

# ANDlightenment: Seeing and Leveraging Polarities for a Higher Purpose, In Healthcare

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Healthcare leaders today operate in environments shaped by ongoing tension, balancing innovation with stability, efficiency with empathy, and individual needs with population-level outcomes. These challenges are rarely solved once and for all. Instead, they require leaders to continuously navigate competing yet interdependent priorities.

In the recent CHI 23<sup>rd</sup> Masterclass, Dr Douglas O’Loughlin, Principal of the Dao of Thriving and Associate Consultant, Civil Service College, introduced polarity thinking as a key leadership capability for navigating such complexity.

Organised by the Centre for Healthcare Innovation (CHI) in partnership with Population Health’s POP Class, the session

explored how leaders can shift from “either/or” thinking towards a more integrative “both/and” mindset, recognising and leveraging tensions rather than attempting to eliminate them.

The session clarified the distinction between problems, dilemmas, and polarities, surfaced common healthcare examples of polarities, and shared practical ways leaders can work with polarities, from noticing and naming them, to making one’s thinking visible, using dialogue and applying tools such as polarity mapping.

## From Problems to Polarities

Dr O’Loughlin clarified a common misconception: not all tensions are problems to be solved. While some leadership challenges require decisive solutions or trade-offs, others represent ongoing dynamics where both sides are necessary and interdependent.

He distinguished between problems (solvable), dilemmas (requiring trade-offs), and polarities, recurring tensions that cannot be resolved permanently because each pole carries both value and risk when overemphasised.

Importantly, polarity thinking is not new. Leaders have long navigated tensions such as stability and change, or compassion and accountability. What is relatively new is the structured process and shared language for recognising and intentionally leveraging them.



*Seeing polarities in action: Through an experiential push-pull exercise, participants recognised everyday tensions and how greater awareness enables more thoughtful response.*

“Polarities are everywhere. The more aware we are of them, the more effective we are in life.”

Polarity thinking, therefore, is not about finding the “right” answer. It is about recognising the **genius of AND**, strengthening one pole when the other has been overextended, and doing so in service of a higher purpose.

## Polarities in Healthcare Leadership

Through familiar examples, high-tech and high-touch care, individual and population health, stability and transformation, being firm and kind, participants saw how polarities play out in everyday leadership.

These examples reinforced that polarities are not abstract concepts but lived realities shaping everyday leadership decisions. Leaders frequently encounter situations where prioritising one pole exclusively leads to predictable downsides, efficiency without empathy, innovation without stability.

Yet, the purpose of these examples was not to create a checklist of polarities, but to invite a shift in perspective. By naming these interdependent dynamics, leaders can move beyond reactive decision-making and more intentionally leverage both poles in service of sustainable outcomes.

### Leveraging Polarities in Practice

Beyond recognising polarities, the masterclass emphasised how leaders can work with them intentionally. A key insight was that polarisation often stems not from rejecting the other pole, but from fearing its potential downsides. Effective polarity leadership therefore involves affirming the value of both sides and anchoring conversations around a shared higher purpose.

“ *People aren’t afraid of the other pole, they’re afraid or worried about the downsides of the other pole.* ”  
– Dr Douglas O’Loughlin

Addressing the question of “what to do with polarities,” Dr O’Loughlin provided several practical possibilities rather than a fixed formula:

- **Notice the polarity** – some tensions simply require awareness. Recognising recurring dynamics, such as advocacy and inquiry, helps leaders step back from reactive responses
- **Be intentional in practice** – Leaders can consciously shift emphasis, for example balancing firmness with kindness or action with reflection.
- **Bring people together** – Many polarities require dialogue and

### Developing Awareness in Polarity Leadership

Recognising polarities is only the first step; working with them effectively requires ongoing awareness and discipline. One common trap is treating polarities as problems to solve, attempting to eliminate tension rather than learning to navigate it.

Leaders may also become overly attached to one pole. Having a natural preference is both normal and expected. Each individual brings personal values, experiences, and instincts that shape how they approach tension. Polarity thinking does not require abandoning these preferences, rather, it calls for greater self-awareness. By recognising where one’s instinctive leaning lies, leaders can more intentionally shift perspective when needed, instead of reacting unconsciously.

“ *Working with polarities is not about becoming less of one thing, it’s about adding what’s missing. When you’re too ‘heaty’, you don’t become less heaty – you add coolness by drinking 白花蛇草水!* ”

Participants were also encouraged to resist oversimplifying polarities into fixed ideals. Maintaining clarity about the distinct



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