

The Polarities of the Human KPI: A Brief Literature Review

- ● Key Polarity
- ●[®] Indicator



The Polarities of the Human KPI™: A Brief Literature Review

People who effectively navigate polarities – seemingly opposite, yet interrelated, tensions – are better performers than those who do not¹². The Human Key Polarity Indicator™ (KPI) was created to help individuals understand how effectively they navigate six of the polarities central to human behavior: Assuredness::Openness, Focus on Self::Focus on Others, Hope::Reality, Take Seriously::Hold Lightly, Desire More::Appreciate What Is, and Responsibility::Forgiveness. The model shows one way the poles from these polarities interact to impact six human capacities that help deliver on three ubiquitous human aspirations – Belonging, Impact, and Peace (see Attachment A for an overview and definition of the polarities, capacities, and aspirations of the Human KPI). This article outlines how the model was created and offers a brief literature review highlighting the importance of the six polarities. It provides insight into why these polarities were chosen for the model and offers a springboard for those wanting to dig more deeply into any of the polarities in the Human KPI.

It is important to note at the outset that the KPI examines six of the key polarities of human functioning, not the six key polarities of human functioning, which would be impossible to ascertain. There are scores of polarities humans must navigate in order to be effective (see Attachment B for an overview of the Leadership KPI and Organization KPI) and in any given situation, some could likely be more important than any of the six examined in the Human KPI. However, lived experience, coaching and work with thousands of leaders in development programs, extensive reading and research, and exploration with a multitude of brilliant thought partners all provide confidence that the polarities identified in this model are among the most common key tensions we must navigate to be successful. This assertion holds true for the six capacities and three aspirations included in the model as well.

6 KEY POLARITIES OF HUMANITY

ASSUREDNESS :: OPENNESS

FOCUS ON SELF :: FOCUS ON OTHERS

HOPE :: REALITY

TAKE SERIOUSLY :: HOLD LIGHTLY

DESIRE MORE :: APPRECIATE WHAT IS

RESPONSIBILITY :: FORGIVENESS

The Creation of the Human KPI

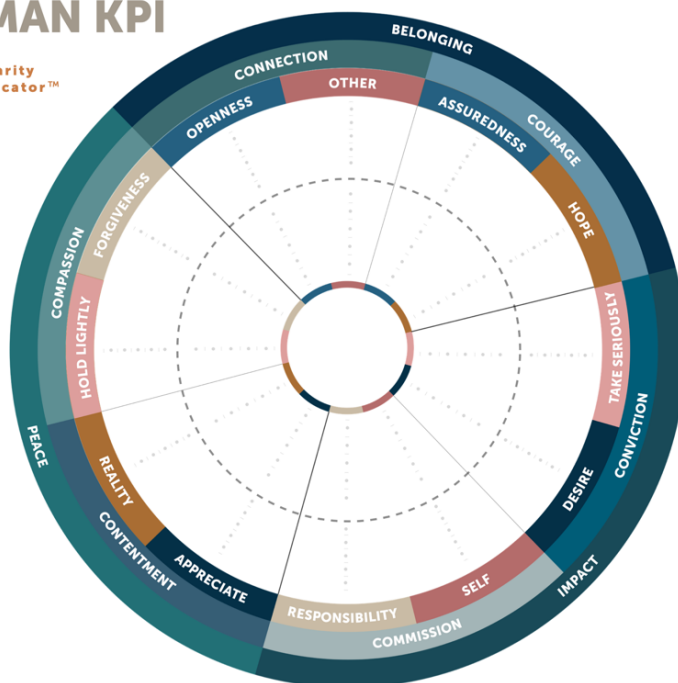
The creation of the KPIs began as an effort to help people “see” polarities—which is one of the most difficult parts of learning to help others navigate them. Leaders and coaches often ask, “What polarities should I be paying attention to?” and “How can I help my client quickly identify a polarity to work?” The KPI wheel was originally developed as a diagnostic tool to help answer those questions. The process was much messier, maddening, laughter-filled, and sticky-note consuming than possible to convey here, but at a high level, the process was as follows.

A list of human polarities was compiled and narrowed. As mentioned above, a mix of lived and work experience, conversations with super-smart clients and colleagues, and research of the literature yielded an exhaustive list of polarities central to human behavior. Unsurprisingly, various tensions were mentioned repeatedly and quite naturally rose in prominence on the list. During the analysis, two lists of polarities began to emerge—one list that people must navigate because we are humans and an additional list for those who lead other humans. As a result, it was decided to create a Human KPI Model as well as a Leadership KPI Model (see Attachment B for a description of the Leadership KPI).

