



You're certainly seeing the big picture!

Leadership Through Learning Part 3C: The Patterns We Live

by Christine Oliver, Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko

“The strange loop pattern provides a structure for making meaning of the dynamics of a relational system, and for focusing action. It centres on the relationship between the experience of the situation itself, and the stories told about that experience.”

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

In the last newsletter, you were introduced to the *strange loop pattern* (shown to the right).

One of the best ways to understand how the *strange loop pattern* works is to apply it to a situation. Janice is a manager of a team. At meetings, she finds that team members take an argumentative approach to discussion. When this happens, Janice becomes very uncomfortable. Instead of working

through the complexity of the issue, she works hard to move the team to harmony. As a result, differences about issues are not resolved, and often go underground. Janice feels good whenever she is able to stop the team from debating an issue. However, team members do not share this view.

One way to understand what is occurring for Janice and her team is to consider what happens at each step of the strange loop pattern, using a technique called a *narrative* (shown below).

1. Feeling (Reflexes)

Pressure increased / feel out of control / increased anxiety:

Janice notices that, when someone proposes a new idea in a team meeting, many team members find the flaws in what is being said or proposed. The team meetings often end with people debating the merits of their positions. This makes Janice uncomfortable.

2. Meaning (Reflection)

Narrow / pessimistic mindset:

Janice feels that something dangerous will happen when people disagree and argue with each other. She believes that those team members who disagree and start the arguments are being difficult.

Potential Choice Point

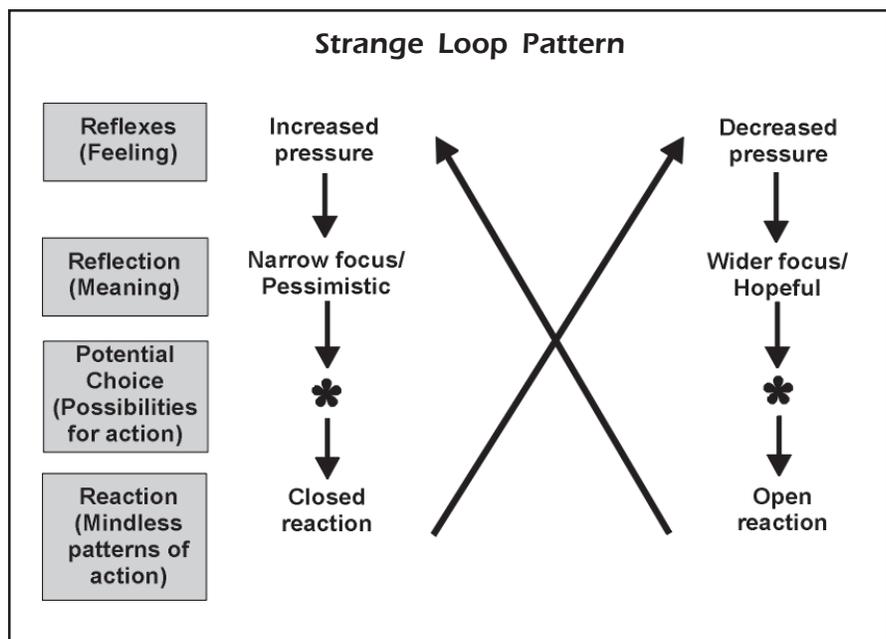
Janice has a choice to open her mind to the fact that the situation is more complex than she imagines it to be. Instead, she chooses to believe that her interpretation is the only option available to her; it is a fixed reality.

