

# The problems that never go away

*Working with the tensions that  
shape your nonprofit*

**Sector Support Series – November 2025**





 **People Centered Change**

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Hi, I'm **Julia**

I support **people-centered transformation** and **participatory strategy development** for nonprofits and foundations.

# Today's purpose & intended outcomes

Why are we here, and what do we hope to accomplish?

Purpose	To offer a practical and compassionate way to <b>understand and navigate the persistent tensions</b> that shape organizational life.
Intended outcomes	<p>In service of this purpose, together we will...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Explore why some of the challenges we face in organizational life are not problems to be solved, but <b>tensions to be managed</b>.</li><li>• <b>Identify core, recurring tensions</b> that show up most often in nonprofit organizations.</li><li>• Learn about and work with a simple framework that helps us understand how to <b>manage these tensions more productively</b>.</li><li>• Reflect on how organizational leadership and structure can help teams navigate these dynamics through <b>shared understanding</b>.</li></ul>

We all experience “either / or” tensions in our organizations – situations where we feel like **we are pulled in two opposing directions where neither extreme feels quite right.**

**What is an example of an either / or tension that you've grappled with in your organization?**



What are tensions, and how do  
they show up in nonprofit life?

# First, let's start by making a distinction between **problems** and **tensions**.



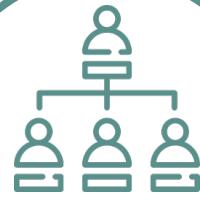
**Problems** typically have a clear root cause and have a known or knowable answer. Problems can be effectively solved with the right solution.



**Tensions** typically have (at least) two valid, competing perspectives, reflect the reality of multiple stakeholders or values, and keep showing up even after you've "fixed" them. Tensions require ongoing management – they never go away.

# Four common sources of tension

Most of the tensions we experience in nonprofit organizations are rooted in one or more common sources.



## Structure

Tensions rooted in how an organization is designed.

*Functional mandates, competing priorities, board/staff roles*



## Values

Tension between what we believe and what we feel pressured to do.

*Equity vs. efficiency, participation vs. urgency*



## People

Tensions that arise because people have different needs, identities, and realities.

*Individual vs. collective needs, generational dynamics*



## Change

Tensions triggered by planned or emergent growth, evolution, or directional shifts.

*Legacy vs. innovation, emerging needs vs. existing programs*

# What can chronic tensions look like?

- Persistent or entrenched **conflicts between individuals and/or teams** with different mandates.
- **Meta-conflicts** that seem to sit right under the surface of day-to-day challenges.
- The **formation of organizational factions** around critical issues or points of conflict.

Recognizing chronic tensions is critical, in part because of **how easily blame for an undiagnosed tension can be (unfairly) assigned to a person or team**.

- “Oh, she’s just hard to get along with.”
- “Those teams just can’t collaborate with each other.”
- “Those people are just resistant to new ideas”.