Polarities were mapped, stacked, named, and aligned to human capacities. Since the point of the effort was to help people “see” polarities, providing a simple list of “Human Polarities to Look For” (while tempting) would have been only partially helpful. To develop the model, it was necessary to determine what it looks like when a person navigates the polarities well, or not. Where can one see it happening? What might a person be doing effectively, or struggling with, depending on how they are navigating a polarity that contributes to specific capacities? This led to the creation of behavioral maps of the six polarities—maps that outlined not the actual benefits and overuses of each pole, but the behaviors a person who preferences a pole might do that would elicit the benefits or overuses of a pole. This was followed by a trial and error (after error, after error) stacking of the poles in countless combinations to see which pattern of behaviors contributed most to a list of top human capacities and aspirations compiled from various fields of human behavior research.

HUMAN KPI

- Key
- Polarity
- Indicator™



Creation and testing of the KPI Wheel. It was initially hoped the stacks would yield a two-by-two model (what consultants don't want a two-by-two framework?), but through continued experimentation and questioning, the stacks began to fall out under six capacities (Connection, Courage, Conviction, Commission, Contentment, and Compassion) that contributed to three broad areas of human aspiration (Belonging, Impact, and Peace).

For ease of use, these categories were placed into a wheel in order to see all of the polarities, capacities, and aspirations in one glance. The models, as diagnostics, were then pressure tested for face validity and usefulness with various colleagues and participants in multiple leadership development programs.

Development of the Assessment. Somewhat unexpectedly, as people started to use the KPI wheels, it became natural to turn them into assessments. To do this, the behavioral maps were revisited and compared to similar maps created with clients, colleagues, and students. The items from these maps were narrowed to develop the four benefits and four overuses of each pole that would be assessed as part of the KPI. After an extensive pilot in the summer of 2020, the face validity of all statements and the usefulness of the maps as a way to make sense of the polarities were confirmed by hundreds of users. Using that data, a proper statistical analysis of all statements is currently underway.

The Six Key Polarities

While the Human KPI does not claim the six polarities are the six most important polarities of human functioning, it is important to understand how they rose to the top to be six of the key polarities of human behavior. First, they repeatedly emerged in prominence during the research and were clearly supported by the literature. Second, they explicitly contributed to the capacities needed to deliver on the human aspirations outlined in the wheel. And third, the polarity had to "stand alone," meaning it could not be an outcome of other polarities on the list.

The Six Polarities in the Literature

What follows is a brief description of some of the literature supporting the importance of each of the six polarities. It aims to provide a sufficient, yet not exhaustive, amount of information to serve as a starting point for those interested in learning more about any of the polarities.

ASSUREDNESS::OPENNESS

A healthy assuredness, or core self-evaluation, in one’s self-worth, self-efficacy, and self-control, is a key element of transformational leadership according to Timothy Judge and Joyce Bono³. However, according to Christian Resick, Daniel Whitman, Steven Weingarden, and Nathan Hiller⁴, this “bright side” of leadership can have a “dark side” if it leads to arrogance, grandiosity, or narcissism. This supports Paula Caproni’s⁵ suggestion that when an individual’s self-confidence and assuredness is coupled with humility, openness, and adaptability, they are more likely to thrive in the challenging and ambiguous world of organizational life.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter⁶ discovered that when leaders are self-assured enough to demonstrate their confidence in other people, they create the conditions for success. When this happens, people’s confidence in the leader increases, thereby increasing the leader’s self-confidence and willingness to be open to input from others. The importance of this openness is highlighted in the research of Brené Brown⁷, who found that leaders who are open to letting themselves be known, who are willing to try something new when not assured of success, and who allow themselves to be vulnerable, are individuals who exhibit the qualities of transformational leadership. She further contends that holding this vulnerability simultaneously with self-confidence and assuredness, or what she has popularized as “strong back, soft front” is what allows us to experience true belonging and connection with others.

The benefits of Assuredness are confidence and a grounded sense of self-worth.	The benefits of Openness are humility, curiosity, and approachability.
Assuredness	Openness
The overuses of Assuredness result in being seen as arrogant and defensive.	The overuses of Openness result in second guessing ourselves and perceived weakness.