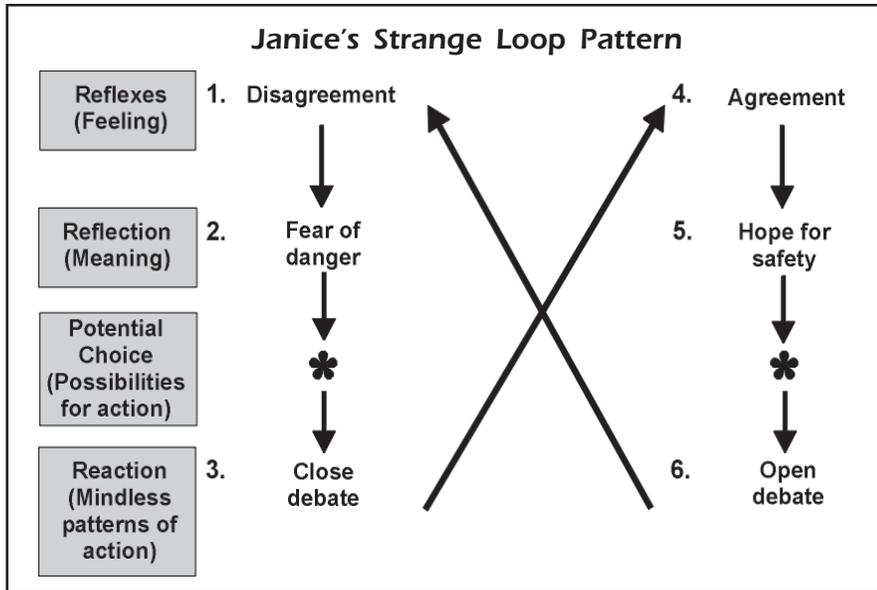
3. Reaction (Mindless patterns of action)

Closed reaction: Janice works hard to move the team to *harmony*. She does this by closing the debate, and moving on to the next agenda item.

Ripple Effect

Without realizing it, Janice's closed reaction of moving to the next agenda





item has created a ripple effect among team members. Several team members talk among themselves about how Janice has already made up her mind, and that she will not consider anything they say.

4. **Feeling (Reflexes)**
Pressure relieved / feel in control / reduced anxiety:
When Janice moves to the next agenda item, she believes that she has removed herself and the team from the pressures of conflict. As she moves the team through the agenda items, she feels that she is helping the team members to get along with each other.
5. **Meaning (Reflection)**
Wider / optimistic mindset:
Although Janice's defensive pattern of controlling the agenda to create safety will have only a temporary effect, she feels much better. She is ready to address the next agenda item, with a set of conditions based on her hope that everyone will get along.

Potential Choice Point

Janice has a choice to open her mind to the fact that the situation is more complex than she imagines it to be. Instead, she chooses to continue to measure the situation based on what she hopes will happen.

6. **Reaction (Mindless patterns of action)**

Open reaction: As the team moves through the next agenda item, Janice encourages different contributions, but, given that it is important to her to work through the item with the least amount of conflict, the tension mounts.

Ripple Effect

Without realizing it, Janice creates the impression that she is fragile in handling differences, thus creating a ripple effect. Team members are now convinced that Janice is out of touch, and does not care enough about what is going on for them, or needs too much care herself, thus increasing pressure and anxiety on the team.

Janice's situation can also be diagrammed using the strange loop pattern (shown to the left).

Janice's fear of danger, and hope for safety, sets up conditions for the strange loop pattern to continue to run unchecked, creating a *pattern lived* over and over again. Janice is unaware that she is caught in this strange loop pattern, and that it is rippling through the larger relational system. These ripples create the conditions for other team members to experience their own strange loop patterns. Although the details will be different, it is likely that Janice uses some form of the pattern above as a basis for her behaviour in a number of situations. For example, whenever she deals with any situation in which people disagree, she might:

- Give some excuse for having to leave
- Try to change the subject
- Start doing something that will distract herself from having to face the conflict

“Although it is tempting to believe that we have individual freedom, choice, and autonomy, the fact remains that we operate within relational systems that are full of interdependent interactions. We affect others, and others affect us. We are in a circular dynamic of interactions that seems to have no beginning or end. It is within this dynamic that we can experience strange loop patterns.”

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

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