



Leadership Through Learning Part 3E: Six Loop Patterns

by Christine Oliver, Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko

“You can be reflexive by recognizing the underlying patterns resident in relational systems, without losing touch with the unique nature of the pattern itself. When you recognize a pattern occurring in a situation, rather than using the pattern to *know* the situation, you can use the pattern as a key to *open the door* to the complexity of the situation.”

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

Research in cognitive science — the study of how the brain functions — shows that our brains are designed to create and recognize patterns. The human brain creates patterns in order to deal with the input of massive amounts of information. These patterns manifest themselves in the ways in which people think, learn, and act. Without question, pattern recognition can create problems,

especially when people rationalize new situations to fit old, established patterns. However, when we accept the fact that the human brain is designed for pattern recognition, we can use it as a way to help people to recognize and work with patterns lived.

The authors have identified six generalized loop patterns that describe most *patterns lived* in real-life experiences of relational systems. This process of identifying patterns simplifies complexity in a way that seems to honour and appreciate the inherent complexity. These patterns can help you to identify when a specific loop pattern might be in play in a given situation. As a result, you can become more *reflexive* in real time, thus stopping a potentially mindless pattern before it gains momentum. Each pattern is described below. Illustrations of each pattern, with examples and detailed descriptions, are found in **Complexity, Relationships and Strange Loops: Reflexive Practice Guide**. For more information on this Guide, go to www.mhainstitute.ca.

Pseudo-Charmed Loop Pattern

This pattern exists when one party, or more, *expects* or *hopes* to experience a relationship in which there is no conflict. In this relational system, one party, or more, avoids any conflict. The parties involved tolerate mistakes and transgressions made by others, by avoiding any discussion about what has occurred, and by covering up or denying most problems and dilemmas.

- **Fear:** Fear of conflict
- **Anxiety:** Whenever conflict arises
- **Expectation:** People are too fragile to handle conflict, confrontation, or disruption.
- **Hope:** People will get along and avoid conflict.

Pseudo-Hexed Loop Pattern

This pattern exists when one party, or more, fears failure, and expects, and looks for, what could be wrong or go wrong in a situation. In this relational system, the parties involved feel discouraged because they see no hope for change, or they are cautious, wanting to make sure that they have thought of everything that could go wrong. This system seems *hexed*, because it is pessimistic in nature.

- **Fear:** Fear of failure
- **Anxiety:** Whenever failure or mistakes arise
- **Expectation:** People need to know what might go wrong.
- **Hope:** Things will not go wrong.

Lost-Charmed Loop Pattern

This pattern exists when one party, or more, has a desire for the current situation to measure up to an ideal. This protects an individual or team from a more complex knowledge of reality, which might involve hurt, struggle, anger, or disappointment. This pattern also exists when one

party, or more, has an idealistic expectation that must be met, with no seeming connection to a past situation. It is likely that a person who operates from idealistic expectations has done so many times in the past. When the current relational system is compared to the ideal, it falls short of the distorted, defensive, and protective expectations.

- **Fear:** Fear of loss
- **Anxiety:** Whenever ideals or expectations are not met
- **Expectation:** It is possible to have the ideal or nostalgic past.
- **Hope:** The ideal or nostalgic past will be created.

Lost-Hexed Loop Pattern

This pattern exists when one party, or more, believes that the current relational system measures up to a past situation that was felt to be a failure, and for which one feels guilt. The past relationship is experienced as toxic, and there is a defensive and protective need for one's responsibility for the past to be buried. One party, or more, projects the responsibility for a problematic past experience onto others, thus shifting the negative expectations onto the current relational system.

- **Fear:** Fear of guilt
- **Anxiety:** Whenever one sees failure looming
- **Expectation:** One must not be seen to fail or to be responsible.
- **Hope:** Others are responsible.

Of the six loop patterns, the charmed loop and hexed loop are special. They are not strange loops, because they do not have the same contradiction and polarization that is resident in the other four patterns. They are circular patterns — one is a *virtuous* cycle and one is a *vicious* cycle.

A **charmed loop** pattern is a virtuous cycle because it produces a relational system that works creatively, and is resilient to change, making it sustainable over time. What makes the charmed loop pattern work so well is the way in which people within this relational pattern deal with pressure. When people experience the other four strange loop patterns, as well as the circular hexed loop pattern, they have two choices. They can continue to live in these patterns, or they can process their experiences with these patterns as *learning*. The strength of the charmed loop pattern is that people can use this pattern to bring the other five patterns to a conscious level, allowing them to learn from their loop experiences, and to make reflexive choices. As a result, they can create the conditions for the emergence of new patterns lived.

In contrast, the **hexed loop** pattern produces a relational system that is unwanted and *stuck*, and is often difficult to exit. Hexed loop patterns are toxic in nature. People who experience these patterns believe that they are not safe, and this lack of safety results in people living in fear and mistrust.

Charmed Loop Pattern

This pattern exists when the parties involved experience beneficial communication. This relational system is not a fantasy; it is real, with a high degree of curiosity, openness, honesty, and authenticity. Past experience with each party has been primarily constructive and respectful, creating a high degree of trust. This system is *charmed* because it generates effective communication patterns within which dilemmas, problems, and conflict can be addressed creatively.

- **Fear:** Fear is natural.
- **Anxiety:** Anxiety is natural.

- **Expectation:** People come from the best of intentions.
- **Hope:** People will value differences.

Hexed Loop Pattern

This pattern exists when one party, or more, experiences a competitive, detrimental, and/or toxic relational system. This system is *hexed* because its communication patterns do not create the conditions for effectively addressing dilemmas, problems, and/or conflict. This is complicated by the fact that one party, or more, expects others to undermine him or her in some way.

- **Fear:** Fear of losing
- **Anxiety:** Facing the person or situation again
- **Expectation:** People will undermine.
- **Hope:** There is no hope.

“Over long periods of time, people can use pattern recognition to stay alert to the signs of repeating patterns, such as strange loops. Once people recognize the different patterns, they practice this skill of recognition by identifying the patterns in real work situations. Then, people spend time practicing reflexivity to understand what makes each pattern unique, at an individual, team, and organizational level.”

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

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