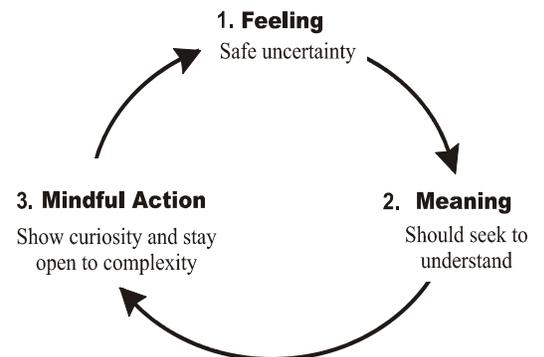




- If we choose to act differently, we actively try to create a completely different pattern (shown below), which is based on the charmed loop pattern.

Reflexive Choice Pattern



In either case, whether you reflexively choose to act in the same way or differently, emergence rules. This means that reflexive critical consciousness in your practice creates the conditions for the emergence of multiple futures, and any one of these emerging futures is likely to surprise you. Again, the relational system is paradoxical — even when you are working reflexively, you cannot predict the future. Reflexive practice simply helps you to handle the unpredictable ups and downs that multiple futures present. This is the essence of being resilient.

Recall the example of Linda and Jack examined in the last newsletter. Although Linda was completely surprised by Jack’s reaction to her action of saying “Good morning,” she was even more surprised by her

Leadership Through Learning Part 3H: Choice and Paradoxical Tension

by Christine Oliver, Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko

“If we are critically conscious, we are being reflexive in our choices, regardless of the choice we make. For example, we can simplify the choice that can occur at a potential choice point by saying that there is a right or wrong choice. However, this is not necessarily what it means to make reflexive choices. In fact, reflexive action requires a mindful anticipation of the potential effects of our choices — it is not about whether our choices are right or wrong.”

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

In the last newsletter, we introduced critical consciousness and its importance in being reflexive —

thinking and acting consciously. When we are critically conscious of our capacity to choose:

- We can choose to continue our behaviour, and not change it, based on what we have discovered in being critically conscious.

Or ...

- We can choose to act in a different way, much as Linda did in the example in the last newsletter.

Either choice is a *reflexive choice* if it is made in a critically conscious way. Either choice has the potential to create a change in the dynamics of the relational system, or to continue the pattern.

- **If we choose to continue to act in the same way that contributed to the strange loop pattern**, we stop being victims of the pattern. Instead, we take responsibility for our part in creating the pattern, and become accountable for the ripple effects of our actions.

reaction to Jack's change in behaviour. Linda was not sure whether or not she liked this change. Without question, she had wanted the change, and was relieved that Jack's behaviour was now more respectful of her and others. What confronted Linda was the uncertainty that Jack's behaviour introduced to a relational system that had seemed predictable. Now, Linda would have to get to know Jack (and herself) all over again — and she was not sure that she felt good about this new situation.

Linda is experiencing the paradox that is a direct result of her reflexive choices and actions. She feels both *excited* about what she was able to do, and *anxious* about the ripple effect she has created. A paradoxical tension lies at the core of reflexivity — being able to hold both optimistic and pessimistic feelings and stories at the same time, without needing to resolve the tension these polar opposites create. *Holding*, and *not resolving*, this tension is difficult both to describe and to explain, because one can only understand it when experiencing it in real time. Recall a time when you were listening to two people state a point of view, one optimistic and one pessimistic. The linear approach generally drives us to say that one person is right, and the other is wrong. Reflexivity values both

positions, holding them without necessarily needing to resolve them.

The reason that this is important is that you cannot know the future; thus, you cannot know which way is right or wrong. The need to know which way is right or wrong is based in a linear approach. Relational systems are not linear; they are systemic. They require a systemic approach that works within the paradoxical nature of these complex systems. In fact, in paradoxical systems, there are no answers; there are only choices.

Reflexive choice is a systemic approach that uses a *learning as you go* method. In this method, one continuously tests *hypotheses* in action, learning from that action, then refining the hypothesis for the next action (shown below).

Rather than needing to know where you are going, and what it will look like when you get there, you focus on understanding *where you are right now*, from a systemic perspective. Then, you hypothesize possible consequences of your thinking and your actions. This is the essence of reflexive practice. One way to do this is to ask a question that you want to answer, then embark on a journey of curiosity and learning at a relational level.

In the example of Linda and Jack, Linda might select actions that help her to answer a question such as, "What did I do to contribute to Jack's previous behaviour?" or "Why do I feel this way about Jack's new behaviour?" Her exploration might include a consideration of her own part in creating the relational dynamics, as well as examining other influences on the relational dynamic. In doing this, Linda would embark on a learning journey, and as she learns, her questions would have relational effects.

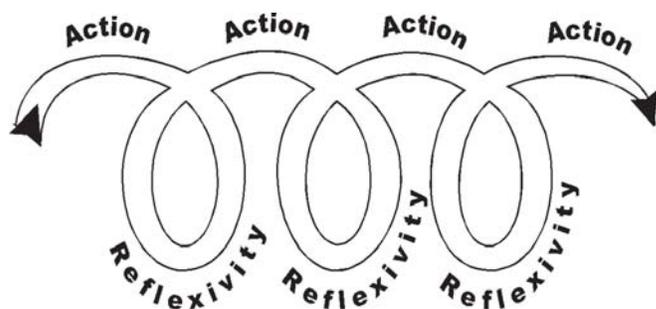
"Learning as you go is based on an experimental frame. It is fundamental to building resilience in any relational system. When you approach the future as a blank slate full of multiple possibilities, you open yourself to the possibility of creating something truly *novel*. That is the power of reflexivity. Rather than focusing on knowing and creating the future, you focus on the adventure of learning as you live within 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 www.mhainstitute.ca for more information

Learning as You Go Method



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