



I told you not to tease it!

### Leadership Through Learning Part 3A: Reflexive Practice as a Discipline

by Christine Oliver, Marilyn  
Herasymowych, and Henry Senko

“If we can think about conversations in ways that help us act differently, we can create a more desirable reality, which can lead to resilient relationships.”

— Christine Oliver, Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko, **Complexity, Relationships and Strange Loops: Reflexive Practice Guide** (2003)

Today, organizations are downsizing, reorganizing, right sizing, redesigning, and re-engineering in an attempt to be effective in a turbulent and uncertain marketplace. Although meant to help, more often than not, these initiatives do not come close to what is necessary for organizations to thrive in this complex world. They often fall short because they ignore the key aspects of an organization: its people and the relationships they form that allow work to be done effectively. Without people, there is no organization. Without resilient

relationships among the people within an organization, and their system of significance, there is no high performance.

Everything that we do, as individuals and as groups, involves relationships. These relationships can be with our own ideas, assumptions, and values, with other people, with our job, or with the organization. Every situation is defined by its relationships. Fragile relationships translate into inefficiencies, ineffectiveness, low productivity, and a lack of innovation. Resilient relationships translate into high levels of effectiveness, productivity, and innovation.

No matter how resilient it is, every relationship experiences ups and downs over time. Like riding a roller coaster, sometimes we feel great in the relationship, and other times we feel overwhelmed by the *strange loops* the roller coaster takes. To create and sustain relationships that work, we need to understand them, and how we, and others, function within them. *Reflexive practice* helps us to ride the strange loops that relationships create so we can develop and sustain resilience, and be prepared for other relationship roller coasters that may come our way.

Reflexive practice is both a *skill* in the development of critical consciousness, and a *language* for understanding, and working within, the complexity of relationships. It helps us to examine *reactions* in a *relational system*. The word

*reflexive* is being used here in the sense of *turned back on itself*. When we work reflexively, we examine relational reflexes — the effects that our behaviour with others is having, and might have, on the relationship of which we are a part. We also question the interpretations of, and explanations made for, the communication and actions that occur within relationships.

A *relational system* implies a focus on patterns of connection between people. A relational system is created and sustained by patterns of meaning and action. For example, you can be in relationship with another person, a team, or an organization; with something inanimate, such as your job, your occupation, or your workspace; with ideas, assumptions, values, and stories about life, and with yourself.

Reflexivity is about thinking and acting consciously. *Reflexive practice* creates the conditions for resilient relationships. When we practice reflexivity, we become more aware of the patterns of thinking and action that we, and others, are experiencing in a relational system. We are also aware that our actions, and those of others, are contributing to the patterns that everyone is experiencing. In other words, our actions reflect back on others, and others' actions reflect back on us. We appreciate that identities, relationships, and cultural practices are interconnected to our and others' actions. When we practice reflexivity, we make *choices* about how we will think and act. We become *responsible* and *accountable* for our choices, our actions, and our contributions to a relational system.

