

And stare he did! And for a moment, just a moment, Harold was victorious.

Leadership Through Learning Part 3B: The Strange Loop Pattern

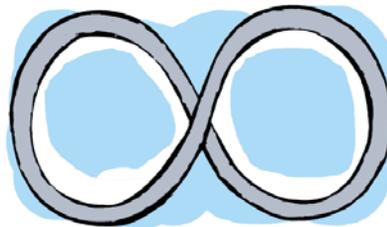
by Christine Oliver, Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko

“The ways in which we create and sustain our relationships shape both our experiences and our possibilities for action through the patterns that we live. In this way, *our own actions reflect back on us*. When we focus only locally, we tend to see the world in terms of problems to be fixed. We then fix these problems —without thinking about the ripple effect of our fixes on the larger system. If others in the system are themselves focused locally, they will do their own fixes to the problem that similarly ripple throughout the system. The result is a relational system rife with strange loop patterns that ripple negatively through people and processes.”

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

To get closer to what is creating problems and dilemmas, and to what we can do about them, we need to become more conscious, curious, and empathic about the complexity of the relational systems that lie under the surface. This requires us to think of problems and dilemmas *relationally* — to think of them as connected to the relationships in which they are embedded.

When we think relationally, we understand that our thinking is derived from the meaning we make of a specific situation. This meaning not only defines our thinking, but also creates and drives our actions. Within relational systems, meaning and action are in a circular pattern — a type of feedback loop. A more complex form of feedback loop is an *infinity loop* (shown below).



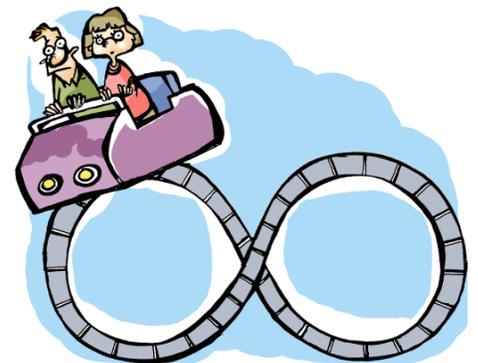
This pattern is called a *strange loop*. When we experience pressure or challenge within our relationships, we can, without knowing, act in a way that contributes to a *strange loop pattern*. When we enter a strange loop pattern, it feels like we are on a *roller coaster*, moving through an infinity loop. Like a roller coaster, when we are caught in a strange loop pattern, we feel an illusion of movement, but we are always

coming back to the same place.

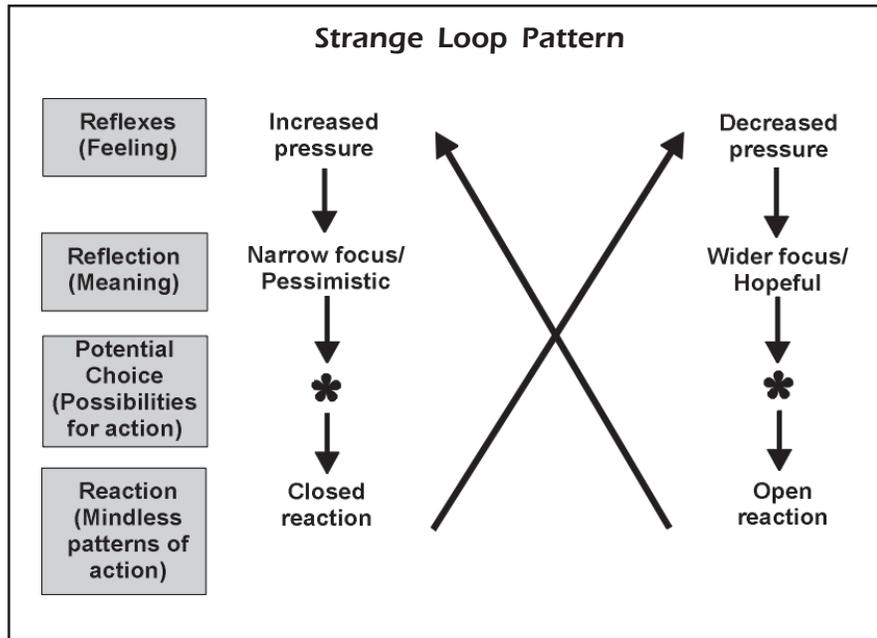
You know when you might be in a strange loop pattern when you experience *one or more* of the following characteristics:

- You feel confused or disorientated.
- You observe that your own and others' positions, feelings, interpretations, and actions are unpredictable.
- You are unsure that others' motivation and actions come from the best of intentions.
- In reacting to others' actions, you experience contradictory impulses.
- You cannot get a grasp on what is going on.
- You find it difficult to trust others in the relational system.
- You are hoping that things will turn out okay, but deep down inside, you fear that things will not improve.
- You feel a lack of progression in communication, always ending up back where you started.

The strange loop is a repeating pattern that allows little or no change over time. This is because the pattern of the roller coaster is predetermined. It takes you where it wants you to go. When you are caught in it, you feel as if you cannot get off.



Below is a generic representation of the strange loop pattern.

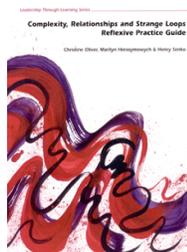


The infinity loop of a strange loop pattern traps our thinking and actions, so we feel oppressed, and unable to break out of its pattern. The movement is *polarized* — when we are in one part of the loop, we may feel good, and when we are in another part, not so good. As we travel the strange loop pattern, we experience a back-and-forth tension, which, in turn, creates a feeling of contradiction or *strangeness*.

The strange loop pattern occurs when we use a linear approach to support our reaction to being challenged or pressured in some way. A linear approach drives the engine of the strange loop pattern by supporting our belief that we know enough about the situation to deal with challenge or pressure, when, in fact, *we are not thinking widely enough*. However, just because we feel we know enough does not necessarily mean that we do know enough. A linear approach works very well, as long as everything

remains relatively stable and predictable over time. Unfortunately, a linear approach does not deal well with complex relational systems that are in constant change and movement. A linear approach is based on the following assumptions:

- The situation is stable and predictable.
- Everything affected by the action will remain stable and predictable.
- We know enough about the situation to solve the problem.
- Certainty, control, and order are desirable.
- We have no time for reflection.
- There is a problem that needs to be fixed.
- Taking action on this solution will solve the problem as we intend it to.



Complexity, Relationships, and Strange Loops: Reflexive Practice Guide, see www.mhainstitute.ca for more information

For example, a person or event can challenge our thinking, or our actions, or something in which we believe. If we believe that we know enough about the challenge, and how it is affecting us and others, our linear interpretations can lead us to attempt to *control* or *fix* the challenge. We may simplify the situation by believing that we are right and the other person or event is wrong. Then we may defend our point of view as being the only point of view, setting up the conditions for creating a strange loop pattern.

“Because we believe that time cannot be wasted, we deal with complex situations quickly, relying on our simplifications as valid data. This may cause an increase in the use of coping behaviours that further fuel the strange loop patterns, thus undermining success. Such relational systems can be described as contradictory, competitive, and closed in nature, rather than clear, collaborative, and open. A lack of reflexivity affects not only the quality of relationships, but also organizational decision-making and achievement.”

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

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