FRAME SHIFT: FROM “FIXING” TO MANAGING INTERDEPENDENCY

Leaders are often asked to step in when values-based conflict—or perceived misalignment—between parts of the community or organization arise. In an effort to reduce conflict, our temptation in these situations may be to fix the problem: use data to prove that one point of view is superior, advocate for one side to get what it wants (or compromise for a time), etc.

However, this frame is typically helpful only when mutually exclusive opposites and truly independent alternatives exist. For example, you may need to decide to contract with one group or the other, but you cannot legally contract with both, so picking alternative A or B will be necessary.

In healthcare, we often encounter situations where ongoing, interdependent alternatives/opposites are at play. Two different sets of ideas, priorities, or values are not an either or choice, but are, in fact, linked inextricably.

For example, patients’ experience of care is directly related to both the speed (efficiency) of the care we give, and to the safety of care provided, which may require double-checks and redundancies designed to slow things down. Picking efficiency at the exclusion of safety won’t work. Neither will picking safety at the exclusion of efficiency.

When facing interdependent alternatives, problem solving tends to have limited benefit, because choosing one approach at the exclusion of the other will lead to eventual failure in achieving the overarching goal. In this situation, polarity management offers an alternative framework for leaders.
The aim in polarity mapping and management is to evaluate when you have over- or under-compensated by favoring one pole, and to seek activities to achieve better balance—then articulate this approach to those affected by the polarity.
Think of a leadership challenge you are facing currently. What polarities are at play?

Draw a polarity map—including upsides, downsides, triggers, and habits—then discuss with a partner.
With your partner, discuss what can you do to articulate these polarities to those involved in the challenge?

With your partner, discuss how you could utilize your own values—and the values of others in the organization—to manage the polarities at play? (What would be a compelling vision you could rally people behind, that incorporates both poles and speaks to commonly held values?)