



The Deliberate Creative Podcast with Amy Climer Transcript for Episode #014: Polarity Thinking and Deliberate Creativity

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Today's episode is about polarity thinking and how it can help you be more creative and look at things differently.

Amy Climer: In this episode I'm talking with Dr. Liz Monroe-Cook. She's a psychologist who I met earlier this year at an amazing conference that happens every June in Buffalo, New York called the Creative Problem Solving Institute. The acronym for the Creative Problem Solving Institute is CPSI so it's referred to as "Sip-see." I tell you that because you'll hear Liz reference CPSI a couple of times during our conversation.

Let me tell you a little bit more about CPSI and how I met Liz. The purpose of CPSI, the Creative Problem Solving Institute is to teach people more about Creative Problem Solving. If you're not familiar with Creative Problem Solving, I definitely encourage you to go listen to [episode #003](#) and that will give you a nice overview. It's an awesome tool for deliberate creativity. At CPSI, like just about any other conference, there are options for different workshops, lectures that you can attend, but one thing that's kind of cool about CPSI is that you can take these intensive 3-4-day trainings on Creative Problem Solving and they build on each other year after year. This year, 2015, was my second year attending and I took the facilitator's track just to learn more about the nuances of facilitating Creative Problem Solving with different organizations or in different situations, and Liz was one of the instructors for the facilitator track.

She was great, super knowledgeable and experienced, and I really felt a connection to her and to her style of facilitation, so I invited her to come join us. She has a particular interest and expertise in polarity thinking and I thought you all would appreciate learning more about polarity thinking because both polarity thinking and creative problem solving are about deliberate thought. You'll hear when listening to Liz that when you understand polarity thinking, it can really help you be more deliberately creative, which of course is our whole purpose here on the Deliberate Creative Podcast. Here's Liz.





Amy Climer: Liz, thank you so much for being on the Deliberate Creative Podcast. I'm so happy to have you on the show.

Liz Monroe-Cook: Well, I'm very excited to be with you, Amy. I think this is a really wonderful way of communicating what everyday creativity can be about for everyone. I'm delighted.

Amy Climer: Thank you. To start off, tell us a little bit about your background, about who you are and what you do.

Liz Monroe-Cook: I am by title what's called a consulting psychologist which is a specialty field that includes kind of assessment stuff, interventions, trainings and a whole array of things that are in the world of Applied Psychology. So it's taking our insights from psychology and then applying them to organizations. I was trained first in counseling and clinical, but then I transferred over to business and organizations a number of years ago. My work today is a lot of facilitation, a lot of training, a lot of consulting around strategic planning with individuals, groups, and organizations. My specialty within that is creativity.

Amy Climer: Perfect. That's what we're going to talk about today. Liz, I know that when we've met before and we've talked in the past that you have a particular interest in polarity thinking as far as connecting that to creativity. I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about what polarity thinking is and how you got interested in it.

Liz Monroe-Cook: Absolutely. Polarity thinking is an approach and a way of analyzing and then using that analysis for organizations, the kinds of issues that look like they are unsolvable problems. It was developed by a man named Dr. Barry Johnson and his insights were something that he then shared with lots of other people claiming that it wasn't that he had discovered the phenomenon of polarity thinking but that he was helping people to make it a deliberate part of their process. So polarity thinking is really in my mind a version of systems thinking allowing people to take things that are interconnected or interrelated, two at a time, and to begin to use 'both and' thinking rather than 'either or' thinking.

One of the things that I have in my history of training as well is experience with the Myers-Briggs Instrument. That's also a set of dynamic pairs if you think about it. So there's introversion and extroversion. I was already using this work intuitively and then I saw a presentation by Dr. Johnson and I knew I had found something as powerful for my work as creative problem solving had become. That's how I got interested in feeling like he had captured something that is instinctively and intuitively true and made it something that people could access on demand





the way that at CPSI, you know, Amy, that we train people to use the CPS Process because it's like being able to call up creativity on demand.

Amy Climer: I love that you mentioned the Myers-Briggs and how there are these different continuums like introversion, extroversion, and both are good. Not one is better than the other but we need both. Can you give some examples of other pairs like that related to polarity thinking and creativity?

Liz Monroe-Cook: Absolutely. One of the most fundamental polarities that we teach people about is inhale and exhale because that's a biological system everybody is familiar with and we find that by using that kind of example, people begin to understand that you need both of something or maybe even multiples of something to make the whole system work. In creativity, we use divergent thinking and convergent thinking as a very fundamental process, teaching people that they need to sort of divide that type of thinking in order to move their creativity along. Diverge and converge is a very common creativity-related one. I would say that structure and flexibility is another one. Another one yet that's related to creativity in my mind is knowledge and discovery. There's bringing what we know to something and then also opening the doorway to connect things that we haven't connected before or understand things we haven't understood before.

Amy Climer: Those are great examples and I love that inhale-exhale because, well, just try to go through live only inhaling. You're going to last about a minute.

Liz Monroe-Cook: Exactly.

