

Participatory Management and Directive Management In Community Based Organizations

By Patrick Masterson, MSOD
Based on the work of Barry Johnson, Ph.D.

This article looks at management in community based organizations through the lens of polarity management. By management, I mean the collection of leadership styles, structures, and approaches to people practices within an organization. My intention here is to introduce the concept of polarity management and then use this frame to understand a common dilemma in community based organizations.

Over the years there have been competing trends in community based organizations, and particularly in community organizing groups. One trend has called for participatory management. This approach is in response to legitimate concerns over the downsides of directive management, which include autocratic decision-making, the inability to tap the wisdom and leadership of members and staff, and abuse of power.

The other trend has called for a “strong hand” and directive management. This has been a response to equally legitimate arguments in organizations that have become unable to manage themselves and have become immobilized due to the resource-intensive process of consensus building and inclusive decision-making. In fact, some have seen that in their very attempt to strive for more participatory management they have found the opposite: staff members who are unable to make decisions, feel disempowered, shoulder a lot of responsibility and possess little actionable authority in their roles. In short, a lack of individual freedom to take action over the work that is in their hands. This negatively impacts the organization’s ability to fulfill its mission including draining resources, decreasing morale, and wasting attention and energy.

So, which is best suited for community based organizations? Which approach causes the most harm? I believe that the most damaging force is neither participatory management nor directive management. Rather, the most damaging force is the inability to see that these are two poles of an interdependent pair, and that both are necessary for effective decision making, strategy creation, leadership development, structure changes, and fostering democratic participation.

What are Polarities?

Polarities are interdependent pairs that do not function well independently. Since the two poles are interdependent, you cannot choose one as a “solution” and neglect the other for very long. Identifying and managing polarities is a fundamental skill in life and work. It is one that we each do everyday.

One example of a basic polarity is that of breathing. If our “problem” is how to get more air and our “solution” is to inhale, then we are going to miss something important, exhaling. You can

Those who see the decision between these two options as an *either/or* “solution” are setting themselves and their organizations up for failure:

**Participatory Management
OR
Directive Management**

Those who approach this as managing between *both/and* polarities are positioning themselves for success:

**Participatory Management
AND
Directive Management**

see in this example that there is a naturally occurring movement and self-correction taking place between the two poles. When you start to get the downside of one, you move toward the upside of the other. This shows up in inhaling. When our lungs have filled and we've depleted the oxygen we start to experience the downside, a build up of excess carbon dioxide. We move toward the other pole, exhaling, until we get the downside of that, which is having no oxygen. Other examples of interdependent pairs include individual responsibility and organizational responsibility, centralized and decentralized, rigid and flexible, and individual and team.

Some decisions we make in organizations are *either/or* – either we hire a new person or we don't. Polarities are different because they are *both/and* decisions. Problems arise when we treat both/and decisions as if they are either/or decisions.

Participatory and Directive Management as a Polarity

We will not be able to manage this polarity well if we pursue participatory management as the singular solution and treat those who support directive management as obstacles to be overcome. This approach will generate avoidable resistance. If the wisdom of those holding on to directive management is ignored, we will end up on the downside of the participatory management pole.

If this happens, we know the fault for the problems being experienced are not with participatory management. The fault will be in part from seeing participatory management as a solution in the first place. This perception will, in the future, become the basis for calling participatory management a failure.

I have worked in and consulted with organizations where directive/participatory management is seen as an "either/or" struggle. For example, when I worked at an organization called YouthAction based in New Mexico, we often spoke about the need for us to be "democratic" in our decision-making, which was our language for participatory management. We often spoke as if the question was to be democratic or non-democratic. The very language we used set us up to see this as an either/or solution, and it was very hard for those supporting directive management to get their voices heard. As a result, we were collectively unable to tap into the wisdom of directive management to help address key challenges as they arose. Nor were we able to pick the necessary ingredients from directive management that support a more democratic workplace.

There was a predictable counter-swing that took place. Once YouthAction experienced the downside of participatory management it then moved toward directive management, in our case we treated directive management as the new antidote or solution. When this tension between participatory/directive is noticed, the important question becomes, how well do we manage these two poles? One way to manage them better is to support those on both sides of the debate to tap the wisdom of their concerns and values to apply to key organizational issues.

