



Leadership Through Learning Part 3G: Critical Consciousness

by Christine Oliver, Marilyn
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“When the strange loop pattern is running, most people within the relational system are thinking and acting non-reflexively — they *react* without being critically conscious of their reactions, and the possible ripple effects of these reactions.”

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

In the last newsletter, we used the strange loop pattern to describe the relational system dynamic for Janice and her team. We also used the six loop patterns (e.g., pseudo-charmed loop, lost-charmed loop) to describe the more complex relational dynamic operating between Janice and the individual team members. Once Janice and her team understand the

relational dynamics that are residing in their situation, they can make critically conscious and deliberate choices about what they will do with this knowledge. In this newsletter, we examine the idea of *critical consciousness* and its importance in reflexive practice — the practice of thinking and acting consciously.

To understand and work effectively within complex relational systems, we need to be *critically conscious* of the feelings we are experiencing, the meaning we are making, and the actions we are taking. *Critical consciousness* is an *emergent property* of recognizing patterns (see **InfoMine**, Vol. 8, No. 3) and the contextual logic (stories we tell ourselves) that shapes them. Critical consciousness is a result of acting reflexively within a relational system of which we are a part, and which we create with others. An emergent property is an unpredictable dynamic that occurs as a result of the interactions within relational systems.

For example, Linda works in a team in which one individual, Jack, seems to be a constant irritant to all team members, but especially to Linda. Every time Jack and Linda work together, the result is a full-blown argument between them that affects everyone in the team. Linda was willing to examine the relational system in which she and Jack were trapped, even though she had trouble believing that Jack was not trying to undermine her. Linda was able to find one action that she

was willing to do, in order to test whether or not she could create a different ripple effect: she would come in the next morning and say, “Good morning, Jack!” and see what happened. Linda was taking a critically conscious action, through her participation in, and her thinking about, the relational system. Linda could not have predicted Jack’s reaction the next morning; it completely surprised her.

When Linda said, “Good morning, Jack!”, she expected Jack to say something derogatory to her, as he has done in the past. Instead, Jack smiled, and said “Good morning, Linda! How are you?” He then proceeded to be pleasant to her in all of their interactions together for the rest of the day, continuously surprising her with his behaviour. Jack’s behaviour was an *emergent property*, and Linda was surprised by it. Another emergent property of Linda’s action was the positive effect that Jack’s behaviour had on the rest of the team.

Because relational systems are dynamic in nature, there is always the possibility that any change in a system might cause something novel to emerge. The system is continually undergoing change. This is one of the many *paradoxes* of relational systems: since the system is dynamic and in flux, you cannot predict when or where something new may emerge, or what will emerge.

What you can do is create the conditions for emergence. One way to do this is to be critically conscious, by thinking and acting reflexively

while interacting within a relational system. When we are critically conscious:

- We include ourselves as part of the relational system, seeing ourselves as contributors to the system's dynamics.
- We attempt to be *mindful* of the patterns out of which we are acting when we communicate with others.

When we include ourselves as part of a relational system, we examine how we are contributing to the patterns in the relationship through our own *patterns lived* and *stories told*. We are able to see that the relational patterns are *shared patterns* — shared by all those involved in the relational system. We know that the system is highly complex, and that we cannot know the whole of the system. This appreciation can create a humility and empathy that assumes and honours the humanity of everyone involved.

When Linda had reacted to Jack in the past, she would do two contradictory actions: give him the cold shoulder, and fight with him. Each of these behaviours increased pressure on Jack, creating the conditions for him to enter a strange loop pattern. Jack's reactions, in turn, increased pressure on Linda, sending her into a strange loop pattern. Both Linda and Jack had developed a contextual logic (*stories told*) that sustained the momentum of each other's *patterns lived*. At some level, Linda knew that her actions were contributing to the toxicity resident in the relational system.

When we attempt to be mindful of the patterns out of which we are acting, we treat everyone in the

situation, including ourselves, from a position of humility, empathy, curiosity, and connectedness. This attitude enhances our ability to act reflexively — to better anticipate patterns, and to make conscious choices to act in meaningful ways.

When Linda decided to act differently, she was, in effect, testing the validity of her contextual logic — the stories she was telling about her relationship with Jack. When Linda acted differently, she may not have believed that Jack was unaware of her interpretation of his behaviour. Regardless of this, her action was based in assuming that he might not be aware. She decided to simply test a hypothesis; belief in the hypothesis was not required. In taking this action, Linda was admitting to herself that she might not know everything about the situation and about Jack. This is a form of *humility*. Linda's humility gave Jack a chance to act differently, ultimately surprising Linda.

Being critically conscious allows us to ride the relationship roller coaster with more curiosity and openness. It allows us to tap into the learning potential that exists within any relational system. This means that we can learn from any situation, regardless of how difficult it may be.

Living continuously in strange loop patterns can draw us into the deep abyss of *stuckness*, breaking our connection to our sense of self. Like a strong undertow in a river, we can be pulled into more and more *stuckness*. When we lack a strong sense of ourselves, we reduce our ability to get clear of the undertow. Critical consciousness gives us back our *sense of self*. It helps us to recognize the form the *stuckness* is taking (*stories told* and *patterns lived*), and to act in ways that help us

to break free of the undertow.

When we recognize the stories and patterns that are creating the feeling of *stuckness*, we can make *choices* — choices about which stories we wish to tell, and which patterns we wish to live. These choices re-energize our connection to our sense of self, lifting us out of the undertow and into a personal relational system with ourselves and others that is itself reflexive, critically conscious, and resilient.

“When people are acting reflexively, they are critically conscious that these potential choice points exist. They are able to use these potential choice points to make reflexive choices about how they will act in the relational system.”

— 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

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