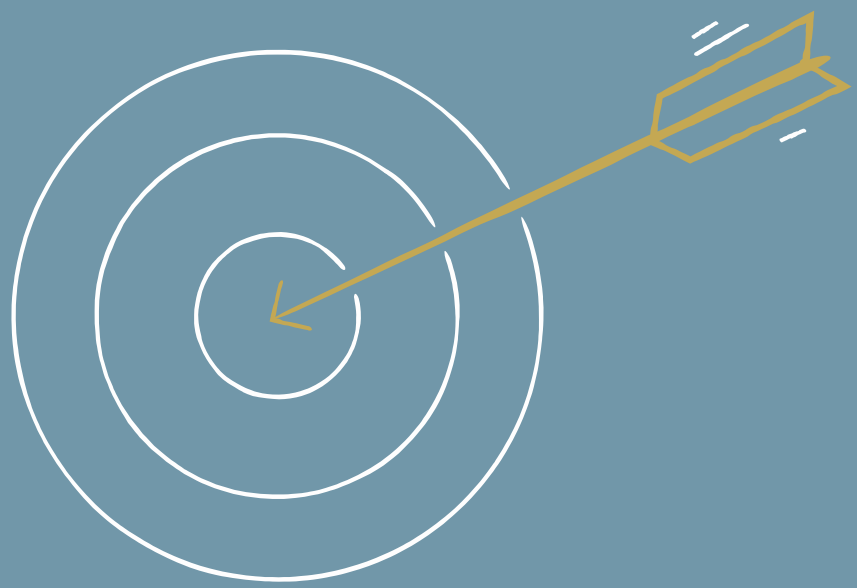
April 29, 2025

“Both/And” Thinking



How Understanding Polarities Can Help You Foster More Effective Teams

What is a Polarity?

How familiar are you with polarities?

Definition of Polarities

Two interdependent pairs of needs, values, or goals that may appear to be in conflict but actually are dependent on each other to contribute to effective outcomes or a greater purpose.

“There is truth and wisdom on more than side or pole of an issue”.

