Boastfulness

Injustice ← -----Justice----- → Injustice  
(gives more and receives less than one's due) (gives less and receives more than one's due)

# Polarity Management

Barry Johnson



# Polarity Management

<b>The Case for Consistency</b>	<b>The Case for Flexibility</b>
Dependable, Clarity, Allowing comparisons, Tradition, Principled, Fair, Just, Reliable, Steady, Standards, Measurability	Innovation, Adaption, Individuality, Creativity, Outside the Box thinking, Pragmatic, Thinking on your feet

<b>The Case for Consistency</b>	<b>The Case for Flexibility</b>
Dependable, Clarity, Allowing comparisons, Tradition, Principled, Fair, Just, Reliable, Steady, Standards, Measurability	Innovation, Adaption, Individuality, Creativity, Outside the Box thinking, Pragmatic, Thinking on your feet
<b>When Consistency dominates Flexibility ...</b>	<b>When Flexibility dominates Consistency ...</b>
Dogmatic, Stubborn, Unaccommodating, Stiff, Simplistic, Stuck in the past, Uninspired, Rigid, Soul-sucking, Obstinate	Wishy-washy, Ambiguous, Inconsistent, Erratic, Untrustworthy, Irregular, Unreliable

## **The Case for Consistency**

Dependable, Clarity, Allowing comparisons, Tradition, Principled, Fair, Just, Reliable, Steady, Standards, Measurability

## **The Case for Flexibility**

Innovation, Adaption, Individuality, Creativity, Outside the Box thinking, Pragmatic, Thinking on your feet

### **When Consistency dominates Flexibility ...**

Dogmatic, Stubborn, Unaccommodating, Stiff, Simplistic, Stuck in the past, Uninspired, Rigid, Soul-sucking, Obstinate

### **When Flexibility dominates Consistency ...**

Wishy-washy, Ambiguous, Inconsistent, Erratic, Untrustworthy, Irregular, Unreliable,



# Steps in the Basic Exercise

- A polarity or tension is identified and named
- In groups, brainstorm the best case scenario when focused on one end of the polarity one at a time
- Groups then complete the out of balance problematic alternatives – what happens when one end dominates too much
- Groups can then potentially combine or compare their work to get a full sense of the polarity map
- Conversation can then focus on responding to the tension, working together to manage the polarity well

# Responding to Key Tensions

- Recognize tension, still **prefer** one side while accepting and working to mitigate the tradeoffs. That preference may be purposefully short-term, with a corresponding focus on nimbleness
- Recognize tension, seek **balance** (which may mean moving in one direction or the other, seeking compromise)
- Recognize tension, seek to **transcend or integrate** tension through creativity and innovation (seeking win-win)
- Recognize tension, allow **different groups** to seek **alternative ends**
- **Disagree** with tension

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## Some others

- Short term and long term
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- Flexibility/Innovation and Consistency/Tradition
- Best use of resources (money, time, people)

# PM and CPD processes

- Superintendent search (strong leader and collaborator)
- Local food cluster (top down and bottom up)
- Neighborhood associations (formal and informal)
- Local church on gay ordination issue (truth and grace)
- Elementary school – flexibility and consistency
- Mathews House (non profit working with children exiting out of foster care) - self care and client care, individual responsibility and opportunity (agency and structure)

# Process Tensions

- Degree of structure (too much v. too little, open v. structured)
- Activism/Social justice v. impartiality/civility
- Talk v. action/impact
- Simplicity v. complexity
- Openmindedness v. Quality/Priority/Hierarchy
- Optimism v. realism
- Role of experts/data (too much v. too little)
- Expertise v. inclusiveness
- Scope (hyper-local v. city v. region v. state v. nation)

# *I believe that the central leadership attribute is the ability to manage polarity.*

Peter Koestenbaum

## **8 Polarities in “The Fundamental State of Leadership”**

From *Building The Bridge As You Walk On It* by Robert E. Quinn

Spontaneous; Expressive	AND	Self-disciplined; Responsible
Compassionate; Concerned	AND	Assertive; Bold
Mindful; Reflective	AND	Active; Energetic
Principled; Integrated	AND	Engaged; Involved
Realistic; Questioning	AND	Optimistic; Constructive
Grounded; Factual	AND	Visionary; Hopeful
Confident; Secure	AND	Adaptive; Flexible
Independent; Strong	AND	Humble; Open

## **12 Leadership Polarities**

From Polarity Management Associates

Conditional Respect	AND	Unconditional Respect
Task	AND	Relationship
Candor	AND	Diplomacy
Responsibility	AND	Freedom
Confidence	AND	Humility
Analysis	AND	Encouragement
Control	AND	Empowerment
Grounded	AND	Visionary
Structure	AND	Flexibility
Logic	AND	Creativity
Individual	AND	Work Group
Planning	AND	Implementation

## **10 Polarities in “Level 5 Leadership”**

From *Good To Great* by Jim Collins

Self	AND	Organization
Willfulness	AND	Humility
Debate	AND	Unity
Candor	AND	Diplomacy
Reality	AND	Faith
Deep Understanding	AND	Simplicity
Discipline	AND	Entrepreneurship
Technology Fads	AND	Pioneering
Evolutionary	AND	Revolutionary
Preserve Core	AND	Stimulate Change

## **8 Leadership Polarities**

From *Lost in Transition* by Richard Elsner & Bridget Farrands

To shake things up	AND	To preserve
To be open to events	AND	To be intentional about results
To develop bonds	AND	To keep distance
To seek help to learn about the organization	AND	To give value by showing how to succeed or avoid failure
To impose	AND	To facilitate
To go fast to perform	AND	To go slow to prepare
To clean out	AND	To develop
To support the team	AND	To serve the hierarchy and/or the wider organization



# Polarities to Explore Today

- Activism/Protest and Dialogue/Civility
- Structure and Agency  
(systemic issues and individual responsibility)
- Equality and Equity

# Polarity Management Worksheet

The Case for \_\_\_\_\_

The Case for \_\_\_\_\_

When \_\_\_\_\_ dominates \_\_\_\_\_

When \_\_\_\_\_ dominates \_\_\_\_\_