

## USE 'BOTH/AND' THINKING TO FIND THE BEST OF TWO SIDES OF A CONFLICT

“But,” my father used to say with a burst of air after a long exposition on a topic. Then he would launch into a counterpoint to what he had just said. I loved his ability to examine ideas from various perspectives.

I also realized that, in many contexts, the word “but” signals that the previous statement is wrong. As a coordinating conjunction, the word “but” joins two words, phrases, or clauses of equal value. Yet, for many, “but” stirs our emotions, overriding our sense of logic. This is as it should be — “but” puts us on guard.

Some groups practice “but watching.” Assign a “but watcher” in groups that frequently use “but” as the first response to a comment. Monitoring the “buts” gives rise to consciousness and can lead a group to using a different

word to lead off statements: “and.”

There are many ways to register alternative viewpoints without the sense of confrontation that the word “but” can bring. We sometimes show a group a figure such as the one at left and ask participants how many squares they

see. We record the responses: 16, 1, 17, 25, and so on. Next, we ask a person who said one of the higher numbers to show the group what they saw. Then we ask, “Is the person who said 16 wrong? 17? 1?” To each question, the group answers no. Finally, we suggest that in the conversation to follow, if they disagree with a speaker, they can say, “I have another point of view” or “I see it a different way,” rather than starting a statement out with “but” to signal disagreement.

### TWO SIDES TO EVERY STORY

And while there are often two sides to an argument, the two ends are rarely contradictions. Those two ends

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generally work together. Exploring both sides of an issue provides a group with a richer understanding.

A principal recently confided to me that the issue of gum chewing was threatening to tear her faculty apart. About half the group felt it was harmless. Allowing gum chewing respected the individuality and needs of kids. The other half believed that gum chewing should not be permitted. It damages the environment, requires classroom management time, and leads to cleaning energy and costs. After watching tensions grow, the principal realized that gum was not the issue. The concerns lie at a deeper level of values — the desire to respect student individuality and the desire to respect the environment. The principal and the group would not have discovered these deeper concerns without the willingness and skills to inquire into each position. Now the group was able to work at the level of “both/and,” seeking to attain the best of both sets of values.

Here’s a strategy that often works for helping groups find common ground. When a group is polarized by two conflicting positions, create an ad hoc subcommittee that includes voices from both sides. Ask the smaller group to work out their differences, and return to the full group with a proposal. The facilitator checks with the full group to learn if they will either:

- Accept the recommendation of the subgroup, or
- Receive and consider the subgroup’s recommendation before making a decision as a full group.

Choosing the most vociferous participants on each side works best. They seem to have the most at stake and are often the most influential over their peers.

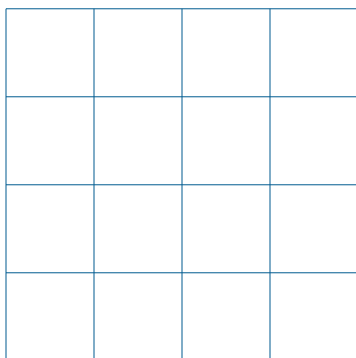
### POLARITIES

While getting to the root of an issue is a solution for some problems, for others, no solution exists. Groups can become trapped and waste valuable energy if they see all problems as resolvable.

Carolyn McKanders, co-director of the Center for Adaptive Schools, defines polarities — some large, some not so large — as a fact of life in schools. A polarity is a chronic, ongoing tension inherent in either individuals or organizations. Polarities are unavoidable, unsolvable, and have two or more right answers that are interdependent (McKanders, in press). These must be managed using “both/and” thinking, where the objective is to get the best of both opposites



In each issue of *JSD*, Robert J. Garmston writes about how to create collaborative work environments that result in improved student learning. His columns can be found at [www.nsd.org](http://www.nsd.org).



Polarities facilitators manage	Polarities schools manage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full-group/small-group interaction</li> <li>• Hard/soft facilitation</li> <li>• Tight/loose protocols</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team/individual</li> <li>• Individual rubrics/school rubrics</li> <li>• Centralized/decentralized</li> </ul>

while avoiding the limits or downsides of each.

The first question groups can ask is, “Is this a problem to be solved or a priority to be managed?” Problems to solve are those with one right answer or two or more right answers that are independent of one another. One example is: What should we include in our parent survey?

In contrast, polarities to be managed are sets of opposites that can’t function well independently. They require “both/and” thinking. Because the two sides of a polarity are interdependent, you cannot choose one as a solution and neglect the other.

#### **FULL-GROUP/SMALL-GROUP INTERACTION**

Facilitators consistently manage a ratio of full-group and small-group interactions. The advantages of full-group conversations include opportunities for participants to hear a common message and develop a sense of the full community. The downsides include frequent talkers dominating the conversation or participants tuning out or tiring out. Upsides of small-group interaction include anonymity to express oneself and full-member participation. The richest thinking is generated in small groups. Small-group work, of course, must be balanced with giving the full group information from its subparts.

#### **HARD/SOFT FACILITATION**

Groups may require tightly directed facilitation or facilitation that allows groups a hand in guiding the processes. Amount of meeting time, complexity of topic, and group skill will all be factored in to facilitation choices. Again, neither position alone is correct.

#### **TIGHT/LOOSE PROTOCOLS**

Cognitive complexity, high emotion, or new content may call for tight structures. Tight structures provide cognitive safety, focus members narrowly on what to talk about and how to talk, and give specific directions for members to follow. When the topic is easier to discuss, facilitators can use less restrictive strategies. Loose structures allow more informal talk, are free from protocol restrictions, and evoke more natural and idiosyncratic engagement. A facilitator or group must choose how much of each portion of those poles they want for a specific task. Looking beyond a specific topic, the choice may be determining how much of either type to use over time, as the

group develops its capacity to manage itself.

“First turn/last turn” is an example of a tight structure. It gives shape to the conversation by providing a focus for talking, naming processes to be used, indicating the cognitive skills required, and setting boundaries for behavior and topic. In this protocol, members read relevant text and mark three or four items that catch their attention. Then, one person in the group names an idea he or she marked. In round-robin fashion, each member comments on the item with an absence of cross talk. After each person speaks, the initiating person has the last turn. The group follows the pattern for a specified amount of time. The downside is the suppression of individual styles of participation.

In contrast, a “say something” protocol is loosely structured. Partners read a selection of content, pausing at designated times to say something about what they have read. No expectations or restrictions are placed on the conversation other than it is about the reading. The downside is that pairs can veer off task without noticing it.

Leading groups is in large part a matter of managing polarities. Facilitators choose from a range of options to best serve the topic or moment. Binary thinking is restricting, often denying groups opportunities for creative problem solving. Our tendency to see in either/or frames may be a heritage from Western thinking, which is oriented toward classification, compartmentalization, and hierarchy. Including more Eastern thinking, such as comprehending the whole and not just its parts, may help us banish the “buts” and ultimately benefit group development.

#### **REFERENCE**

**McKanders, C. (in press).** Polarity management: Using conflict as a resource (Appendix L). In R. Garmston & B. Wellman (Eds.), *The adaptive school: A sourcebook for developing collaborative groups* (2nd ed.). Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon. ■