# Framework for understanding and managing tensions

# Using a Polarity Map to manage organizational tensions

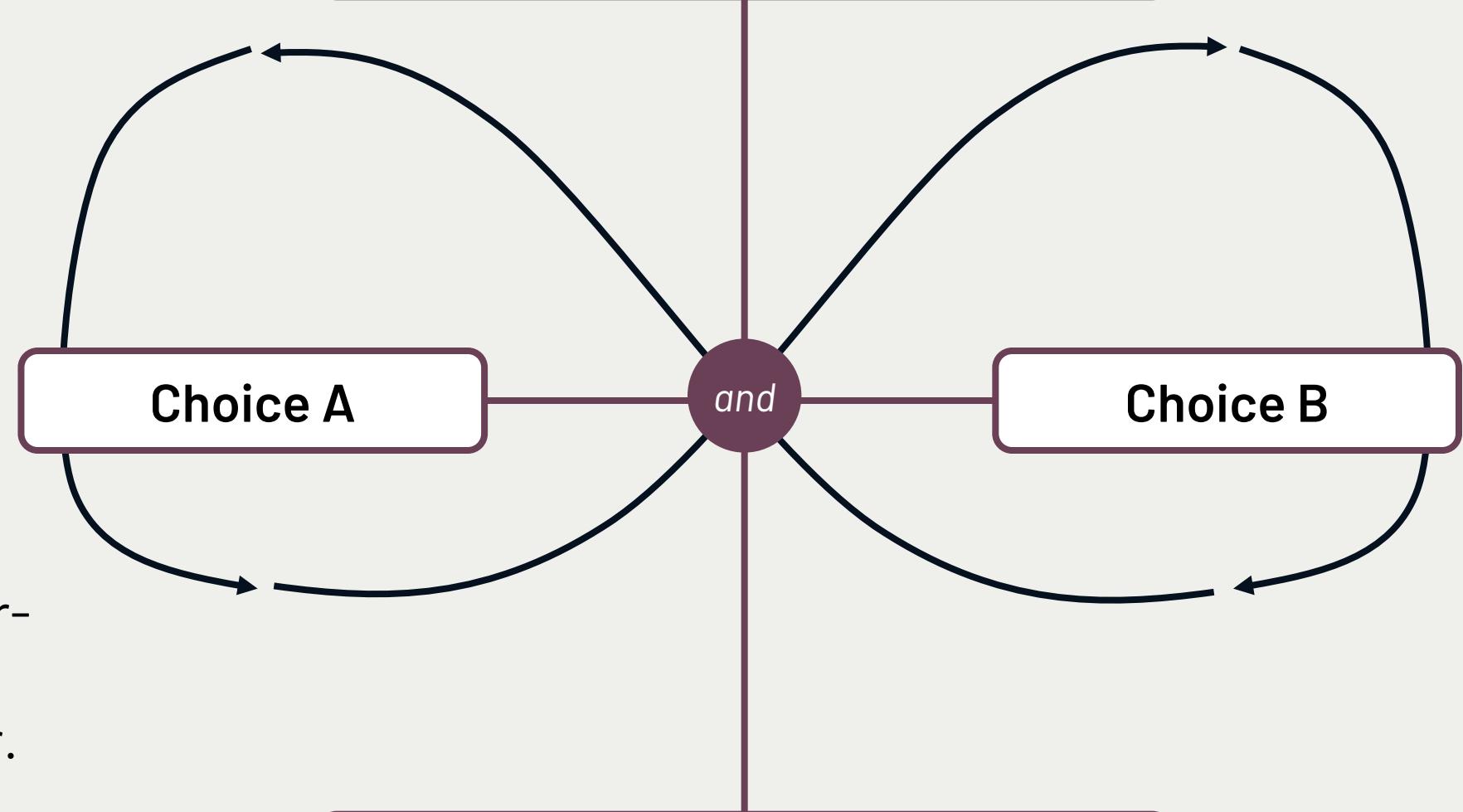
Barry Johnson created the **Polarity Map** to help us more deeply understand, leverage, and manage the tensions or “polarities” that come up in organizational life. It focuses on helping **drive shared understanding of a tension, how it manifests, and how to manage it**, including:

- The positive impact of each polar choice,
- The potential negative results of over-focusing on one choice or another, and
- What it looks like when you are managing the tension well.

