

Talking Taboo

Making the Most of
Polarizing Discussions at Work



ALEXANDER
ALONSO

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Chapter 2

The Science of Polarization

A quick search online for the definition of “polarization” yields the following language: “sharply contrasting groups or sets of opinions or beliefs”;¹ “a state in which the opinions, beliefs, or interests of a group or society no longer range along a continuum but become concentrated at opposing extremes”;² “a sharp division, as of a population or group, into opposing factions.”³ The works of contemporary political scientist Nolan McCarty discuss polarization in terms of blame, ideological division, excessive partisanship, entrenched characteristics, dimensionality of political conflict, societal inequality, invalidation of others’ perspectives, and more.⁴

I consider polarization a function of discord arising from the belief that someone disagrees simply because they wish to invalidate another’s thinking. This view comes from the world of political science, but when considered more broadly—as in the role of polarization in the workplace—it is only partially accurate.

The causes and antecedents of polarization fall into four types, according to Barber and McCarty.⁵ Polarization can be based on (1) the issue being debated, (2) the persons involved and their

¹ *Google/Oxford Languages*, s.v. “polarization (*n.*),” accessed November 28, 2020, <https://www.google.com/search?ei=pMzCX8uwI42m5wLck6qIAw&q=polarization&coq=polarization>.

² *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “polarization (*n.*),” accessed November 28, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/polarization>.

³ *Dictionary.com*, s.v. “polarization (*n.*),” accessed November 28, 2020, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/polarization?s=t>.

⁴ Nolan McCarty, *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁵ Michael Barber and Nolan McCarty, “Causes and Consequences of Polarization,” in *Political Negotiation: A Handbook*, ed. Jane Mansbridge and Cathie Jo Martin (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press), 37–90.

personalities and ideologies, (3) external environmental factors that influence entrenched positions or beliefs, and (4) other miscellaneous causes.

Issue-based causes of polarization take us back to the common advice we received from our elders to never discuss politics, sex, or religion (or race, health, relatives, money, etc.) outside the family. For centuries, this guidance has driven “polite” society’s methods for avoiding polarization.

Person-based antecedents of polarization are more in my wheelhouse as a psychologist. Here, polarization is a function of an individual’s experiences. For example, someone from a culture that highly values self-reliance might develop entrenched views about taxes, teamwork, and social assistance programs.⁶ A student raised in such a culture who needs financial assistance for education might seek only merit-based scholarships rather than grants or loans because the latter are (according to this cultural view) unearned handouts and, therefore, shameful.

How do environmental factors create or influence polarization? During US presidential elections, political strategists and operatives leverage deep disagreements in the populace in order to drive voters to the polls. The messages delivered on social networks and through various advertising media are often deployed to depict candidates and their policies as threatening to societal and individual well-being. In 2016, for instance, the Democratic candidate’s description of “deplorables” was publicized to antagonize those who understood the remark as critical of people who hold certain beliefs; the Republican candidate’s description of his “seduction” technique (“grab them . . .”) was publicized to antagonize people who understood the remark as disrespectful and harmful to women. The words of the candidates were, for the most part, external to the issues and to the voters, but their deployment directly contributed to further polarization in the electorate.

⁶ Geert Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990).

DEGREES OF CONTROL

The issue-based, person-based, and environmental factors that affect polarization relate to a psychological concept known as “locus of control”—how individuals assess the degree of control they have over a given situation.⁷ With an internal locus of control, one feels in charge of one’s own situation; this supports a combined issue-based and person-based explanation for polarization. With an external locus of control, one feels that others (or “fate”) are in charge; this supports a combined person-based and environmental explanation for polarization.

Here is an example. Suppose a powerful family has two heirs: an educated younger child who is put in charge of the family business and an uneducated elder child who is given a make-work position in the company. The elder’s polarized perspective is that he “wuz robbed” of his rightful position as the firstborn; he seeks an explanation for this unfair state of affairs. Under an external locus of control approach, he would blame outside influences that blocked his potential rise (e.g., parental favoritism). Under an internal locus of control approach, he would do some soul-searching and identify his own shortcomings that contributed to his situation (e.g., poor grades preventing college admission).

The hard sciences offer another way to understand polarization. Magnetism is a phenomenon in which objects are attracted to or repelled from one another, based on their polarity. But polarity is not constant; what was once attracted may next be repelled, and vice versa. We can recognize and rethink the social phenomenon of polarization using this concept.

⁷ Herbert M. Lefcourt, “Locus of Control,” in *Measures of Personality and Social Psychological Attitudes*, ed. John P. Robinson, Phillip R. Shaver, and Lawrence S. Wrightsman, *Measures of Social Psychological Attitudes Series*, Vol. 1 (San Diego: Academic Press), 413–99, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-590241-0.50013-7>.