FOCUS ON SELF::FOCUS ON OTHERS

Abraham Maslow⁸ suggested human behavior is motivated by a drive to satisfy one’s self-needs, beginning with basic survival requirements and advancing through an order of increasingly complex desires. Focusing on self-needs is a key trait for successful leadership according to Michael Maccoby⁹, but his research warns that those who focus on their needs to the exclusion of the needs of others often damage relationships because they are “emotionally isolated...highly distrustful...poor listeners and lack empathy.” This supports Jeremy Shapiro’s assertion that healthy intrapersonal functioning and interpersonal relationships need to negotiate an “adaptive moderation,” or balance, between the focus on self and focus on others¹⁰.

The benefits of Focus on Self are personal satisfaction and wellbeing.	The benefits of Focus on Others are inclusion and connection to others.
Focus on Self	Focus on Others
The overuses of Focus on Self result in isolation and selfishness.	The overuses of Focus on Others result in burnout and overwhelm.

Other scholars highlight the interdependence of self and other by pointing to how the former creates the latter and vice versa.

Heather Lawford and Heather Ramey’s research suggests a healthy development of self is fostered by focusing on and caring for others¹¹. This supports Ifeanyi Mankiti’s description of the African view in which there is no self until one has sought to fulfill the needs of others because it is only through our relationship with others that the self emerges¹². We learn who we are through relationship with others, not in isolation. Perhaps this explains why Maslow later amended his hierarchy of needs to include self-transcendence, a step beyond his original highest level of self-actualization, stressing that “fulfillment of basic needs can only take place by and through other human beings.”

HOPE::REALITY

Cindy Wahler¹³ writes of the criticality for leaders to be realistic, but warns that when realism lacks positivity and optimism, the resulting pessimism can be “one of the most insidious [things] that derails teams.” Dan Lovallo and Daniel Kahneman¹⁴ support the argument from the opposite direction, suggesting leaders who demonstrate optimism and hope create focus, resiliency, and motivation on their teams, but that negative consequences arise from having “delusional optimism.” They therefore advocate for leaders to find a “balance between optimism and realism.”

This is supported by Albert Bandura’s¹⁵ findings that individuals who believe they can be successful are more dedicated to putting forth the realistic effort required to achieve their goals and are, therefore, more likely to be successful than those who are not similarly optimistic. Later

<p>The benefits of Hope are an openness to possibilities and optimism.</p>	<p>The benefits of Reality are being grounded in the now and pragmatism.</p>
<p>Hope</p>	<p>Reality</p>
<p>The overuses of Hope result in naivety and idealism.</p>	<p>The overuses of Reality result in shutting down ideas and pessimism.</p>

termed “realistic optimism,” scholars such as Heidi Grant¹⁶ suggest realistic optimists are highly effective because they balance the hopeful belief they will succeed with a realism about the continuous effort, planning, persistence, and working through obstacles it will take to make success happen. However, in spite of the numerous calls for a blended approach, Sandra Schneider¹⁷ finds that “most views...seem to be based on the assumption that optimistic and realistic perspectives are mutually

exclusive,” therefore people need some way to navigate the interdependence that leads to realistic optimism or what the KPI labels Hope::Reality.

TAKE SERIOUSLY::HOLD LIGHTLY

Having “perseverance and passion for long-term goals,” or what Angela Duckworth, Christopher Peterson, Michael Mathews, and Dennis Kelly¹⁸ call “grit,” is positively correlated with achievement of difficult goals, conscientiousness, and effectiveness. Suzanne Kobasa’s¹⁹ seminal research found that executives who manage the stress of goal attainment better than others tend to view problems as worthy “challenges-to-meet” rather than threats; they are highly committed to something meaningful; and they take control by acting proactively to influence outcomes.

While we expect leaders to take their responsibilities seriously, in order to achieve success, Tony Schwartz²⁰ posits that pushing too hard can be a recipe for failure and leaders need to also learn the “art of letting go.” This is echoed in Ron Robert’s²¹ book on leadership dichotomies which extols the benefits of letting go as the ability to adjust quickly to setbacks, change past attitudes and habits, increase compassion and trust, and release attachment to things like power and status that might cloud judgement in the here and now. All of this supports Mai Chi Vu and Roger Gill’s²² proposition that while leaders need to be committed to success, if they become “attached” to the outcome of the goals, they can create suffering in their teams and organizations. Therefore, they advocate for leaders to be “non-attached” and to find “the middle way” between what the KPI terms Take Seriously::Hold Lightly.