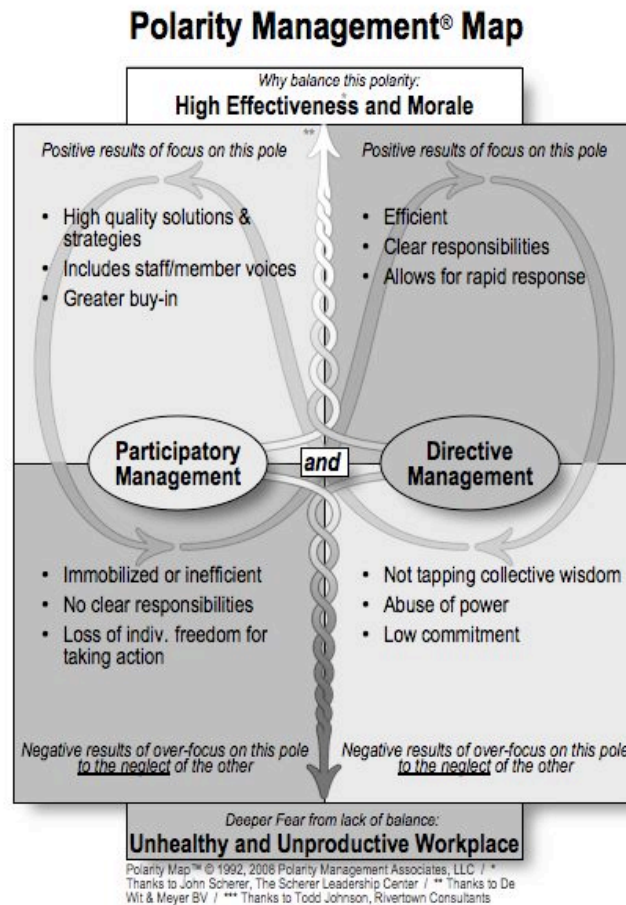
What to Do

Seeing the issues as a both/and polarity, rather than an either/or solution, will help in dealing effectively with this dilemma in management. It's okay to have a preference. Once you identify your preference ask, "What is the wisdom in the other pole?"

When organizations start to see these as two interdependent poles they can create plans and take actions that support and strengthen the skills of staff, members and boards in managing the fluctuation between the two poles. Over time, there will be areas of the organization that need directive decision-making and there will be areas that need more participative decision. Likely there will be phases of the organization's life where its survival and ability to effectively fulfill its mission depends on it leaning more toward directive management or leaning more participatory management.

Polarity Mapping

The following is a simplified example of a polarity map. The mapping process helps to make explicit the wisdom of each pole and can be used in organizational meetings. Just understanding that the dynamic of polarities is at play can be helpful.



On the left side of the map above you will see the upside and the downside to participatory management. On the right side you see the same for directive management. The infinity loop represents the energy cycle between the two.

An individual or a group can use polarity mapping to save time and energy by avoiding the trap that either pole is the solution. It also helps to better understand resistance to organizational changes you want to make.

Two other steps in the polarity mapping process *not* represented here are developing action steps to support the upside of both poles and identifying warning signs for when you are experiencing the downsides of the poles.

So What?

Here are five practical ways this can help you today:

- 1) Go with the resistance instead of against. When you talk with some who is on the other side of the polarity incorporate their reality instead of trying to contradict it. You will demonstrate a more thoughtful and deep understanding of the issues and decrease the chances of being dismissed as a lofty idealist.
- 2) Since you are aware of the polarity, you know there is a need to shift focus back and forth in order to manage the dilemma.
- 3) As a leader you can improve your effectiveness by leading efforts to foster directive practices and for participatory practices in your organization.
- 4) Test your assumptions about which one is appropriate in any given situation. The question is *whether* to shift to the opposite pole, *when* and *how*.
- 5) You know the difference between *both/and* thinking and *either/or* thinking, start to use the word “and” instead of “but” sometimes and see how it impacts the conversation.

This article explored aspects of one polarity, the polarity of directive and participatory management. Greater awareness and heightened skill in attending to and managing polarities increases our effectiveness and eases our work by saving time and energy. With big missions and limited resources, learning how to manage polarities can make our work easier, especially if we find that our group or leaders in our group are stuck in problems that seem intractable.