- Barry Johnson

Examples

Work ∞ Life

Structure ∞ Flexibility

Task ∞ Relationship

Intent ∞ Impact

Confidence ∞ Humility

Stability ∞ Change

Logic ∞ Creativity

Individual needs ∞ Team needs

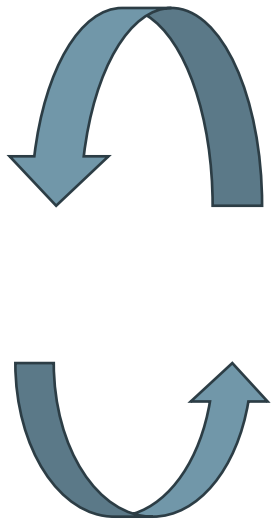
Breathing is a polarity

Recognizing a Polarity

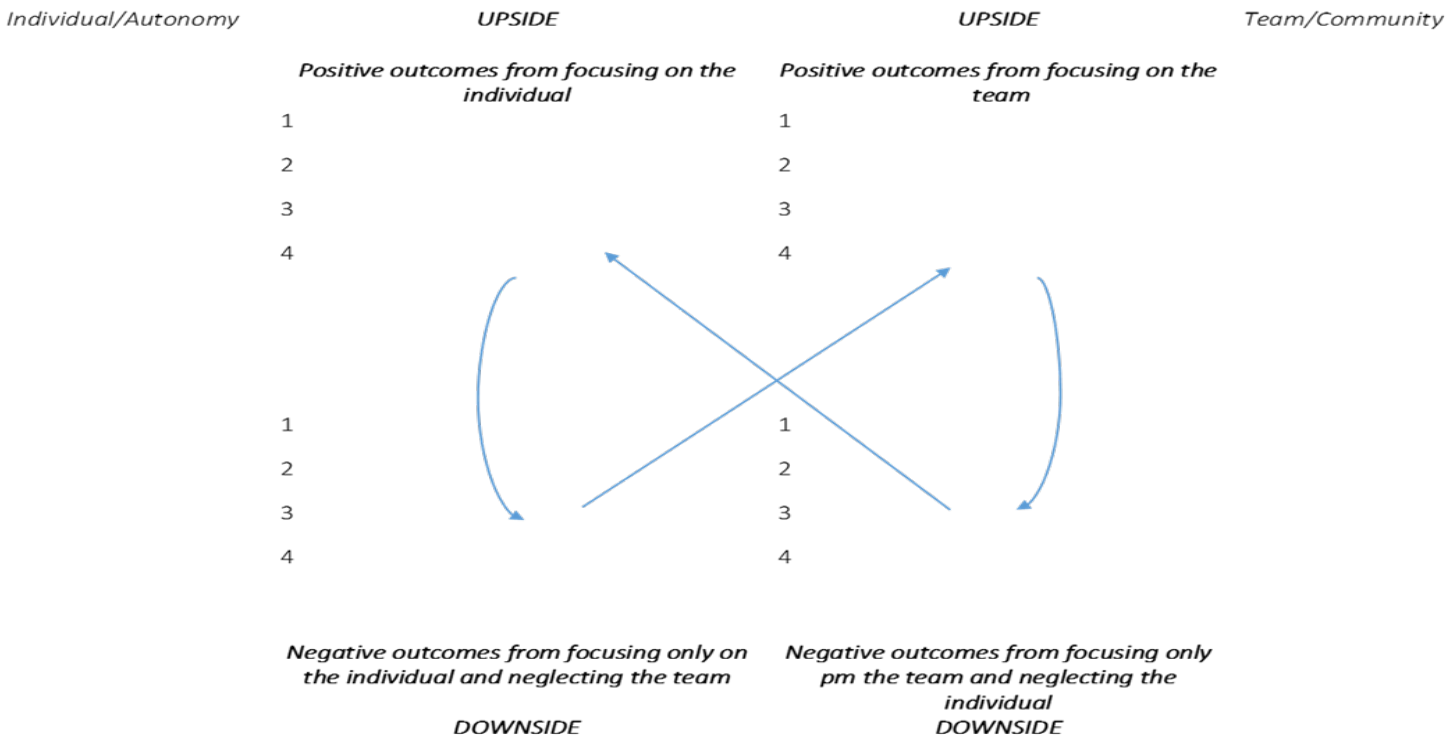
It is recurring and ongoing, won't go away

Contains opposing, interdependent poles

It is not a problem



The Polarity Two-Step



Polarities exist at many levels

Individual

Taking care of self and Taking care of others

Team/Unit

Innovation and Efficiency

Organization

Decentralization and Centralization

Community

Responsibility and Freedom

Mapping a Polarity

Seeing the Whole

- Poles include both a value and a fear
- Each of us naturally relates to one side of a pole – this enables us to see the upside, the positive results gained by focusing on this pole
- And we often cannot see the downside, the negative results from over-focusing on this pole

When teams map a polarity together, they can identify both the upside and downside of both poles

This allows the team to achieve its greater purpose by leveraging the upsides of both poles

When we map polarities, we can see more of the whole

- Both/And thinking is required
- Either/Or thinking causes problems over time
- By naming upsides and downsides of both poles you can see more of the whole
- By optimizing upsides and minimizing downsides you can move to the higher purpose

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Mapping a Polarity

See the *Whole Picture*

Define all four quadrants

- Upside and Downside of both poles

Anticipate the downside

- Identify red flags and early warning

Stay in the upside

- Identify strategies and actions for staying in upside

UPSIDE ***Positive outcomes from focusing on this pole*** ***accountability***	***UPSIDE*** ***Positive outcomes from focusing on this pole***
Negative outcomes from over-focusing on this pole ***DOWNSIDE***	***Negative outcomes from over-focusing on this pole*** ***DOWNSIDE***

Key Elements of a Mapped Polarity

You must identify the greater purpose

- Why leverage this polarity?