The benefits of Take Seriously are determination and being seen as earnest.	The benefits of Hold Lightly are perspective taking and being seen as lighthearted.
Take Seriously	Hold Lightly
The overuses of Take Seriously result in losing perspective and creating anxiety.	The overuses of Hold Lightly result in being seen as frivolous and uncommitted.

DESIRE MORE::APPRECIATE WHAT IS

Humans have an innate desire for growth as articulated in French philosopher Henri Bergson’s²³ sentiment that, “To exist is to change, to change is to mature, to mature is to go on creating oneself endlessly.” While effective leadership requires knowing how to direct, develop, and celebrate this innate “drive to achieve” in people, Miguel Pina e Cunha, Luca Giustiniano, Arménio Rego, and Stewart Clegg²⁴ are quick to highlight the “dark side” of constantly setting and advancing goals that stretch us beyond our limits, as many leaders and organizations are inclined to do nowadays.

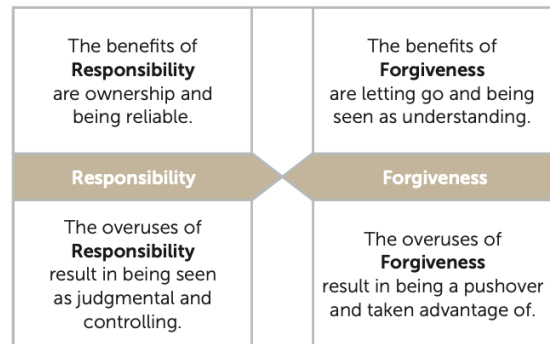
The benefits of Desire More are stretching farther and pushing higher.	The benefits of Appreciate What Is are gratitude and focusing on what is working.
Desire More	Appreciate What Is
The overuses of Desire More result in dissatisfaction and overlooking what is good.	The overuses of Appreciate What Is result in complacency and no growth.

Summer Allen²⁵ would suggest one way to mitigate the negative impacts of the constant desire for more is to cultivate another innate human trait, gratitude, and the contentment, satisfaction, and tranquility it can produce. According to Patty Hlava, John Elfers, and Reid Offringa²⁶, these benefits of gratitude come not just from an appreciation of what material goods we have but also from our experiences at the interpersonal, transpersonal, and spiritual levels as well. The necessity to balance our

“desire for more” with “appreciation of what is” is supported by the research of Xavier Oriol, Jesús Unanue, Rafael Miranda, Alberto Amutio, and César Bazán²⁷, that shows life satisfaction comes not just from our aspirations and goal achievement, but also from the gratitude we experience as we go about working to achieve the goals we set.

RESPONSIBILITY::FORGIVENESS

Nathaniel Branden²⁸, a key figure in the self-esteem movement, held that taking personal responsibility and acting from a place of self-authorship is crucial to an individual's healthy development and overall success. Similarly, employee and organizational success relies on people owning their responsibilities and being held accountable for their output, which supports Neal Mero, Rebecca Guidice, and Steve Werner's²⁹ findings about the need for leaders to demonstrate behaviors that make employees want to take responsibility and feel accountable for their tasks and goals.



However, because people will inevitably miss targets and mistakes will happen, an effective leader also needs to include understanding and forgiveness as part of their leadership repertoire. Manfred F.R. Kets de Vries³⁰ writes about the importance of forgiveness and "how costly it is [for leaders] to hold onto grudges" when others fall short because "an unforgiving attitude keeps people from moving forward" which erodes overall success. This is supported by Amy Edmondson and Zhike Lei's³¹ assertion that psychologically safe spaces, where employees can admit and grow from mistakes and shortcomings, are central to organizational learning, trust, and employee engagement. According to Fred Kiel³², it also impacts the bottom line. In a seven-year study, he found that leaders who demonstrated responsibility and forgiveness (along with integrity and compassion), achieved up to five times the return on assets for their organizations than other leaders.

Conclusion

The references here are just a small window into the wealth of information about the polarities of the Human KPI. The growing interest in polarities in the field of leadership guarantees that in the years ahead there will be increasing references to the polarities of the KPI in the literature. If you run across any in your travels, we'd love to hear from you.

