



Freedom and Accountability at Work Reloaded

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"How wonderful that we have met with a paradox. **Now we have some hope of making progress.**"

—Niels Bohr, Nobel Prize-Winning Physicist and one of the founders of quantum theory

We live in a world that is becoming increasingly complex and is becoming so at an accelerating rate. An IBM study¹ found that most executives doubt their own ability to manage complexity. It's not hard to understand why. We are introducing new technology at a dizzying pace: blockchain, artificial intelligence, virtual reality, genetic engineering, robotics, nanotechnology and now 4D printing (we've already raced

beyond 3D printing). It's little wonder that the rate of change is outpacing the ability of humans to absorb the change. A BCG study² found that one out of three public companies will not exist in its current form in five years, a rate forty times faster than four decades ago. There is a burning need for leaders to effectively manage complexity. The question is: how?

My friend Peter Koestenbaum and his colleague and collaborator, Peter Block, are preparing to release a new book in February, 2023 titled *Confronting Our Freedom: Leading a Culture of Chosen Accountability and Belonging*³. The catchy title represents a continuation of the themes that have energized Peter Koestenbaum's nine-and-a-half decades of life.

One of those themes is the paramount importance of managing polarities. As Peter has shared with me, the most urgent and important task of any leader is identifying and managing polarities. Given their urgency and importance, what exactly are polarities and why do they need to be managed?

Dictionary.com defines polarity (singular) as "the presence or manifestation of two opposite or contrasting principles or tendencies."⁴ A list of similar terms might include the words tension, contradiction, contrast, dilemma, predicament, duality, paradox and quandary. Polarity management for leadership means that leaders are continuously and unavoidably exposed to opposing forces that require balancing. That means that first, leaders must recognize the opposing forces, and second, pursue strategies that effectively and intentionally balance them. Polarities are not and never will be problems to be solved. Polarities are unavoidable tensions that can only be managed. In fact, treating a polarity like a problem to be solved can easily lead to unintended negative consequences. An exciting new product design from a competitor may cause a company to surge its research and development budget and reduce focus on customer service, causing the company to lose the very customers it was hoping to retain with new products.

In the early days of Morning Star, a few colleagues and I undertook a large project to define geographic market territories throughout North

America and hire representatives for each region. The project required tons of research, phone calling and travel to achieve quality representation throughout the North American market. During the marketing project's lifespan we deliberately postponed separate non-marketing-related initiatives, understanding that we would come back to address those areas post-project. Our learning: businesses themselves often demand sustained attention for specific needs, and it's okay to pivot from one area to another. The key to doing this successfully is to always keep the larger picture in mind—the essence of managing polarity.

For leaders, managing polarities presumes that leaders are capable of spotting a polarity in the first place, and then theorizing an approach to managing it that makes sense for the organization. In workshops, I will often ask teams to brainstorm polarities and then prioritize the brainstorm results to land upon the most crucial polarities for balancing. It's often enlightening for team members to learn and discover the priorities of other team members. Typical outputs might include short term vs. long term, objective vs. subjective, innovation vs. execution, centralized vs. decentralized, individual vs. team or proven vs. experimental. An especially creative team can theorize dozens of polarities in a few minutes.

So a leadership team identifies a list of polarities, prioritizes the items on the list, and knows which polarities demand focused attention in the context of their particular strategic objectives. What then?

Wendy K. Smith, Marianne W. Lewis and Michael L. Tushman, the authors of the HBR article '*Both/And*' Leadership⁵ describe the mindsets and approaches needed for effective polarity management. First, the leadership mind (on which Peter Koestenbaum has written extensively) must shift from a focus on consistency

to consistent inconsistency. This is a departure from traditional management thinking and often produces deep anxiety. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as Koestenbaum observes, because anxiety is the fuel for courageous action. In the case of polarity management, humans are often wired to see one pathway as right, making the other pathway wrong—an Either/Or proposition. In the mind of the paradox-minded leader, however, two seemingly opposing pathways may both be right, and the job of the leader is to figure out how to optimize both (the Both/And approach). The HBR authors point to the experience of IBM in the late 1990s, forced by technological revolution to embrace the world wide web while simultaneously optimizing its existing client-server business. This high-wire act required balancing two conflicting structures, with wildly different cultures, rewards and metrics—a massively difficult task.

Complicating the task of polarity management is the fact that polarities are often interdependent as well as contradictory. Focusing on process execution for customers at the expense of innovation may make for happy customers

in the short term, but process execution will ultimately require innovation in the long term to be effective. The current dramatic failure of Southwest Airlines in cancelling thousands of flights during the 2022 Christmas holiday (largely due to antiquated information and communication systems) is forcing a brutal reckoning for an airline once lauded for its great culture and fabulous customer service. The lesson: it's dangerous for contemporary leaders to embrace one side of a polarity at the expense of the other. Maintaining a focus on both sides is what the HBR authors call *dynamic equilibrium*, because the structure of any given polarity can shift in response to competition, technological change, regulatory approach, de-globalization and myriad other factors. One's approach to a given polarity may require frequent pivots in response to a wildly dynamic environment. The authors describe effective polarity management as a process of both *separating* and *connecting* the opposing sides of a polarity. In the case of IBM, that meant maintaining two separate cultures for the two divergent sides of the business (emergent vs. traditional), while actively resolving conflicts between them.



Translating theory into practice (another polarity!), Barry Johnson, Ph.D., in his excellent book *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems*⁶, declares that “Our problem-solving skills and the whole problem-solving paradigm, while extremely useful with solvable problems, can get in the way when we have a polarity to manage.” In the book, Johnson shares a useful Polarity Map that identifies the positive and negative outcomes possible from a focus on one side or the other of any given polarity.

How does this discussion of polarity management relate to the title of this article? In my experience, the greatest polarity to manage is the tension between freedom and accountability at work. That is, in fact, the title of the first Koestenbaum and Block book collaboration: *Freedom and Accountability at Work: Applying Philosophic Insight to the Real World*⁷. The title begs several questions, such as: what is freedom? And what is accountability? In Koestenbaum’s view, every human being is a walking, talking agent of free will and

should be respected as such by leaders at work. How does that translate into important questions about boundaries, mandatory trainings, behavioral consequences, performance reviews, attendance policies, promotions, compensation and myriad other questions? How does it relate to command-and-control management, position power, titles and decision rights?

A final question: why is the tension between freedom and accountability the greatest polarity?

Because that tension is ubiquitous and continuous, influencing every human decision and action. Those who do not recognize and embrace their inherent freedom to decide and act appropriately are passive bystanders in the game of life, constantly reacting to others who feel less constrained. Their ability to advance their own lives and the lives of others is severely compromised by a deficit of agency and autonomy, producing suboptimal results for themselves and others.

The other side of the pole is equally important. It’s not enough to embrace freedom, because freely-taken decisions and actions must be exercised with utmost respect for people affected and for the promises that those decisions and actions are intended to fulfill. Promises are the only things that exist between human beings, and fulfilling promises is the very definition of integrity. As orators and writers throughout history have declared: “Where there is great power there is great responsibility.”

Managing the eternal balance between freedom and accountability isn’t just the job of every leader, it’s a big part of the job of being human in the first place.



References

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