Working with polarities

Tools for Shared Agendas, No. 5

July 2026

Shared Agendas

Working with polarities.
Tools for Shared Agendas, no. 4
June 2026

Tools for Shared Agendas is a series of practical instruments designed to support collective work on place-based challenges under conditions of complexity. The tools build on established frameworks in systems thinking and transformative innovation policy and are adapted for use within Shared Agenda processes.

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1. Why polarities matter in the work with Shared Agendas[1]

Shared Agenda processes often bring together different priorities, responsibilities and time horizons. Some participants give priority to visible short-term results. Others focus on longer-term change. Some emphasise stability, coordination and continuity. Others emphasise flexibility, experimentation and adaptation.

These differences often express persistent polarities within collective work. A polarity is a tension between orientations (poles) that both bring value to the Shared Agenda. When one orientation dominates for too long, its limits become visible and the value of the other orientation is weakened.

Working with polarities helps participants understand how these tensions shape decisions, relationships and patterns of action. It creates a structured way to examine the value of each orientation, the effects of imbalance and the conditions needed to keep collective work adaptive.

2. What the polarities template is used for

The polarities template structures collective reflection around a persistent tension in collective work. It is used to:

- identify the poles involved in the tension
- clarify the value each pole brings
- recognise the limiting effects that appear when one pole dominates
- define actions that retain value and reduce limiting effects
- identify signals that show when the polarity requires attention

The result is a shared reference for observing, discussing and adjusting how the polarity is handled in practice.

[1] This tool builds on polarity thinking as developed by Johnson, B. (1992). *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems*. HRD Press. and subsequent work in systems and organisational practice. The present version is adapted and contextualised for Shared Agenda processes.

3. How the polarities template is used

The template is organised around four elements for each pole.

Value

What this pole contributes to the Shared Agenda. This may include coordination, legitimacy, effectiveness, continuity, experimentation, participation or learning.

Limiting effects

What becomes weakened, reduced or distorted when this pole dominates for too long. These effects often appear gradually through everyday practices, decisions, relationships or resource allocation.

Actions

What can be done to retain the value of this pole and reduce its limiting effects. Actions may focus on coordination arrangements, decision routines, participation spaces, resource allocation, learning practices or facilitation.

Signals

Observable signs that indicate how the polarity is evolving in practice. Signals may include recurring coordination problems, repeated disagreements, delayed decisions, loss of participation, reduced experimentation, weak follow-up or growing concentration of influence.

4. How SharedAgendas.org uses the polarities template

SharedAgendas.org uses the polarities template to examine persistent tensions in collective work around place-based transformation processes. These tensions often become visible through repeated discussions, unclear coordination, initiatives pulling in different directions, or one pole becoming dominant. They may involve short-term results and long-term change, stability and experimentation, autonomy and alignment, or speed and participation.

In facilitated sessions, participants work with the poles involved in the tension. They clarify the value each pole brings, the limiting effects that appear when one pole dominates, and the actions that can retain value while reducing those effects.

The template also connects the polarity with the conditions that shape it in practice. Rules, incentives, narratives, decision routines, funding arrangements and investment patterns can strengthen one pole and weaken another. This helps

participants understand how the polarity is reproduced through everyday arrangements, not only through individual preferences. Signals are used to observe how the polarity is evolving. They may include recurring coordination problems, repeated disagreements, delayed decisions, loss of participation, reduced experimentation, weak follow-up or concentration of influence.

Working with the polarities template creates a practical basis for learning and adjustment. It helps participants maintain direction while preserving diversity, experimentation and adaptation within collective work.

5. Template for working with polarities