- You need to name the two poles
  - Each pole must be positive

You need to identify the positive AND the negative results of focusing on each pole

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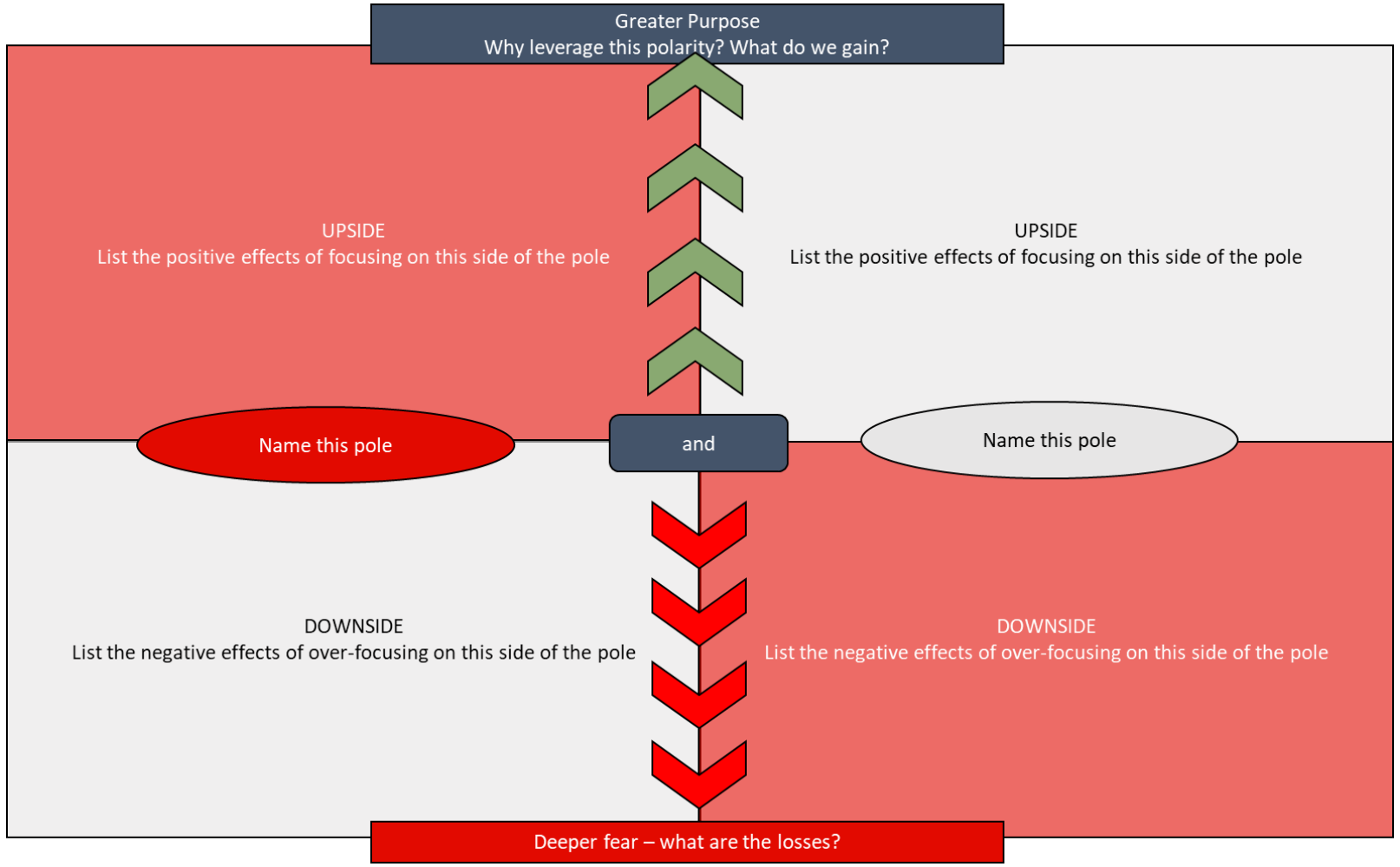