A NEW DEFINITION OF POLARIZATION

I propose a simple, modern-day definition of polarization: the adoption of opposing perspectives with the potential for weaponized entrenchment. Thus defined, polarization is achieved in three steps:

1. Diametrically opposed perspectives are adopted,
2. Each perspective is entrenched (that is, the person holding that perspective “digs in”), and
3. The perspectives are weaponized (that is, each person believes that their perspective is the correct one, that other perspectives are wrong, and that persons who hold those other wrong perspectives are worthy of condemnation or punishment).

Figure 2.1 provides a visual representation of this polarization process as it occurs today.

How does this new definition of polarization—the adoption of opposing perspectives with the potential for weaponized entrenchment—play out in some contemporary settings?

Take your average hour of cable news programming. The host welcomes a politician already known for holding extreme positions on certain issues. But the politician is not asked about them. Rather,

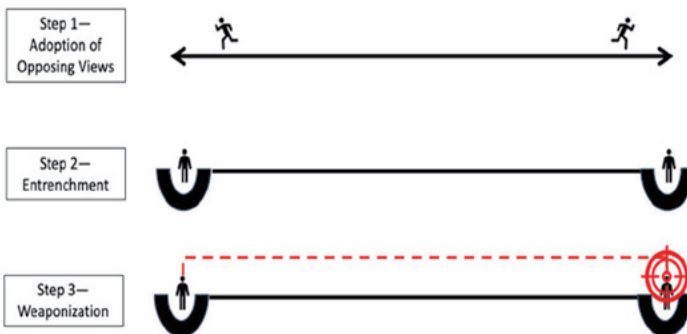


Figure 2.1. The modern process of polarization

the host asks the politician to interpret a set of facts relating to a different controversial matter, then challenges the interpretation—“But Senator, how can you rationalize such a view? How do you reconcile *this* with *that*?”—which invariably ends the segment. Asking someone to explain themselves is perfectly reasonable in normal discourse, but on a current-affairs television show, such a question is designed to reinforce a polarized perspective on a given issue. The real aim of the program is to articulate differences and chastise those who think differently. (On some networks, the overall goal of increasing polarization is inverse to its level of journalistic integrity.)

Now imagine moving such an interaction into a workplace. People in the break room are discussing the previous night’s episode of a reality TV show featuring a long-shot presidential candidate. One employee says she agrees with the candidate’s platform, names a number of valid points, and concludes that she will vote for him because of his promise to increase policing efforts. Another employee walks in. Having heard only the tail end of the discussion, the second employee launches into a rant on police brutality, the degradation of American morals, and how people like the long-shot candidate are the cause. The first employee now accuses the second of wanting to defund the police, shouting “ACAB!” (“All Cops Are Bastards”). The second responds that the first is a deplorable who must wear a MAGA hat (“Make America Great Again,” the Trump slogan). What the heck happened here?

This example—based on a real-life incident—illustrates our new three-step definition of polarization, as depicted in Figure 2.1. The diametrically opposed perspectives (Step 1) were the employees’ beliefs concerning the police. The entrenchment (Step 2) was evident as they argued with ever greater zeal to prove their points. The weaponization (Step 3) manifested itself when they raised the stakes by accusing each other of more extreme beliefs than they had stated and worse behavior than they had displayed.

This account of the discussion of a taboo topic in the workplace (in this case, politics) is distressingly realistic and plausible. In fact,

recent data from SHRM (Appendix A) shows that nearly seven out of every ten individuals have engaged in this very type of conversation. Like it or not, taboo talk is commonplace.

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

Why did the two employees in this example “dig in” so quickly? The answer is cognitive dissonance. Perhaps you’ve heard of it: psychologist Leon Festinger coined this term in 1957 to refer to the way we perceive inconsistencies in the opinions held by ourselves and others.⁸ Naturally, we experience discomfort when other people disagree with our opinions. But it’s also natural to experience discomfort when we realize that some of our *own* opinions are *internally* inconsistent. Likewise, we experience discomfort when other people express internally and externally inconsistent views. In sum, cognitive dissonance means discomfort when our own opinions don’t seem to agree with each other, as well as when other people don’t seem to agree with themselves.

The greater our discomfort, the more likely we are to dig in—(become *entrenched*) supporting our own opinions, and rejecting (*weaponizing*) everyone else’s opinions. And unlike magnets, it’s close to impossible for people to “reverse polarity.”

