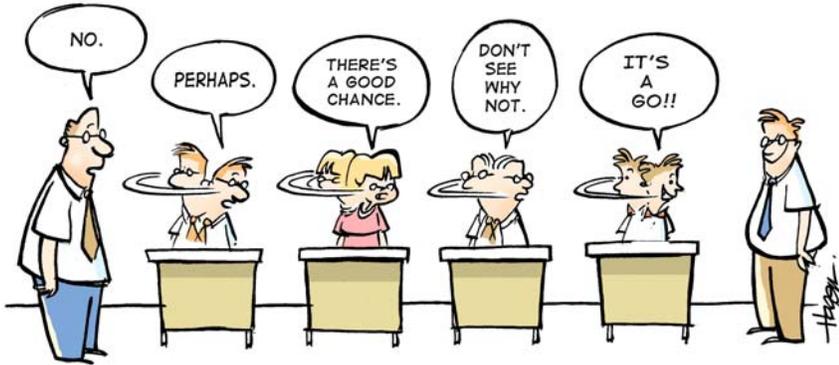




Check out back issues!
www.mhainstitute.ca

InfoMine
Vol. 13. No. 4 ■ July-August 2006

mentoring human action



**Leadership Through Learning
Part 3J: Taking Mindful Action**

by Christine Oliver, Marilyn Herasymowych and Henry Senko

“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. ... It is a result of acting reflexively about how we are part of, and, together, create a relational system.”

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

The key to mindful action is found in the two *potential choice points*, indicated by an asterisk (*), in the generic strange loop pattern shown on this page.

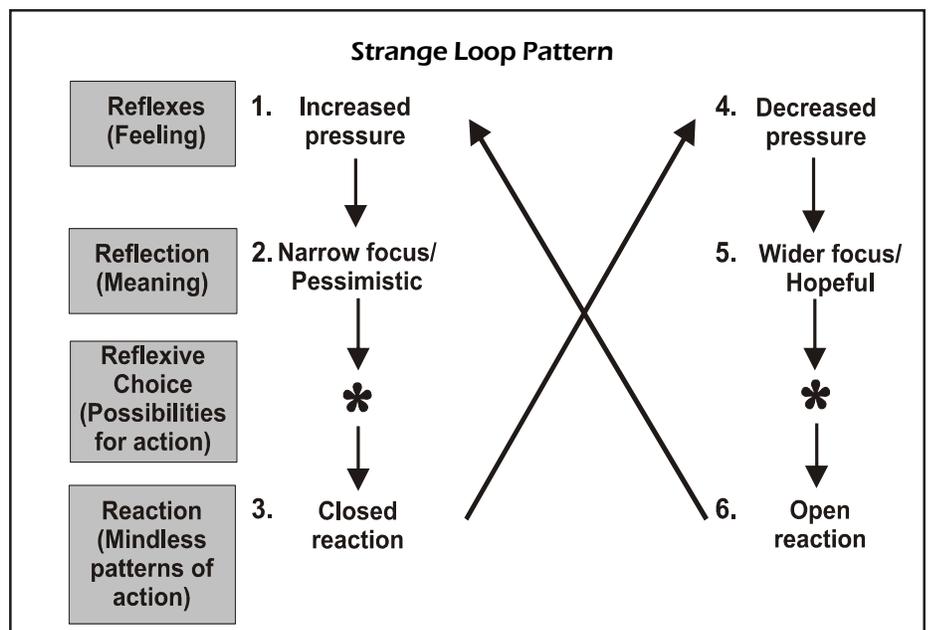
When the strange loop pattern is running, most people within the relational system are thinking and acting non-reflexively — they *react* without being critically conscious of their reactions, and the possible ripple effects of these reactions.

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. 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 always undergoing change. What you can do is create the conditions

for emergence by making reflexive choices and taking mindful action.

Recall Janice and her team from previous newsletters (**InfoMines** Vol. 12, No. 3; Vol. 12, No. 4; Vol.12, No. 6). Janice was caught in a pseudo-charmed loop pattern with her team, in which conflict was to be feared and avoided at all costs. The team was in the same loop pattern with Janice, believing that it was too dangerous or too difficult for any one individual to try to change the situation, or Janice’s behaviour. The team believed that Janice was the problem; Janice believed that the team was the problem.