George Box had an excellent point when he said, "All models are wrong, but some are useful." Through a both/and perspective, we prefer to say, "all models are incomplete, and some are useful." Creating a model such as the KPI involves art::science, head::heart, and hard data::intuition, to name just a few. With confidence::humility, we can say the Human KPI is useful and it is incomplete. Evidence shows the KPI, and the practitioners that administer it, help people better see and understand themselves in relationship to these six polarities so they can navigate them more effectively. The hope is that this usefulness makes up for any of the ways the model might flatten the beauty, nuance, and complexity of the human experience and what it takes to be a leader.



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Assuredness::Openness

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Focus on Self::Focus on Others

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Hope::Reality

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Take Seriously::Hold Lightly

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Desire More::Appreciate What Is

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Responsibility::Forgiveness

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ATTACHMENT A

Polarities, capabilities, and responsibilities of the Human KPI

6 KEY POLARITIES OF HUMANITY

The Human KPI is built upon six polarities of the human experience and assesses how often people demonstrate the benefits and overuses of each. All polarities work the same way—every pole has benefits but when overused, unproductive things happen. Focus on Others has many benefits, but its overuse can be harmful when it's not blended with Focus on Self.

The six polarities were chosen based on our research, lived experience and client experiences. They are frequently discussed by philosophers and psychologists and serve as part of the foundation for our core human aspirations and capacities.

ASSUREDNESS :: OPENNESS

FOCUS ON SELF :: FOCUS ON OTHERS

HOPE :: REALITY

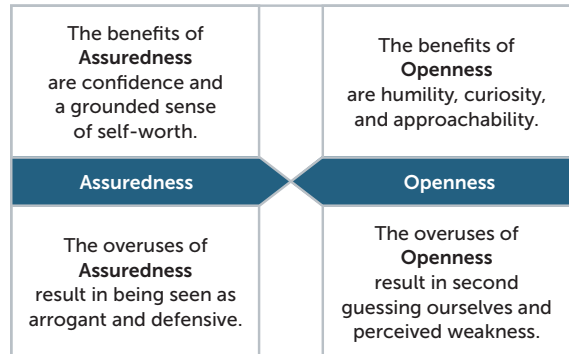
TAKE SERIOUSLY :: HOLD LIGHTLY

DESIRE MORE :: APPRECIATE WHAT IS

RESPONSIBILITY :: FORGIVENESS

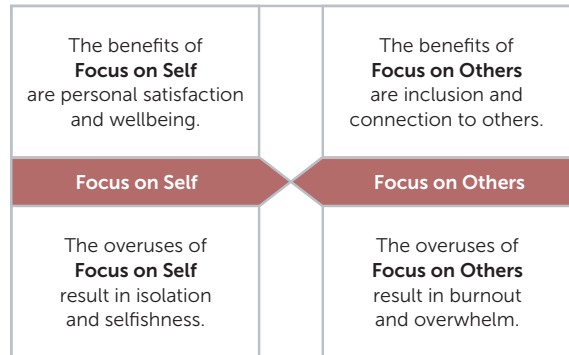
ASSUREDNESS :: OPENNESS

Healthy confidence flows from genuine competence, self-worth, and self-assurance. It springs from a passionate point of view about what to do and being a fearless pioneer in finding the way. But this assuredness, when overused, can convey, "I know more than you" or "I am more than you," leaving others feeling disrespected and belittled. When we navigate Assuredness::Openness, the importance of trusting we are good enough is matched by an openness and humility to recognize and embrace our imperfection and humanity. This opens the door to curiosity, learning, and connection.



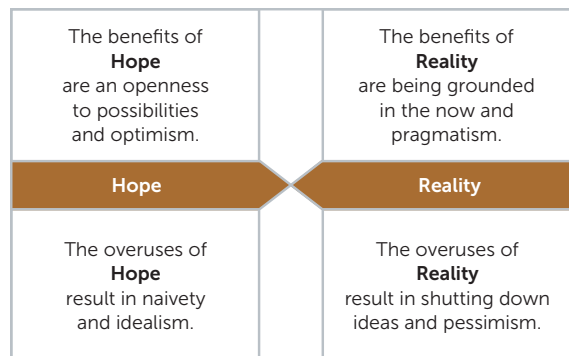
FOCUS ON SELF :: FOCUS ON OTHERS

Relationships are essential to humans and are a big part of what gives life meaning. And they are a two-way street. We all have personal interests to satisfy and we should take care of ourselves by asking for what we need from our relationships. And we need to do it in a way that considers others' interests and doesn't leave them trampled and bruised. We have to care for, and be generous to, others while taking care of ourselves. Sustainable relationships require maintaining the personal energy to care for others by navigating Focus on Self::Focus on Others.