Why couldn’t the two employees in the example just “agree to disagree”? Instead of mollification or reconciliation, why was there confrontation that led to retaliation and repudiation?

Something else kicked in once they reached high enough levels of discomfort: the process of self-justification,⁹ which aims to reduce the impact of cognitive dissonance. When we think about our own opinions, we seek validating evidence to eliminate our discomfort

⁸ Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson, 1957).

⁹ Kris De Meyer, “The Science of How We Become Entrenched in Our Views,” *Reaction*, January 6, 2017, <https://reaction.life/science-become-entrenched-views/>.

(along with our social principles, unfortunately), which results in our challenging those who hold different opinions. Those challenges can further devolve into impugning those who fail to validate our already self-validated opinions.

THE PYRAMID OF CHOICE

All holders of opinions stand atop a “pyramid of choice.” As opposing opinion-holders descend the widening sides of the pyramid, their positions grow further apart.¹⁰ In the prior example, the arguing employees jumped straight to name-calling because they had worked their way down the pyramid, where they were less able to adapt to the other’s polarity.

The disagreement further devolved into an exercise in confirmation bias—the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms or supports one’s prior beliefs or values.¹¹ Both employees sought external validation of their now-entrenched positions by weaponizing data from others to confirm their own biases rather than by seeking more information to support their respective opinions in an unbiased and respectful manner.

By teaching workers how to engage in respectful behaviors, we might be able to avoid conflicts such as the one described. Researchers like Sternberg and Dobson¹² and their later interpreters¹³

¹⁰Caroll Tavis and Elliot Aronson, *Mistakes Were Made (but Not by Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts* (New York: Harcourt, 2007).

¹¹Raymond S. Nickerson, “Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises,” *Review of General Psychology* 2, no. 2 (1998): 175–220, <https://doi.org/10.1037%2F1089-2680.2.2.175>.

¹²Robert J. Sternberg and Diane M. Dobson, “Resolving Interpersonal Conflicts: An Analysis of Stylistic Consistency,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 52, no. 4 (1987): 794–812, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.52.4.794>.

¹³Evert van de Vliert, “Sternberg’s Styles of Handling Interpersonal Conflict: A Theory-Based Reanalysis,” *International Journal of Conflict Management* 1, no. 1 (1990): 69–80, <https://doi.org/10.1108/cb022673>.

would disagree, though. Conflict avoidance provides an avenue for managing conflict, but it does not always build a better workplace experience.

A much more effective approach to handling potential conflict in the workplace would involve an orientation toward management and resolution, augmented with collaborative openness. The good news is that there are countless tools for achieving this.

DEPLOYING RESEARCH TO GAUGE POLARIZATION

To understand exactly how conflict manifests itself in the workplace, we developed a research survey (Appendix A) to be administered over several rounds of data collection. We focused on two main questions:

- » Do people become polarized about things in the workplace?
- » What events or topics trigger polarization and its manifestation?

In March 2020, we emailed 15,000 randomly selected SHRM-certified members, inviting them to participate in a SHRM survey on polarizing discussions in the workplace. About 1,700 people responded, and about 1,400 completed questionnaires were analyzed.

The majority of respondents worked in the United States, were female, were an average age of thirty-eight, and had more than sixteen years of work experience, including five years of organizational tenure. They included both individual HR practitioners and people managers. The industries most represented were healthcare and social assistance; professional, scientific, and technical services; and manufacturing. We analyzed and compared the data across different political leanings (conservative, liberal, and both) and multiple generations (baby boomers, Generation X, millennials, and Generation Z).

The survey yielded fascinating results about the prevalence of conversational conflict in the workplace. Overwhelming majorities of the respondents had encountered contentious workplace situations of which 95 percent were the result of discussions about polarizing topics, with 86 percent being the result of political discussions.

Significant percentages of respondents reported having contentious encounters on a monthly basis. (Weekly encounters were relatively rare.) About a quarter of those people engaged in monthly contentious encounters did so about political discussions; about a third engaged in discussions about other polarizing topics.

The top three underlying causes of these conflicts, according to the survey, were personality; lack of emotional intelligence; and one's worldview, belief system, or values. While these causes are due to factors that can be difficult to change, HR professionals can still play an important role in handling situations created by some of the other causes—namely (according to one in three respondents), a lack of employee guidance as to what is acceptable content for discussion.

About a quarter of the respondents specified the reason employees discuss topics that cause tension or that (should) have negative consequences is because they got away with doing so in the past, having suffered no negative consequences. Over half of respondents also said they were involved in or observed situations in which serious matters were dismissed as trivial or in response to which no action was taken.