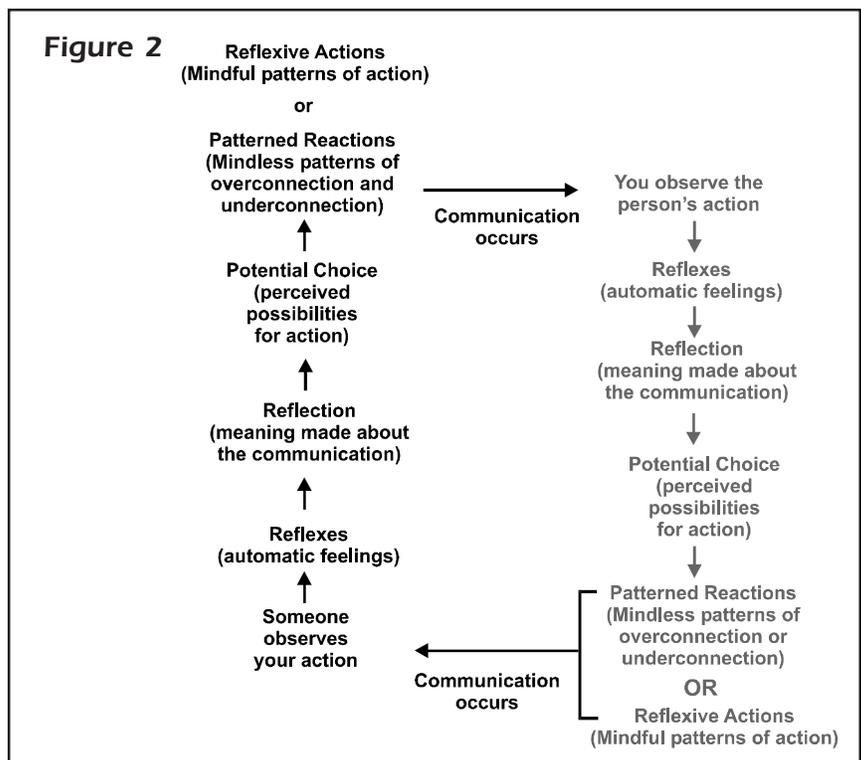
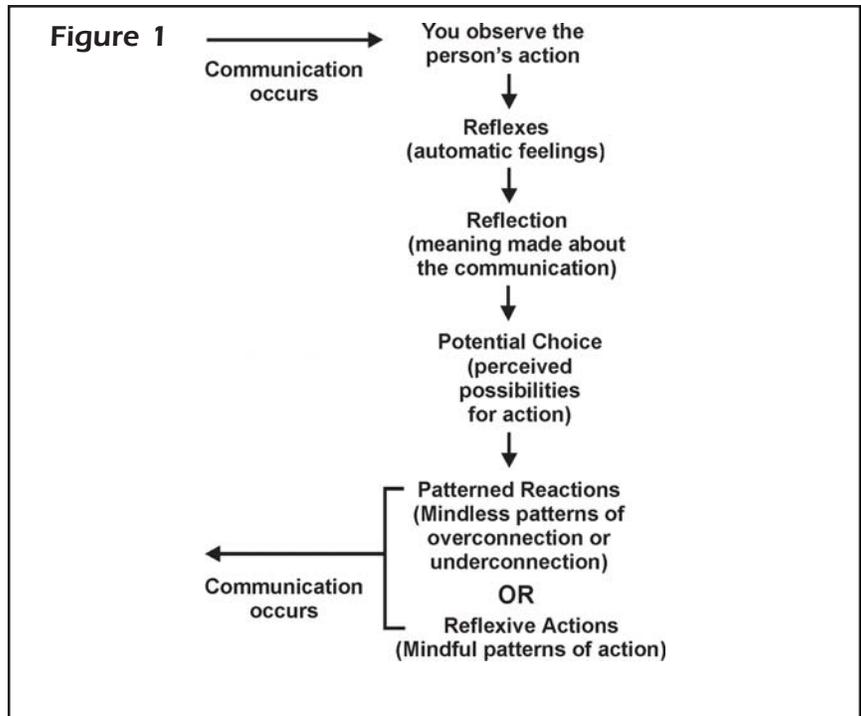
In the illustration to the right (Figure 1), imagine that a communication occurs between you and another person. Follow the arrows to see how the reflexive dynamic might play out.

Mindless patterns of action are likely to happen when we do not consider the potential of the *ripple effects* of our own feelings, thoughts, and actions on the relational system of which we are a part. This can show itself through acting out a feeling (overconnected) rather than experiencing it, giving meaning to it, possibly challenging the meaning, then deciding on action. Or it might show itself by ignoring the feelings in a situation (your own or that of others), and moving too quickly into uninformed (underconnected) action.

One possible resulting pattern is shown to the right (Figure 2). Follow the arrows starting at the bottom of the diagram from *Communication occurs* to see how the reflexive dynamic might play out from another person's perspective.

The other person will either **react** using a *patterned reaction*, or **act** using a *reflexive action*. The other person's reaction can easily feed into your reflexes —either lending support to the meaning you have made, or creating a change in that meaning.

“More often than not, we attempt to understand the complexity of a situation by acting as if the relational system is simple, rather than complex, and that our view of the system is adequate. As a result, we think and act non-reflexively — totally unaware that patterns are running unchecked in the background. Because we are acting non-reflexively, we can become so convinced that we know what is going on that we are often surprised by any information that challenges our viewpoint.”  
— Christine Oliver, Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko, **Complexity, Relationships and Strange Loops: Reflexive Practice Guide** (2003)



**Complexity, Relationships, and Strange Loops: Reflexive Practice Guide**, see [www.mhainstitute.ca](http://www.mhainstitute.ca) for more information

**MHA Institute Inc.**  
 Unit 248, Suite 205  
 259 Midpark Way SE  
 Calgary, Alberta T2X 1M2 Canada  
 Phone: (403) 257-4597  
 Fax: (403) 257-4649  
 E-mail: [info@mhainstitute.ca](mailto:info@mhainstitute.ca)  
 Web: [www.mhainstitute.ca](http://www.mhainstitute.ca)