HOPE :: REALITY

The possibility of a better future keeps us going. Without optimism about what could be, we shut down ideas and bring a gloomy outlook to those around us. However, having too much confidence in the inherent goodness of life can lead to naivety, impracticality, and denying what is. To lead a fulfilled life, we need to trust our ability to step into possibility while also having both feet planted in the here and now. Blending Hope::Reality provides a buoyancy to life. It allows us to accept reality and hold optimism about what's to come.



TAKE SERIOUSLY :: HOLD LIGHTLY

Life is serious—there are consequences to what we do or don't do. Countless things require our attention and people rely on us, so it's important to show up to life with sincere and earnest conviction. It's what drives us to excellence. But without a sense of lightheartedness and the ability to hold things with a loose grip, our diligence creates anxiety for us and others which limits our perspective and ability to have fun. Take Seriously::Hold Lightly is about showing up to life ready to put in the effort with a sense of ease in our heart.

The benefits of Take Seriously are determination and being seen as earnest.	The benefits of Hold Lightly are perspective taking and being seen as lighthearted.
Take Seriously	Hold Lightly
The overuses of Take Seriously result in losing perspective and creating anxiety.	The overuses of Hold Lightly result in being seen as frivolous and uncommitted.

DESIRE MORE :: APPRECIATE WHAT IS

Growth is an inherent driver for humans. We hunger to improve, to learn, and to experience life in new and better ways lest we become stagnant and complacent. While a desire for more is necessary to grow, in excess it creates dissatisfaction and we overlook what is good, true, and beautiful. Ambition needs to be infused with gratitude for what we already have. Healthy growth requires us to Desire More::Appreciate What Is as we dare ourselves to stretch into discomfort while simultaneously appreciating the goodness of who we are and all that's around us.

The benefits of Desire More are stretching farther and pushing higher.	The benefits of Appreciate What Is are gratitude and focusing on what is working.
Desire More	Appreciate What Is
The overuses of Desire More result in dissatisfaction and overlooking what is good.	The overuses of Appreciate What Is result in complacency and no growth.

RESPONSIBILITY :: FORGIVENESS

Being responsible allows others to trust you. You accept accountability for what needs to get done and offer amends instead of excuses when you fall short. But when overused, taking responsibility leaves us burdened doing everything and drives judgment of people who don't live up to our expectations. We have to be able to let people, including ourselves, off the hook when things don't go as planned while still holding them accountable for the impact of their actions. When we navigate Responsibility::Forgiveness, the importance of taking ownership is matched by understanding mistakes happen and giving people second chances.

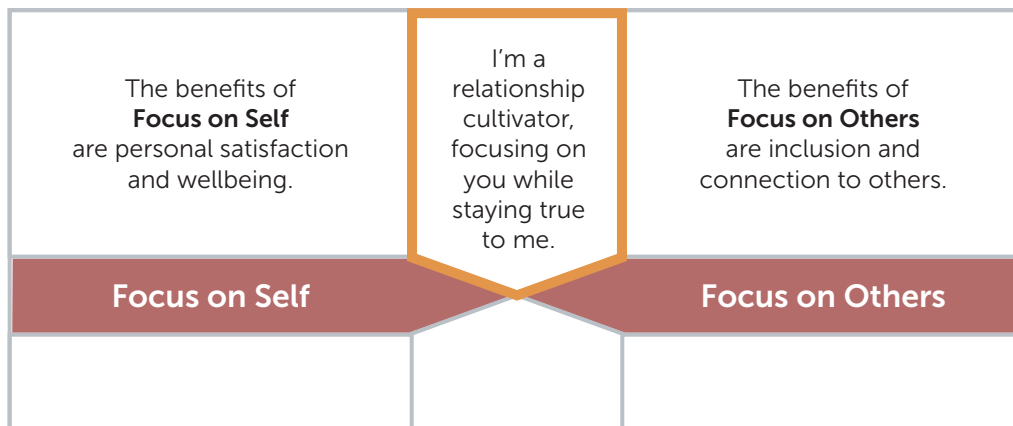
The benefits of Responsibility are ownership and being reliable.	The benefits of Forgiveness are letting go and being seen as understanding.
Responsibility	Forgiveness
The overuses of Responsibility result in being seen as judgmental and controlling.	The overuses of Forgiveness result in being a pushover and taken advantage of.