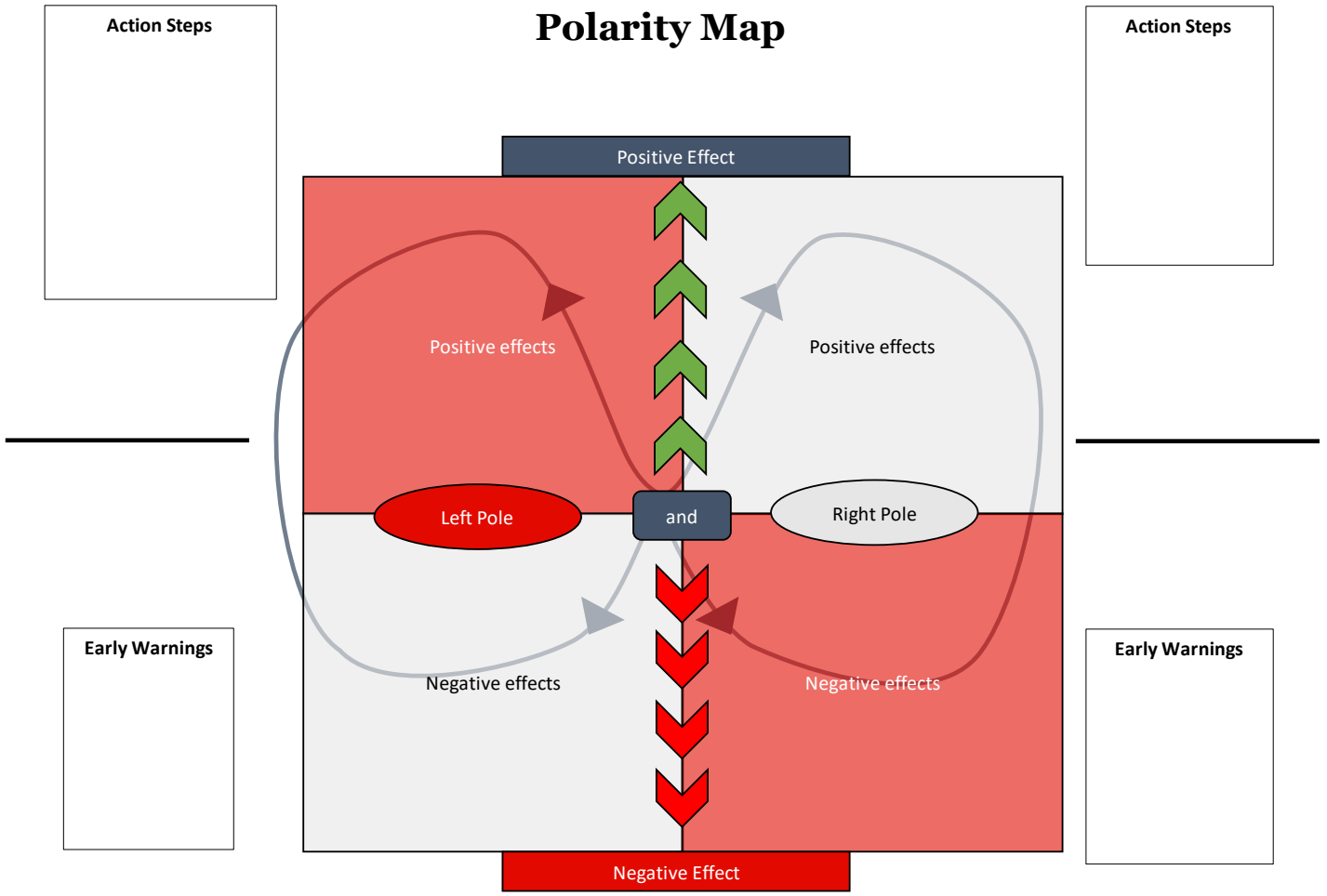
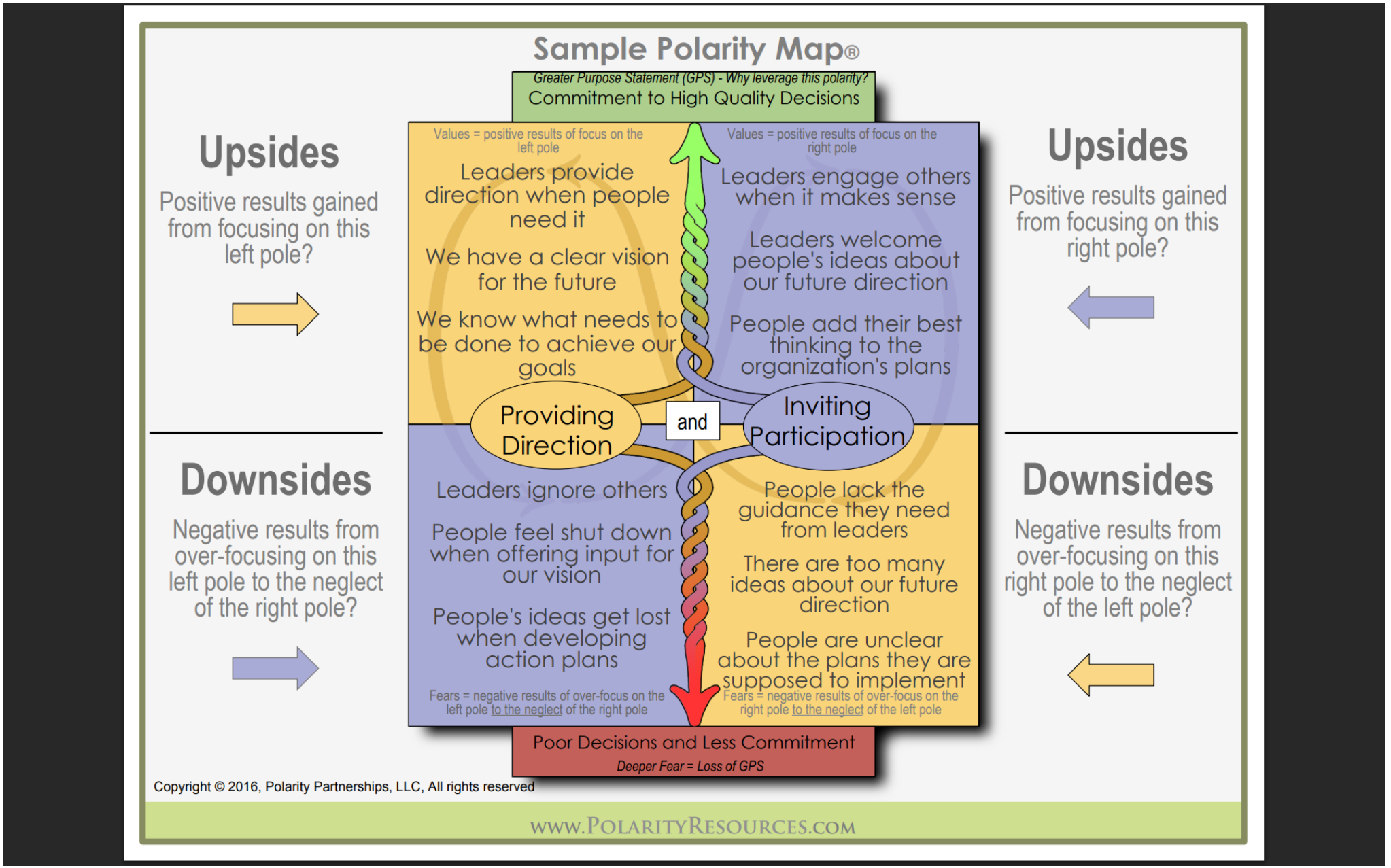
- Barry Johnson