Amy Climer: It sounds like polarity thinking is really about recognizing we need both ends of the spectrum and we can't just live in a state of structure or we can't just live in a state of flexibility, but we want to be able to move back and forth.

Liz Monroe-Cook: Exactly and one of the things that I think about with it is it's represented by an infinity loop. The fact that there's a cycle to it and if you can teach people that there are these cycles they can begin to recognize polarity as a natural conditions, the flow between things. The energy system that two partner ideas create together and it's very relieving to understand that you're dealing with the polarity and not with a problem to solve.

Amy Climer: I love that that it's a 'both and' and not 'either or' like you said before.



Liz Monroe-Cook: Exactly. There are times for ‘either or’ thinking that’s necessary too. Barry is the first to point out that if you neglect or reject ‘either or’ thinking, that’s an example of ‘either or’ thinking.

Amy Climer: Of course, that’s great. So you mentioned a little bit of how polarity thinking can act with creativity specifically the diverging and converging thinking. Are there some other ways that polarity thinking can act with creativity?

Liz Monroe-Cook: The one I mentioned about structure and flexibility I think is part of creativity. I think there’s another one around whether or not one is going in deep on a subject or is treating a subject broadly. To be really creative I think that you need enough information about something that would be the depth side of it, but the breadth side of it is to begin to see how that idea or topic would relate to a variety of things and I think there’s also that polarity around what might be a flash of insight and then an insight that comes after dutiful work. I’ve seen both of those things in creativity. I imagine you have as well.

Amy Climer: Yeah. I think that’s a great example because I think sometimes there’s this myth that creativity is only about these flashes of insight. Sometimes, it can be kind of a long drawn out process where you finally get to a solution that you hadn’t thought of before.

Liz Monroe-Cook: Exactly. I think there are lots of polarities related to creativity and the other thing that is very important to understand is what we talked about at the very beginning that these are methods that can be taught, ways of thinking that can be taught so that once people develop the sensitivity for these insights, they can call on them when they need them just like CPS is one of those call on creativity moments, deliberate creativity to go with the name of your podcast. Now this would be the deliberate polarity thinker too. It really is a wonderful way to address the complexities that we as individuals face, that teams and groups face, and that organizations face.

Amy Climer: I love that. Let’s build on that a little bit. Can you talk about ways that teams can use polarity thinking to be more creative and innovative? You talked about there’s this deliberateness. Are there some more ways or can you get more specific as far as what teams would do?

Liz Monroe-Cook: I think as you do when you’re exploring a situation or a challenge or what people call a problem, one can ask themselves on a team or as part of a team, is this something that’s ongoing? In other words, if we were to come up with solutions for what we think is our



problem and we only did that, would we end up some place we don't want to be ultimately? If the answer is yes, you've got a polarity you're dealing with. The challenge for the team is, let's say we're looking at something like how to be more centralized in our operations versus being more regional in our operations, what if the 'versus' isn't 'versus' but 'and'? So the team needs to come up with ideas for creatively being more centralized and creatively being more regionalized in their efforts or operations. That's a great example for a team to use.

Amy Climer: I can imagine most people can relate to that, at least people that have worked with large organizations. Seems like that's often a struggle that they have.

Liz Monroe-Cook: Yes or the struggle between thinking long term and thinking short term. Actually, you need to be able to do both. I like that question at the beginning of any process where a group is trying to come up with some solutions for themselves.

Amy Climer: I'm wondering if you can give some examples of when you've seen a team use polarity thinking in a really positive way and you've seen that cause of shift in their outcome and in the work that they are doing.

Liz Monroe-Cook: Yes, actually there's a group that I work with fairly often and there was a huge conflict going on in their organization about a proposed plan to do something different with how they operate. The group that I was working with is really from the leadership side, the group that governs a lot of decision making and they were taking the organizational lens, if you will. They were looking at the whole organization in their solution and they were experiencing the resistance from the other more regionally focused groups or more locally focused groups as attacks even, and some of them were attacks. What we did was we talked about the polarity of the organizational lens and the individual lens, or what Barry calls the part-whole polarity. We walked the infinity loop together and because I was not one of the people that they saw as a attacking them, I could take the voice of the more regional local people and after that, they really made a very different decision about their proposal.

While it was disappointing that some people still saw it as a win-lose circumstance, the people who really understood that it was a polarity felt more relief more than anything else that they had gotten themselves out of what I deem an unnecessary conflict by looking at the fact that both sides had something to offer and they needed to look at both the organizational level of things and the regional local level of things that have their best decision. That was a really good outcome for them.



Amy Climer: That's great. I love that story. To me it also really speaks to how polarity thinking connects to conflict resolution or conflict management, and I would imagine a lot of conflicts arise from people having just different polarities or different perspective on the same polarity.

Liz Monroe-Cook: Exactly and I think that it's also you know that in the world of creativity, you want enough debate to make your ideas rich, but this is a very important principle. You want debate, but not conflict and that's Göran Ekvall's insight from studying a lot of organizations. That if there isn't enough debate, sometimes you get that sort of group think that doesn't really get you to a creative place. But if there's too much debate and it turns into dysfunctional conflict, then you also end up in a place of not really getting to a real solution. I think polarity thinking is a great one for bringing sufficient debate in but not allowing for conflict.