**Greater purpose statement:**  
What can we gain by navigating this?

## Values

Positive results of focusing on either the left or right pole

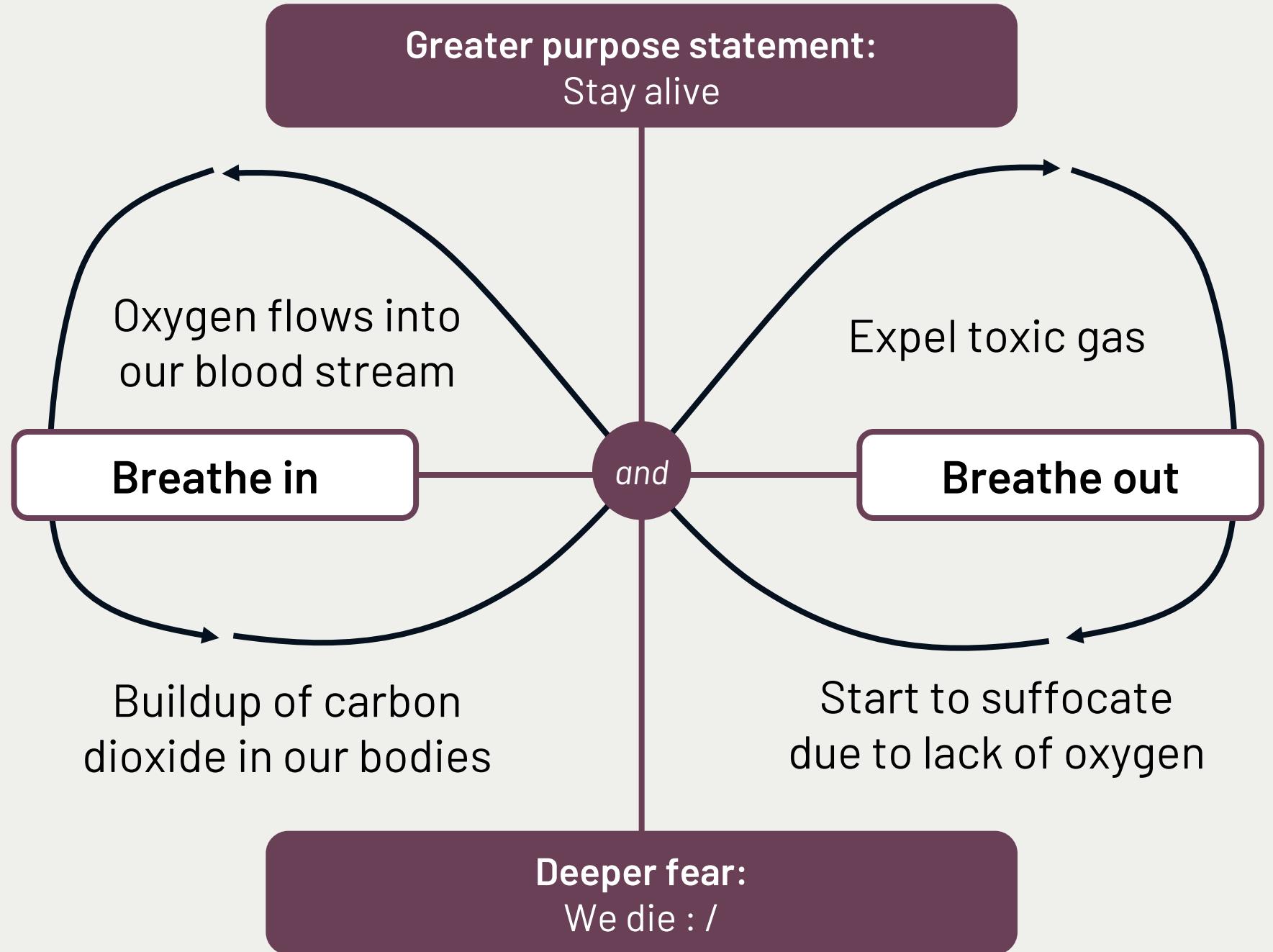


## Fears

Negative results of over-focusing on one pole to the neglect of the other.

