



### Leadership Through Learning Part 3D: The Stories We Tell

by Christine Oliver, Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko

“When we experience *patterns lived*, we tell stories about what we are experiencing. Our *stories told* are, at best, incomplete representations of the actual experience itself. *Patterns lived* and *stories told* contain characters, plots, moral positions, hopes, fears, expectations, intentions, and outcomes. But it is only when we tell a story about our lived experience that we create the opportunity for making connections among the fragments of our experience.”

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

We tell stories about our experience of patterns we live in a number of ways, which we can call *cultural stories*, *relational stories*, and *identity stories*. These stories form a *contextual logic* that we use to explain the patterns we live. Contextual logic also limits how we think and act, thus contributing to the *patterns lived*.

Contextual logic and its effects can be described as:

- **Patterns lived:** The experience itself.
- **Stories told:** Incomplete representations of the actual experience.
- **Patterns yet to be lived:** The emergent future experience based on multiple future possibilities.
- **Stories yet to be told:** The stories told about this emerging future.

Contextual logic can be viewed through a number of lenses:

- **Cultural stories:** These are the stories told about social order and people’s relationship to that order. Culture can include family, team, organization, and/or wider

societal patterns of practice that may be relevant in a given situation.

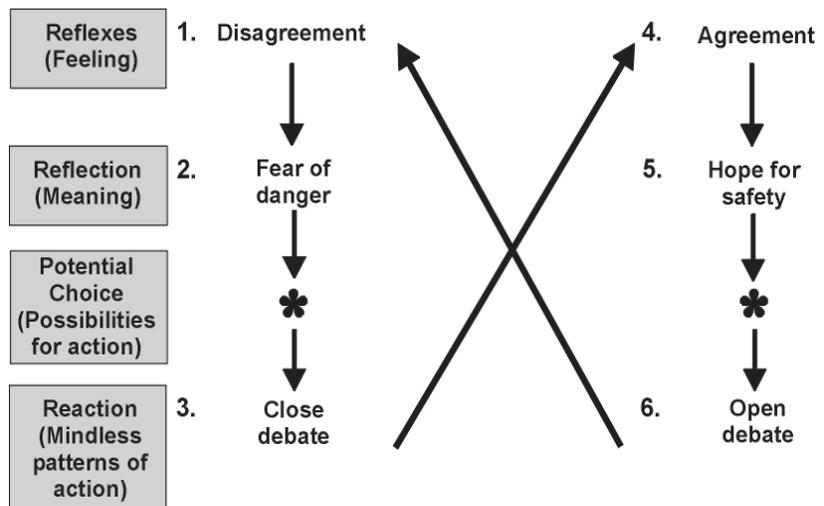
- **Relational stories:** These are stories told about the expectations established by everyone involved in the relationship. Relationships can occur between individuals, between individuals and groups, and between groups and other groups.
- **Identity stories:** These are the stories told about an individual’s concept of self. This is the personal relationship we have with ourselves. It is driven by the dynamic of internal and external expectations of who and what we are supposed to be. These would include stories about our career and our role.

### Janice’s Strange Loop Pattern

**Cultural Story:** Conflict is to be feared and avoided.

**Relational Story:** Consensus driven.

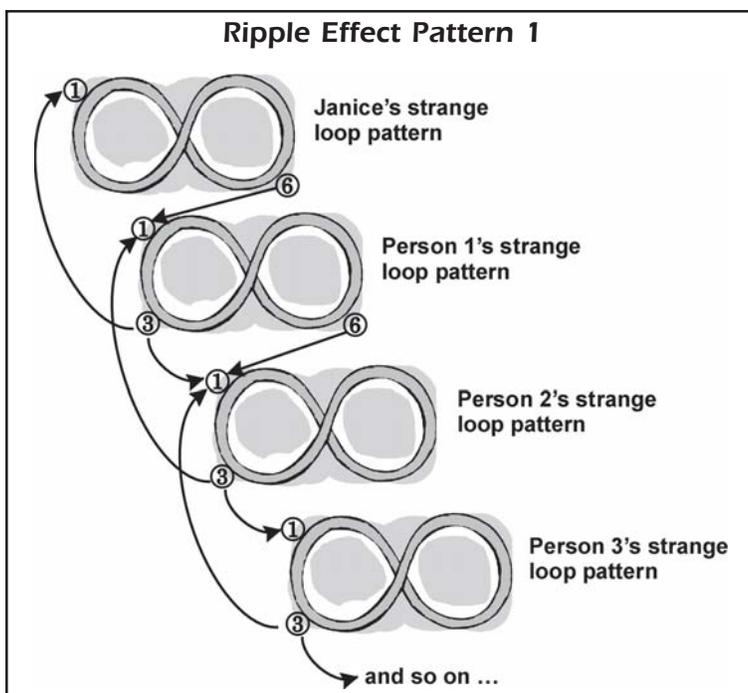
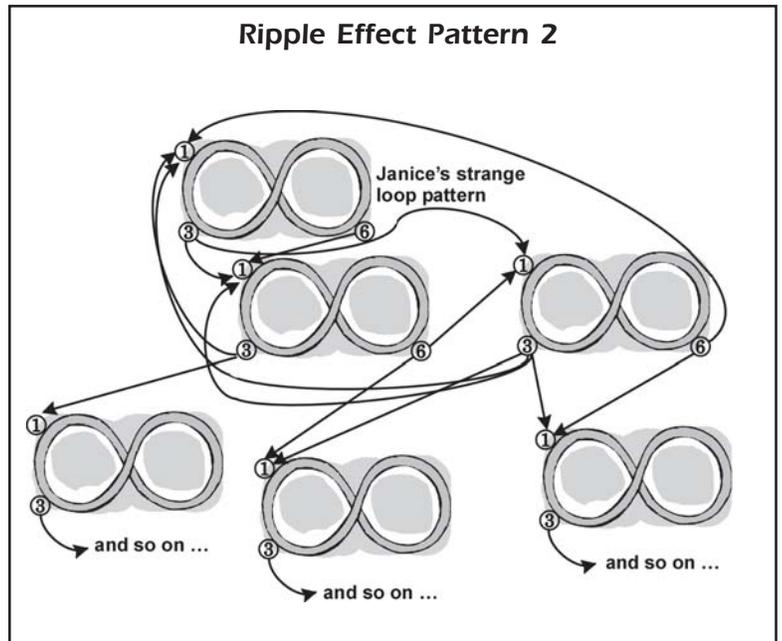
**Identity Story:** I must maintain harmony.



Recall the case of Janice and her team from the last newsletter. 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. On the previous page, you can see Janice's strange loop pattern and her contextual logic — *stories she is telling herself* about the situation.

The cultural, relational, and identity stories Janice is telling herself support her fear of danger (conflict) and hope for safety (harmony). But even more surprising is the fact that her closed and open reactions at step 3 and 6 create ripple effects among her team, as well as people external to the team. An example of what the ripple effect might look like is shown below.

But it is not this simple. Ripple effects are highly complex. The illustration below attempts to show this.



“Even though, in our minds, we believe that we are open, others in the system observe our conditional behaviours. They may interpret our actions by using their own partial judgment criteria. A possible result is that they react to our behaviours, trying to relieve the pressure or challenge that our behaviours have exerted on them. Although meant well, our *open reactions* can, in fact, ripple through the situation, starting others on the pathway to experiencing a strange loop with us.”

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

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