Mapping a Polarity Step One



Polarity Mapping Step Two




Sample Polarity Map®
Greater Purpose Statement (GPS) - Why leverage this polarity?
Commitment to High Quality Decisions
Upsides
Positive results gained from focusing on this left pole?
Values = positive results of focus on the left pole
Leaders provide direction when people need it
We have a clear vision for the future
We know what needs to be done to achieve our goals
Values = positive results of focus on the right pole
Leaders engage others when it makes sense
Leaders welcome people's ideas about our future direction
People add their best thinking to the organization's plans
Upsides
Positive results gained from focusing on this right pole?
Providing Direction
and
Inviting Participation
Downsides
Negative results from over-focusing on this left pole to the neglect of the right pole?
Leaders ignore others
People feel shut down when offering input for our vision
People's ideas get lost when developing action plans
Fears = negative results of over-focus on the left pole to the neglect of the right pole
People lack the guidance they need from leaders
There are too many ideas about our future direction
People are unclear about the plans they are supposed to implement
Fears = negative results of over-focus on the right pole to the neglect of the left pole
Downsides
Negative results from over-focusing on this right pole to the neglect of the left pole?
Poor Decisions and Less Commitment
Deeper Fear = Loss of GPS
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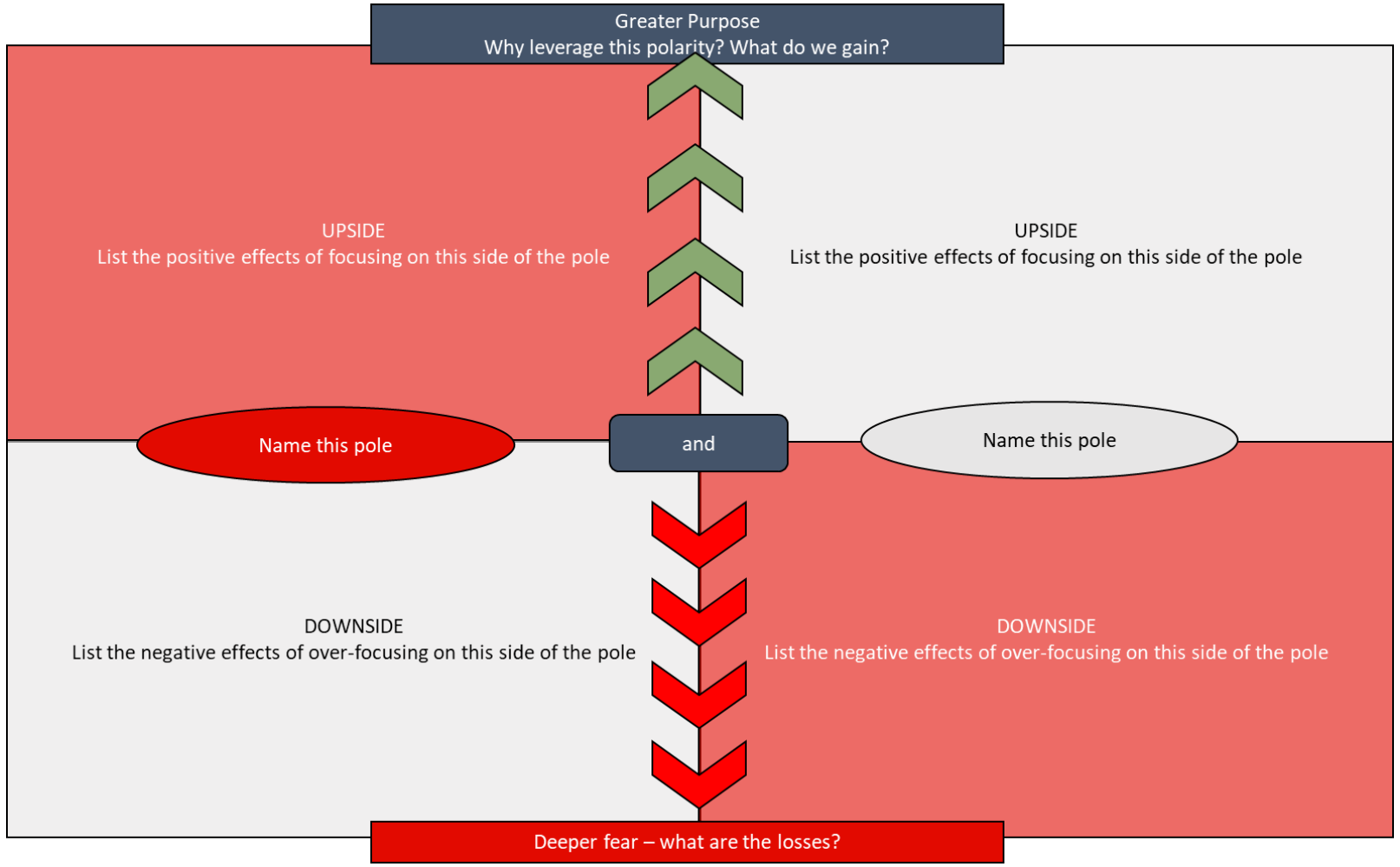
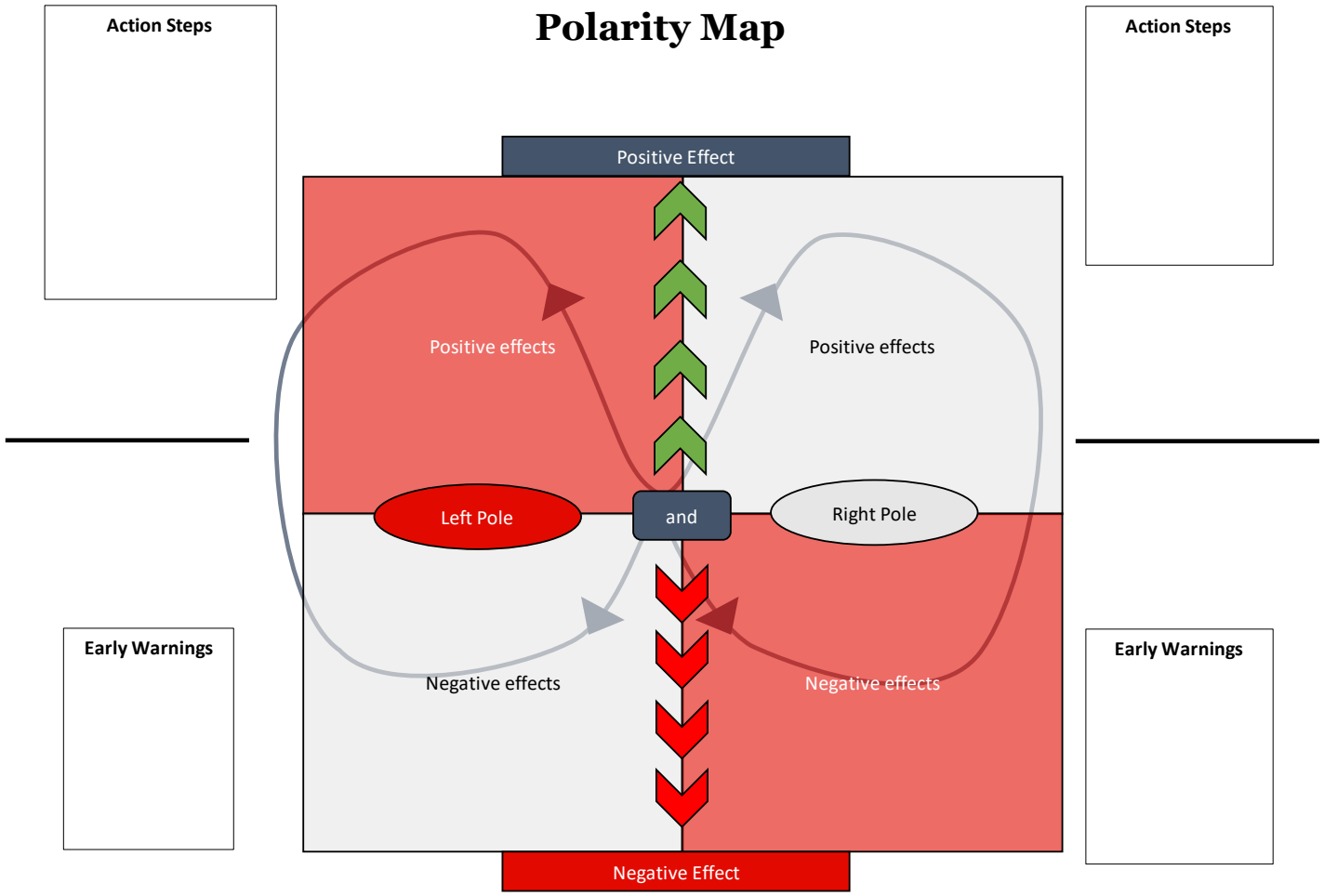
Let’s Map the Polarity Task Completion and Relationship Development