There was a great deal of variability in how the survey respondents reacted to contentious situations in their workplaces. The differences depended on who engaged in which behaviors and to what extent. (For example, a relatively small percentage of participants reported that they behaved unprofessionally in response to contentious conversations, but they also said that much larger percentages of their peers and leaders—*other* people!—engaged in the same behavior.)

In addition to participants and peers, categories of survey respondents included supervisors, subordinates, and clients. We asked them all to share their experiences, first by describing the polarizing incident, and next by explaining how they handled those incidents.

DESCRIPTIONS OF POLARIZING ENCOUNTERS

According to participants in polarizing workplace situations, the most common forms of disruptive encounters were undermining a boss or coworker to their peers, acting unprofessionally, playing a practical joke, and suggesting that someone lacks intelligence. Peers added to the list of situations described: acting immaturely or childishly and undermining a boss or coworker to their superior.

Supervisors noted several additional contentious encounters: pushing a personal agenda; taking credit for someone's work or the work of a team; and generally contributing to, or doing nothing to address, an overall cultural problem resulting from polarizing discussions. Subordinates added this conflict: refusing to work with someone. Clients mentioned another: throwing a tantrum.

DEALING WITH POLARIZING ENCOUNTERS

There were no statistically significant differences across political leanings, gender, or generations in how those involved in contentious situations dealt with them. People tended to act in a similar manner.

Survey respondents were asked about the best interventions for addressing the disruptive behaviors they described. While they reported myriad effective interventions, there is a lack of clarity as to *which* intervention is *most* appropriate for each situation. Rated as most effective were individual coaching, involvement of supervisors or the department head, administering a performance improvement

plan, and individual training. The intervention considered least effective was reassignment.

Despite the prevalence of discussions on polarizing topics in the workplace, these conflicts continue to yield negative consequences for individuals and organizations. The most commonly reported consequences include undermined trust across the organization, lowered opinions of both the organization and parties involved, and decreased productivity.

Most respondents said that neither leadership nor HR in their organizations had communicated to them about the (usually negative) impact of contentious workplace discussions on corporate culture. It is no surprise, therefore, that almost a third of respondents cited as the cause of such discussions a lack of guidance as to what is considered acceptable to talk about and a lack of negative consequences for such talk.

POTENTIAL POLARIZING TOPICS

As part of each round of the survey, we asked respondents to name the political and other polarizing topics that seemed to spur the most reactions, discussions, or arguments in their workplaces. Figure 2.2 gives an overview of the answers presented, organized by decade.

The most contentious topics among most employees, according to the HR professionals surveyed in early 2020, were the 2016 election of Trump, mass shootings, and the 9/11 attacks.

When making comparisons across political leanings, generations, and industries, additional topics made the list. Conservatives as well as liberals reacted most to gay marriage, LGBTQ rights, *Roe v. Wade* (abortion), and the #MeToo movement (sexual harassment). There were pronounced gender differences over the war on drugs and gun control. As for comparisons across industries, the general trend was that people in healthcare and education were more engaged

1960s	1970s	1980s
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civil Rights Movement • John F. Kennedy Assassination • Vietnam • Robert Kennedy Assassination • Martin Luther King Jr. Assassination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nixon Resignation • Watergate Scandal • <i>Roe v. Wade</i> Supreme Court Ruling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iran-Contra Scandal • Reagan Assassination Attempt • War on Drugs
1990s	2000s	2010s
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clinton Election • Clinton Impeachment • Middle East Conflicts • Gulf War • Fall of Soviet Union 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9/11 Attacks • Obama Election • Gun Control Legislation • Environmental Accidents • Natural Disasters • Gay Marriage Supreme Court Ruling • Election Turmoil • Iraq and Afghanistan Wars 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trump Election • Trump Impeachment • Mass Shootings • #MeToo Movement • LGBTQ Rights • Human Trafficking • ISIS/ISIL

Figure 2.2. Sample of potential polarizing topics surveyed

in workplace conflict; those in finance, manufacturing, and public administration, less so. The greatest number of conversations experienced were on the topic of environmental disasters.

Details and analysis of the survey data appear in Appendix A.

Polarization in the workplace is pervasive. It is driven by people and topics of conversation inside and outside the organization. Conflicts are made worse when views become entrenched and when the holders of those views weaponize them against others, especially to overcome their own discomfort. If these encounters are

not managed properly, everyone involved suffers the consequences, directly or indirectly.

With these facts in mind, it is incumbent on us to explore ways to lessen the risk of people's views becoming entrenched and weaponized. And there *are* ways. The next chapter discusses how empathy affects polarization, how assessing people's empathy levels can guide their taboo talk, and how innovative assessment and guidance tools can accomplish this.