THE THIRD WAY

Every polarity contains several perspectives. Often the perceived contradiction between two of the perspectives creates conflicts and as a result a person, relationship, team suffers as they work to prove their perspective is right. In a polarity, both perspectives are accurate, but neither is complete. However, using a polarity lens and viewing the situation as an interdependent pair, we



start to realize there is yet a third perspective that honors, respects, and holds both simultaneously – the Third Way. For example, combining the benefits of Focus on Self and Focus on Others can create a mindset that says, my job is to cultivate nurturing relationships that consider the needs of others while staying true to my own.



The Human KPI measures how well you are navigating each of the six key polarities and identifies the ones where you might benefit from harnessing more of the Third Way. You then develop strategies to increase your overall effectiveness in those areas.

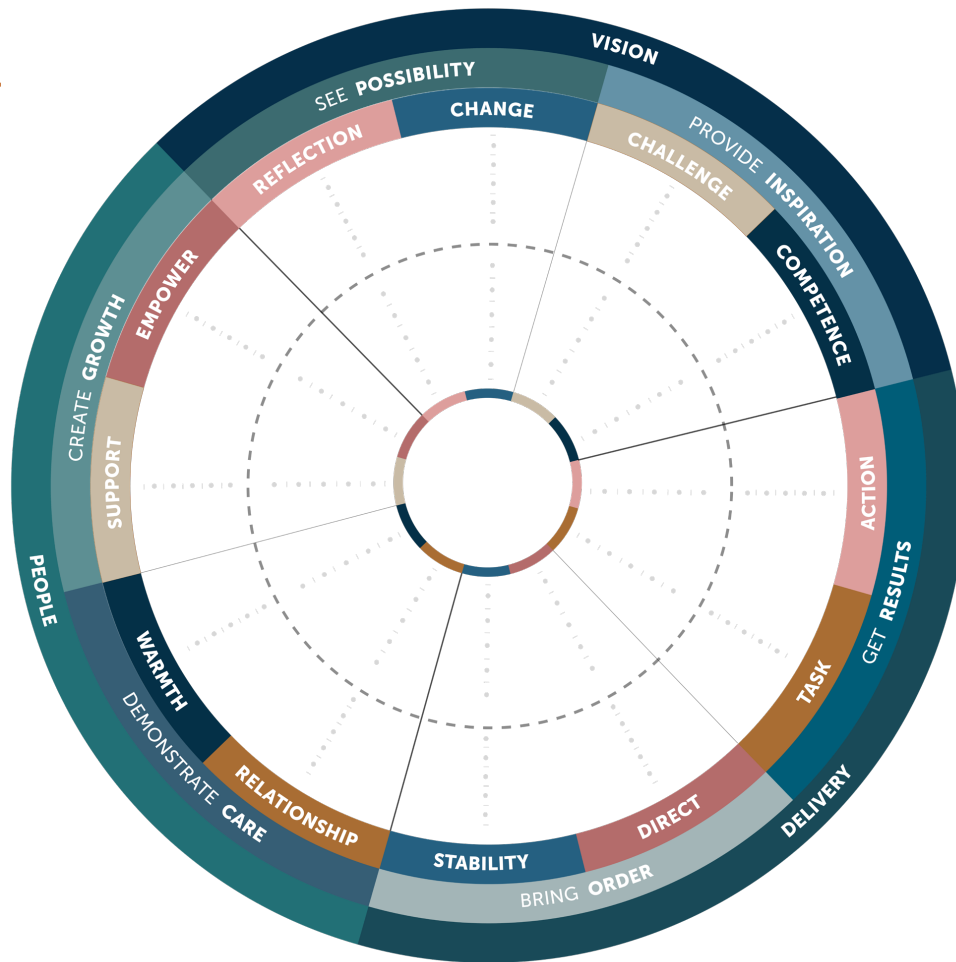


ATTACHMENT B

Polarities of the Leadership and Organizational KPIs

LEADERSHIP KPI

- ● Key
- ● Polarity
- ● Indicator



SIX KEY POLARITIES OF LEADERSHIP

ACTION :: REFLECTION

being in motion, doing something

contemplating what was, is, and could be

STABILITY :: CHANGE

existing or operating consistently

making or becoming different