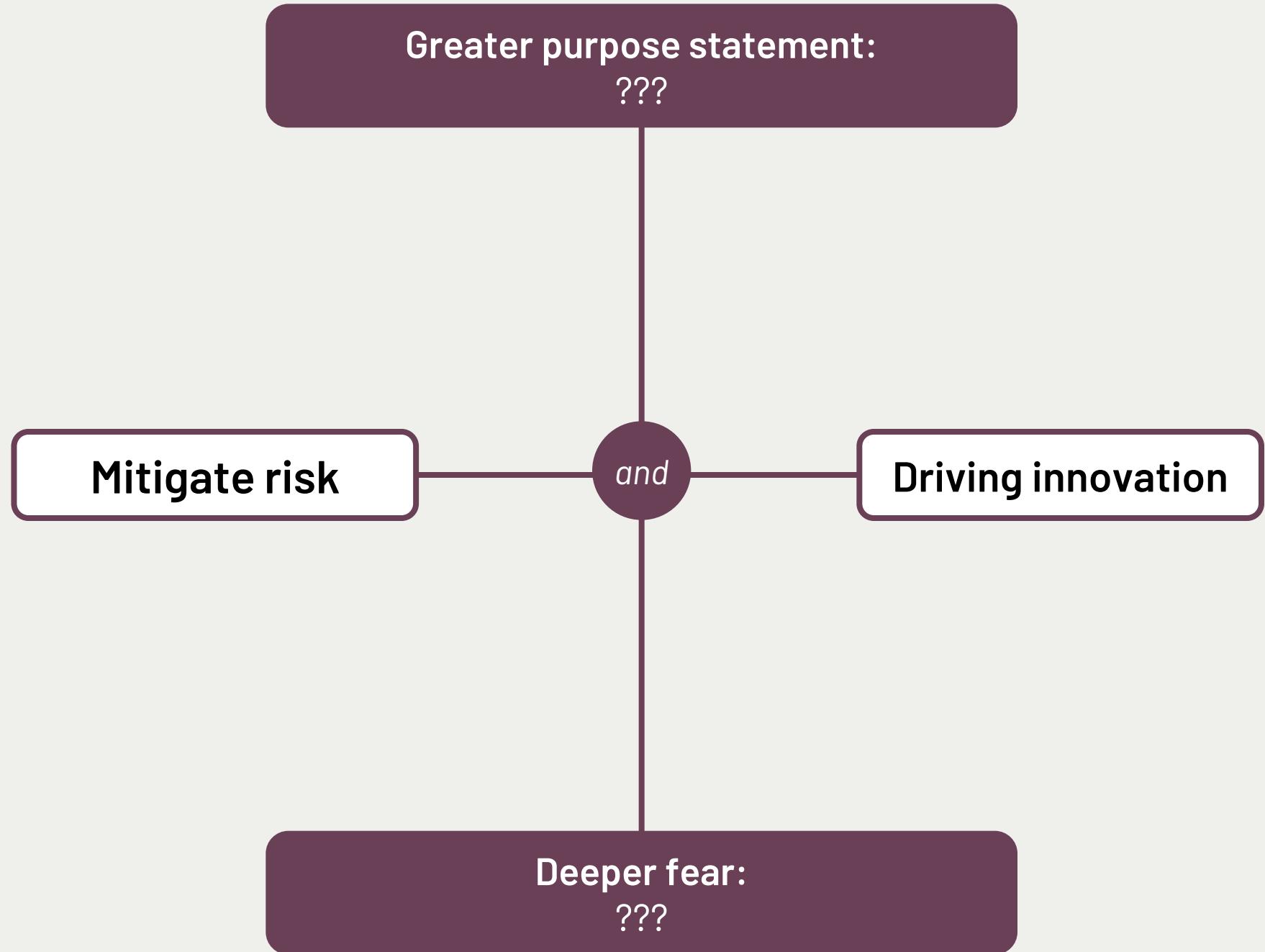
# Example

## Staying alive through respiration



# Example

## Balancing risk mitigation & innovation



## Greater purpose:

Graceful improvement – improve and evolve

### Values

- Good communication
- Streamlined processes
- No regulatory or compliance trouble
- Cost-saving
- Relieve some kinds of stress

### Values

- Reach new audiences
- Deepen relationships with current audiences
- Trailblaze
- Staff energy and excitement
- First to market

### Option A:

Mitigating risk

### Fears

- The world leaves us behind
- Missed opportunities
- Internal frustration and potential turnover or loss of motivation

### Option B:

Driving innovation

### Fears

- BURNOUT
- We look scattered
- Forgetting purpose and mission
- Dry up annual reserves
- Regulatory trouble

### Deeper fear:

Crazy and chaotic

# Early warning signs

If tension management is all about finding balance near the middle, how do we know that we are over-investing in one choice to the detriment of the other?