Once Janice and the team became aware of their *loop patterns lived* and *stories told*, they had a choice to be mindful. The mindful pattern for a pseudo-charmed loop is “Accept the discomfort that accompanies conflict and disagreement, by seeing it as a natural part of relational dynamics.” This means that Janice and team



members could start by becoming aware of the discomfort they felt whenever conflict arises. This would give them access to a conscious and mindful choice rather than an unconscious and mindless choice.

At an individual level, each team member dealt with Janice from his or her specific loop pattern (**InfoMine** Vol. 12, No. 6, diagram at bottom of page 2).

- If team members are caught in a *pseudo-hexed loop*, the mindful pattern is to “Give as much time and value to considering optimistic views as you give to pessimistic views. Examine your own fear of failure.”
- If team members are caught in a *lost-charmed* or *lost-hexed loop*, the mindful pattern is to “Consider that your feelings about the past situation might be more complex than you have realized. Separate the past situation from the present, and deal with the present as an episode, by setting aside any comparison.”
- If team members are caught in a *hexed loop*, the mindful pattern is to “Make sure that stories told are sufficiently complex and valid; question your own contribution to the pattern. Notice how your behaviour creates ripple effects in relational systems, and make reflexive choices about future action.”

Each of these mindful patterns describes the reflexive or critically conscious *pattern to be lived*. In order to take mindful action, the first step is to select a reflexive choice (**InfoMine** Vol. 13, No. 3). Because Janice and her team were caught in a pseudo-charmed loop pattern, they had five of the six reflexive choices:

- Continue the pattern
- Examine the pattern

- Accept and live with the relationship
- Exit the relationship
- Create a charmed loop pattern

As individuals, each team member, including Janice, could select any of these five reflexive choices, but as a team, team members decided that they wanted to *create a charmed loop pattern*. However, they felt that this was too hard to achieve at this point. They decided to take it one step at a time and chose the *examine the pattern* reflexive choice as their first step. They believed that they needed to recognize when they were feeling discomfort, before they could make different choices.

Each reflexive choice has a set of leverage points (**InfoMine** Vol. 11, No. 4) that are designed to create positive ripple effects in a relational system. The leverage point that Janice and the team members selected was to spend the next month to “*Examine the observable behaviours and actions, yours and other parties’, within the current situation.*” To take action on this leverage point, Janice and the team members decided on a tactic of pointing out when they thought others were uncomfortable. They knew that some team members might take this personally, so they decided to use the question “Are we in a strange loop pattern?” or “I think we’re in a strange loop!” whenever they noticed discomfort in a situation.

Within a few days of taking action on this leverage point, team members were becoming more mindful of their patterns lived, and when they felt discomfort. What occurred next was an emergent property (**InfoMine** Vol. 8, No. 3). Team members started telling themselves different stories about a situation. For example, Janice and the team had been telling themselves the story that *they must*

maintain harmony at all costs. Now the story had become that *they must examine their discomfort at the expense of harmony*. The emergent property occurred when they started to tell the same story as for the mindful pattern for a pseudo-charmed loop. The team had a new story now: *accept the discomfort that accompanies conflict and disagreement and don’t try to fix it*. As individuals, each team member became more connected to the team. This translated into greater effectiveness in communication and in being able to work together. The bottom line result was an increase in productivity, a decrease in turnover, an increase in individual engagement and accountability, and an increase in creativity and innovation.

“There will always be [relational] roller coasters [and strange loops], and every roller coaster will be different from the last. You cannot get rid of relational roller coasters, but you can be prepared to ride them in a way that is more about learning and less about stuckness.”

—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

MHA Institute Inc.
Unit 248, Suite 205
259 Midpark Way SE
Calgary, Alberta T2X 1M2 Canada

Phone: (403) 257-4597
Fax: (403) 257-4649
E-mail: info@mhainstitute.ca
Web: www.mhainstitute.ca