CHALLENGE :: SUPPORT

raising the bar and provoking learning

encouraging others and building confidence

EXUDE COMPETENCE :: EXUDE WARMTH

conveying one's expertise, ideas, and know-how

conveying one's care and openness

TASK FOCUS :: RELATIONSHIP FOCUS

being concerned about the work to be performed

being concerned about the connection with others

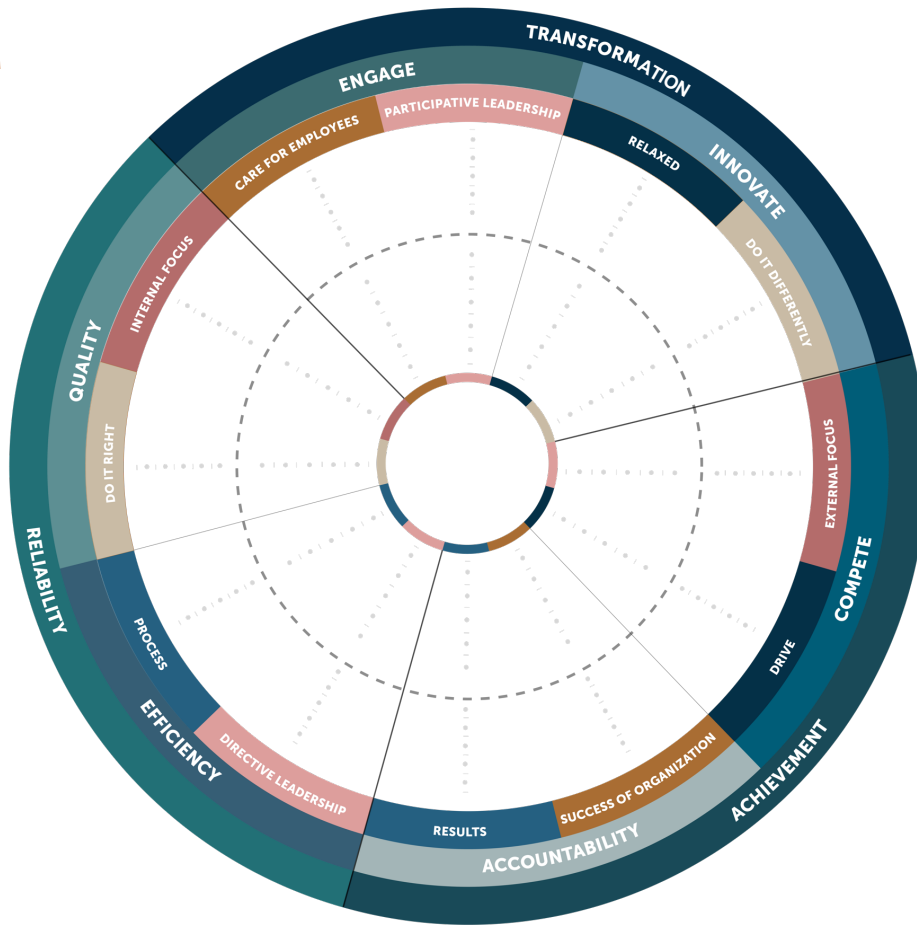
DIRECT :: EMPOWER

providing guidance, authority, and focus

giving others authority and freedom to operate

ORGANIZATIONAL KPI

- ● Key
- ● Polarity
- ● Indicator™



SIX KEY POLARITIES OF ORGANIZATIONS

EXTERNAL FOCUS

paying attention to what is happening in the outside environment



INTERNAL FOCUS

paying attention to what is happening inside the organization

DRIVE

providing the energy to set, and keep, things in motion



RELAXED

staying open and flexible as things emerge and change

SUCCESS OF ORGANIZATION

focusing on what is in best interest of the system



CARE FOR EMPLOYEES

demonstrating concern for workers as people

RESULTS

placing priority on what is produced or accomplished



PROCESS

concentrating on how something is accomplished

DO IT RIGHT

ensuring accuracy and precision



DO IT DIFFERENTLY

seeking new and unique ways

DIRECTIVE LEADERSHIP

telling and guiding the work of others



PARTICIPATIVE LEADERSHIP

involving others and giving them a say