- Once you've mapped out the values and fears related to each choice, you have a clear sense of what you want to move toward and maximize, and what you want to avoid and mitigate.
- Then, for each pole, you identify "early warning signs" – signals that you are starting to over-invest in one over the other.
- Once you know what those early warning signs are, you can agree on how you want to respond when they show up.

<p><b>Early warning signs</b> that we are over-focusing on Option A</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Start to hear people grumbling, "oh we can't do that because of x policy"</li> <li>We see someone in the market putting something out that we thought about but didn't pursue</li> <li>Complacency</li> </ul>	<p><b>Greater purpose:</b> Graceful improvement – improve and evolve</p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td> <p><b>Values</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Good communication</li> <li>Streamlined processes</li> <li>No regulatory or compliance trouble</li> <li>Cost-saving</li> <li>Relieve some kinds of stress</li> </ul> </td><td> <p><b>Values</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reach new audiences</li> <li>Deepen relationships with current audiences</li> <li>Trailblaze</li> <li>Staff energy and excitement</li> <li>First to market</li> </ul> </td></tr> <tr> <td> <p><b>Option A:</b> Mitigating risk</p> </td><td> <p><b>Option B:</b> Driving innovation</p> </td></tr> <tr> <td> <p><b>Fears</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The world leaves us behind</li> <li>Missed opportunities</li> <li>Internal frustration and potential turnover or loss of motivation</li> </ul> </td><td> <p><b>Fears</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>BURNOUT</li> <li>We look scattered</li> <li>Forgetting purpose and mission</li> <li>Dry up annual reserves</li> <li>Regulatory trouble</li> </ul> </td></tr> <tr> <td> <p><b>Deeper fear:</b> Crazy and chaotic</p> </td><td></td></tr> </table>	<p><b>Values</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Good communication</li> <li>Streamlined processes</li> <li>No regulatory or compliance trouble</li> <li>Cost-saving</li> <li>Relieve some kinds of stress</li> </ul>	<p><b>Values</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reach new audiences</li> <li>Deepen relationships with current audiences</li> <li>Trailblaze</li> <li>Staff energy and excitement</li> <li>First to market</li> </ul>	<p><b>Option A:</b> Mitigating risk</p>	<p><b>Option B:</b> Driving innovation</p>	<p><b>Fears</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The world leaves us behind</li> <li>Missed opportunities</li> <li>Internal frustration and potential turnover or loss of motivation</li> </ul>	<p><b>Fears</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>BURNOUT</li> <li>We look scattered</li> <li>Forgetting purpose and mission</li> <li>Dry up annual reserves</li> <li>Regulatory trouble</li> </ul>	<p><b>Deeper fear:</b> Crazy and chaotic</p>		<p><b>Early warning signs</b> that we are over-focusing on Option B</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We incur costs we can't cover</li> <li>Staff are spread too thin – more sick days, leveraging more PTO</li> </ul>
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# Testing it out on a real example

# Let's give this a try

In groups, I'm inviting you to pick a real, live tension that you or one of your colleagues is facing and to explore how you might manage it using polarity mapping.



**Identify** a real tension one of you is facing



**Ask clarifying questions** to help the case owner flesh out their Polarity Map, including:

- Greater purpose statement
- Deeper fear
- Values and fears related to each choice
- Possible warning signs



**Avoid** problem solving – it's hard but give it a try!

# What was that like?

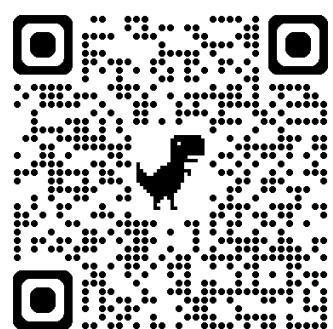
- › What did that experience **feel like**?
- › Did anything **surprise** you?
- › What did you **learn**?
- › What **questions** are you left with?

# Continuing the conversation



## Share feedback

I would love your feedback on this workshop and future topics you'd find valuable - use this QR code to get started!



## Get pro bono support

If you want a thought partner to apply what you learned today at your own organization, use this link to sign up for pro-bono office hours!

# Thank you!

It was such a pleasure to be here with you today!!