Amy Climer: Absolutely. I've read some of those studies and it's interesting. There's kind of a happy medium as far as how much debate you want. Liz, I'm wondering if you can give some tips or resources if people want to learn more about polarity thinking and really dive in and start applying that to their teams.

Liz Monroe-Cook: Absolutely. There are a couple of websites that I can recommend. Both of them are organized by people who have been polarity thinking practitioners. The first I'm going to say is PolarityPartnerships.com. This is the website that Barry and all of his other associates have put out that has a resource library on it and lots of the historical and current thinking about it. Some articles by Barry are downloadable from that site. A newer group that's called the PolarityWisdom.com site. They are people who have also incorporated ego development. Beena Sharma has incorporated ego development work and other ideas into polarity thinking. Those are two really good websites.

Amy Climer: Great. That's really helpful. For those of you listening, I'll put those links in the [show notes](#) so you can access them.

Liz Monroe-Cook: Great.

Amy Climer: Liz, one of the things I do at the end of every episode is that I offer listeners a weekly challenge related to the topic and I'm wondering if you have a challenge that you can give listeners this week related to polarity thinking.

Liz Monroe-Cook: Absolutely. One of the things that we've found in teaching people about polarity thinking is its far more powerful as an insight if you start with something personal and



individual. One of the really common polarities is work and home. If people, dear listeners, could draw themselves a little box with four quadrants in it and then label the left hand side WORK and the right hand side HOME, we'll start in the upper left quadrant with work positives. What are the benefits or good results from focusing on your work? What do you get from that? And then if you over focus on work, neglecting home, what are some of the downsides? This would be the lower left quadrant of this box that you've built. What are the negative results of over focusing on work and neglecting home? Then in the upper right quadrant, you would think about what are the pluses, what are the benefits or the positive results from focusing on home? What is it that I get by focusing on home and eventually if I over focus on that to the neglect of my work, what are some of the downsides or the negative results that I start to experience, and that's the lower right quadrant. With that little activity, people have built their first polarity map, which is the tool that we use to help people see in one place the results of their analysis. There are other pieces to it, but that's a great starting point.

Amy Climer: I love that and I think the visual can be so powerful based on what you've mapped out for us. Do you know if on either those websites there are polarity maps that people can access?

Liz Monroe-Cook: Yes, I think you can see examples of the polarity maps on the Polarity Partnerships website for sure and you'll see them in articles that are downloadable from that. We use it in training for creative thinking and that debridging tool of what happens, what does it mean, now what will I do, and the action steps and early warnings pieces of the polarity maps are something that people should explore on that website.

Amy Climer: Great, excellent resource. I love the challenge. Thank you so much.

Liz Monroe-Cook: You are so welcome.

Amy Climer: Liz, if people want to learn more about your work and what you do, where can they go to find out more about you?

Liz Monroe-Cook: Well, I don't have a website. I am affiliated with both of the websites that I gave you, Amy, but people can certainly reach out to me at MonroeCook@gmail.com with questions that they have and I'd be happy to respond.

Amy Climer: Great. Thank you. That's very generous of you. I appreciate it.

Liz Monroe-Cook: Sure.





Amy Climer: Liz, thank you so much for being on the Deliberate Creative Podcast. I really appreciate it and I think this idea of polarity thinking and its connection to creativity will really help people understand through the depth of what goes into being creative. Thank you.

Liz Monroe-Cook: My pleasure. Thank you, Amy.

Amy Climer: I hope you all enjoyed that conversation with Liz as much as I did. I learned a lot about polarity thinking. I really didn't know much about polarity thinking, at least not by that name and as Liz was talking about it, it felt very intuitive. Hopefully you had some similar "aha's" and learned some new things listening to Liz. I can definitely see the connection to Creative Problem Solving, to systems thinking. It's funny how all these things are connected, but then they all just have a little bit different twist and when you combine them together, it's really powerful and it really helps us understand ourselves and each other and human behavior, which can be so complex and complicated.

If you are interested in going to those websites that Liz mentioned, you can head on over to the show notes and that webpage is ClimerConsulting.com/014. I will have all the links that Liz mentioned. I will have her email address there and other information for you. Also on the show notes page, if you have a question for Liz, you can leave a question on the comments section of that page and I'll make sure that she sees that and responds. It's also a great opportunity if you do have a question that it is shared publicly that other people can see your question and her answer because you know how it is. If you have a question, somebody else does too so we can just share in that learning together.

The other thing is if you do end up doing the challenge and creating your own polarity map, feel free to go over to the show notes and share your insights, anything that you learned from that process. It would be great to hear from different people just what they learned and how they are thinking about polarity and polarity thinking in their lives.

Thank you so much everyone. I hope that you have an awesome creative week. Go make a polarity map. Think about the polarities in your life and I'll see you next time. Bye!