Mapping a Polarity Step One



Polarity Mapping Step Two



Using your map

Post your map so all can see

Review the map regularly

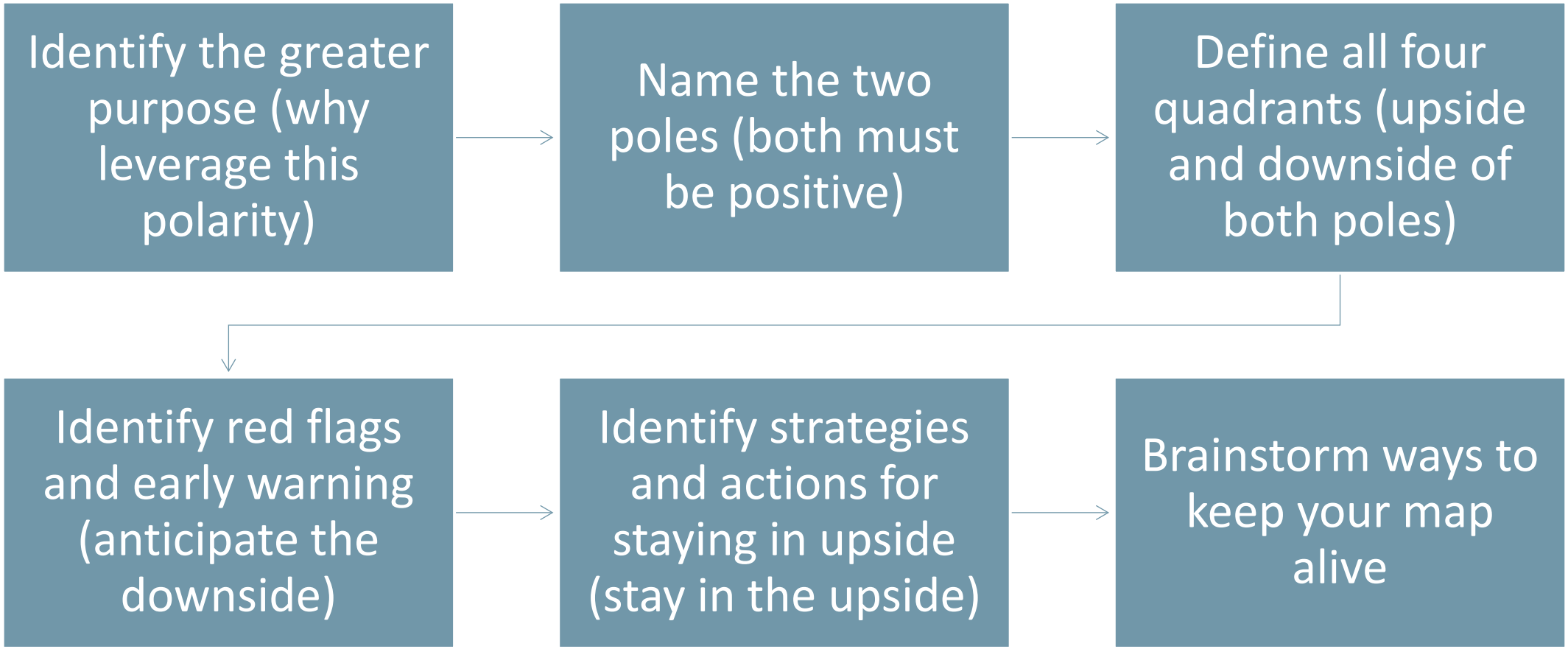
Assess how well you are leveraging the polarity

What are you learning?

Name your best strategies

Identify new early warning signs

Mapping a Polarity Recap



Can you recognize a polarity?

Questions/Comments

Resources

Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems

By Barry Johnson

Accompanying Website: Polarity Partnerships

Navigating Polarities: Using Both/And Thinking to Lead Transformation

By Brian Emerson and Kelly Lewis

Accompanying Website: Andiron

Are You Facing a Problem? Or a Polarity?

Center for Creative Leadership ccl.org