Developing Polarity Thinking in Global Leaders: An Illustration

MARC B. SOKOL
Sage Consulting Resources

Holt and Seki (2012) provide an exciting glimpse of an industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology that leverages paradox and polarity thinking. In response to their call for members of our profession to develop a polarity-sensitive mindset and skillset, a case study is presented using these concepts in the coaching of global leaders.

FrameCo (a pseudonym) is a manufacturing company with operations, sales, and R&D services based in North and South America, Europe, and Asia. Although this might lead one to simply consider them a global firm, the new CEO considered this company a regional firm that happens to have its regions dispersed around the world. He sought to make FrameCo a truly global enterprise, fearing that without this mental, behavioral, and organizational shift the company would become vulnerable to competitors who really were more global.

In Phase 1 key administrative functions, such as marketing, human resources, and procurement were centralized to provide more consistency and alignment across regions. That was the relatively simple phase.

Phase 2 would entail globalizing key commercial roles as well as that of R&D. Manufacturing operations, however, were still locally managed and had been built close to regional customers. Some regional customers were themselves further along on the journey to becoming global than others. As such the regional operations managers were accountable for their local goals and identified most closely with their own regions.

The CEO promoted several regional directors to global roles, with the expectation that they would become the ''point of the spear'' in his quest to move the business to a next level of global functioning but without compromising annual performance goals. FrameCo is, after all, very much a matrix organization, where R&D staff (for example) allocate time as requested to solve technical issues at manufacturing facilities and where global heads of recycling and sustainability must accomplish their objectives without staff directly reporting to them. The reality of the business was that while advancing the CEO's mandate, leaders up and down the organization had to also manage against present day commitments and constraints.

So we have a situation where the CEO is providing unprecedented pressure on the organization: Be more global, achieve more locally, if you have local goals you are fully accountable for them; if you have global goals you need to figure out how to achieve them, regardless of staffing

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Marc B. Sokol.
E-mail: marc.sokol@sagehrd.com
Address: Sage Consulting Resources, 6417 Timber Ridge, Edina, MN 55439

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2012.01436.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

limitations. Readers who work in a large corporation may be wondering if this CEO could be *their* CEO!

Into this setting I gained an opportunity to coach several of the newly appointed global leaders. A few had recently attended a leadership program, which included a short module on ''the tyranny of either/or,'' building off Jim Collins' work, *Good to Great* (2001). Appealing as that message was, participants had no idea how to put this into practice. After an initial meeting with each of these leaders, I was able to construct a polarity map of the dynamics surrounding regional and global leadership.

Figure 1 illustrates the following:

- Rather than viewing the shift from regional to global leadership, it can be depicted as a shift to regional AND global leadership.
- Statements of the greater purpose (sustainable industry leadership) and greater fear (vulnerable to market competition) are noted and written to resonate with those who might occupy either side (or pole) on this map.
- The downside of being regional to the exclusion of being global (lower left quadrant) is summarized along with the hope of becoming more global (upper right quadrant). This essentially captures the logic leading the CEO to appoint global leaders.
- The downside of being global to the exclusion of being regional appears (lower right quadrant) along with the strengths of maintaining a strong regional focus (upper left quadrant). This captures the logic of regional leaders and their resistance/fear of moving to a completely global business model.

The new leaders, to the extent they only internalize the CEO's mandate, will indeed become the ''tip of the spear'' toward a global business, but they will also encounter resistance of those who see only the downside of being global at the expense of being regional.

Seasoned change agents know the outcome of the pendulum swinging too far in one direction. Leaders who get caught up in these shifts may find themselves damaging their relationships as they seek to take up new roles in the business. They also risk spending most of their time fighting

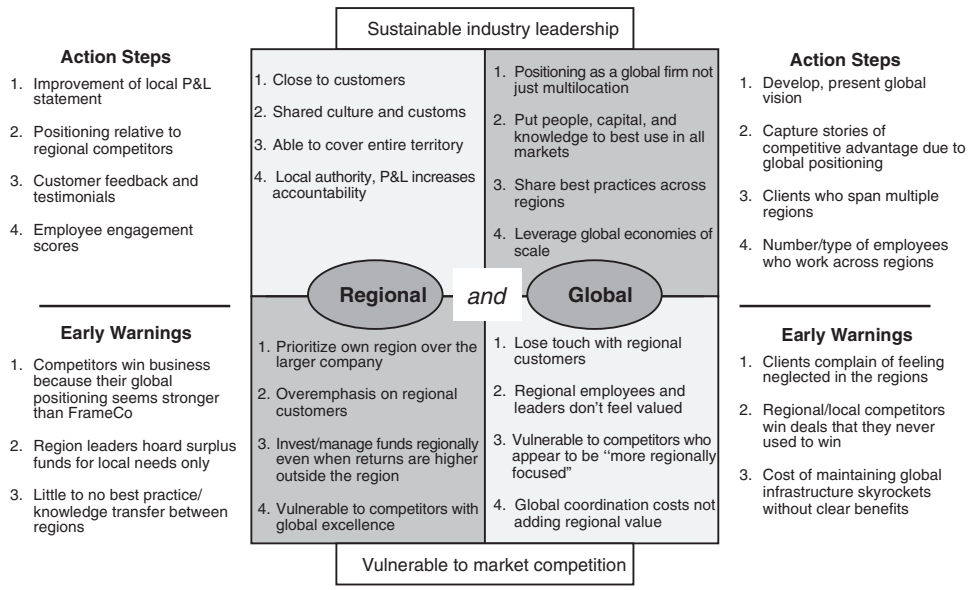


Figure 1. Regional-global polarity map.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2012.01436.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

resistance rather than leveraging it toward a greater goal. Polarity mapping enables leaders to see the both/and dimension of their roles (Johnson, 1996). It provides the insight Holt and Seki note is often lacking in our models of leadership and consequently in the behavior of those we seek to support.

Insight without action, however, is of limited value particularly in a coaching situation. The top half of Figure 1 illustrates the type of action steps one might take to promote the positive values of either pole. The bottom half of Figure 1 illustrates the early warning signs, that one pole is being favored to the exclusion of the other, which also tend to arouse the anxiety and resistance of those who favor the opposing pole.

To be successful, the new global leaders of FrameCo have to figure out how to be regional AND global, how to recognize the strengths of each pole and get the best of both. They also need to be alert for early warning signs, looking to recognize these before others begin to lose trust in a new way of operating.

As a coach, the steps involved in this work are to first recognize which polarities were most relevant to this audience of global leaders (there are other polarities these leaders face, but that goes beyond the scope of this commentary). The contents of the polarity map organize the insights of coaching clients and allow them to modify these contents to more closely fit their own experience.

Once leaders see the interplay of competing values within the polarity map, they can begin to see action steps that support the best of each pole. They can also recognize early warning signs that one pole is being supported to the exclusion of the competing values.

As an aside, one of the other benefits of the Polarity Map is that it captures the historical narrative creating the present state and provides a single-page vehicle for leaders to describe the dynamics and tensions within their organization. This alone might encourage I–O psychologists to explore the tools of polarity thinking, paradoxes and competing values, as suggested by Holt and Seki.

References

Collins, J. (2001). *Good to great: Why some companies make the leap. . . and others don't.* New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Holt, K., & Seki, K. (2012). Global leadership: A developmental shift for everyone. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice, 5*, 198–217.

Johnson, B. (1996). *Polarity management: Identifying and managing unsolvable problems.* Amherst, MA: HRD Press.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2012.01436.x Published online by Cambridge University Press