mentoring human action

Leadership Through Learning Part 3K: Reflexive Inquiry
by Christine Oliver

"Reflexive Inquiry rests on the assumption that consciousness about the patterns of feeling, meaning and action that we, and others, are experiencing in a relational system, is central to effective organizational development."
— Christine Oliver, **Reflexive Inquiry: A Framework for Consultancy Practice** (2005), London, Karnac
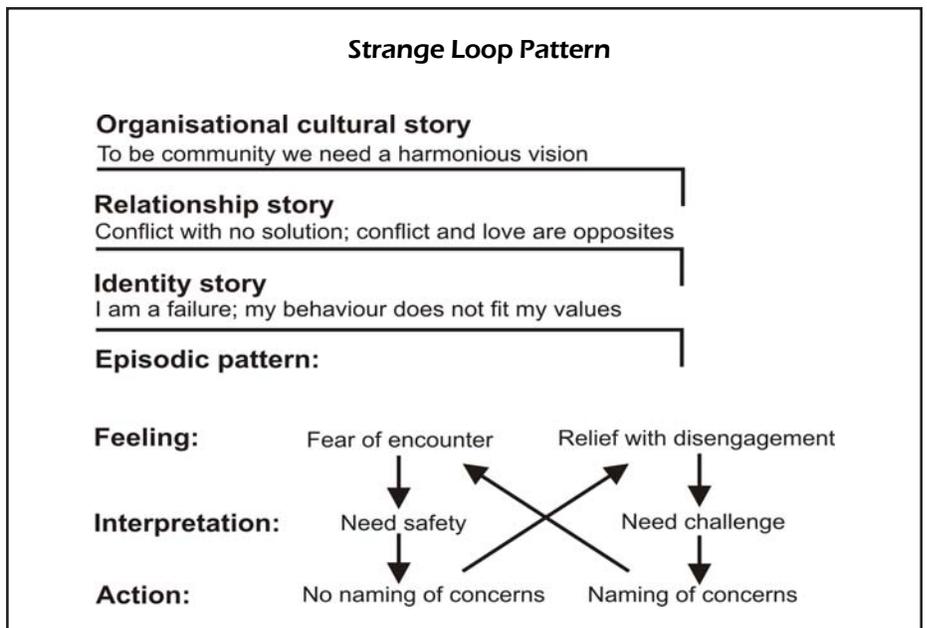
Reflexive inquiry:
- Facilitates a critical appreciation of the parts people play in the patterns they live with others as well as the contexts that shape and are shaped by these patterns
- Takes the position that organizations are continually changing, and thus need to build reflexive examination into their cultures and structures
- Assumes that identities, relationships, and cultural practices shape our actions, and are shaped by our actions
- Understands these identities, relationships, and cultural practices as contextual logic — the stories we tell ourselves about obligation and entitlement (see **InfoMine** Vol. 12, No. 4).
- Facilitates responsibility and accountability for the choices we make in interactions

To use an example, a religious community presented its concerns in a language of conflict, demoralization, and breakdown in communication. The breakdown had been triggered by a crisis two years previously, when a personnel decision had been made that caused a split in the community. The leader, with a group of supporters, was on one side; a group who challenged the leadership was on the other side. This experience of split was distressing and challenging to the religious and cultural values of the people in this community. However, whenever attempts had been made to resolve the conflict, the split pattern seemed to become more entrenched.

I was one of a group of consultants who worked with this religious community. We observed a paradoxical pattern, or *strange loop*, that constrained meaningful communication (see **InfoMine** Vol. 12, No. 2 and No. 3). We noticed that, when a concern or difficult feeling needed expression, people created a fear of *encounter* (i.e., confrontation). This led to a kind of pseudo safety. Since members of the community would not talk about their experiences, this caused them to withdraw from engagement. However, given the value of brotherhood in the community, disengagement would build such a feeling of discomfort that the need

Strange Loop Pattern

Organisational cultural story
To be community we need a harmonious vision

Relationship story
Conflict with no solution; conflict and love are opposites

Identity story
I am a failure; my behaviour does not fit my values

Episodic pattern:

Feeling:	Fear of encounter	Relief with disengagement
Interpretation:	Need safety	Need challenge
Action:	No naming of concerns	Naming of concerns

for challenge or critique would create the need to talk about the experiences, but within the fear of destructive consequences in encounter. And so the strange loop pattern (i.e., pseudo-charmed loop) would continue to endure. From interviewing, observation, and experience of the *patterns lived,* the consultants hypothesised the following stories (contextual logic) to be constraining communication and setting a context for the strange loop pattern on the previous page.

The consultants were faced with deeply entrenched discussions and patterns of interaction that made sense in the contexts in the *Strange Loop Pattern* shown on the previous page. The community shared a long history of discomfort with both difference and engagement. Community members had always experienced difficulty with sharing meaning in relation to their religious and spiritual life. They feared that too many differences would be revealed. The conflict about the justice of leadership action had served to deepen fears about irreconcilable differences within the community. We noticed in the larger group a stifling tentativeness, which, we hypothesised, indicated a great fear about opening up the subject again. At the same time, there was a sense of despair that if the issue weren't addressed, the future of the community would be endangered.

As the consultants, we felt ourselves to be in a strange loop pattern. If we addressed the conflict head-on, we would create a defensive reaction. Yet, if we didn't address it explicitly, we would be avoiding something important at the heart of community, and not doing our job. We felt we needed to try to understand this conflict at the heart.

We needed to treat the conflict as precious, and protect it, not through polarisation, but in a way that made the community less fragile. We made the decision to interview all members of the community privately and formally. We met with the community and explained our dilemma, and shared the strange loop pattern with the community members. We suggested that we would be compounding the community's dilemma if we enacted the pattern in the same way as the community. From the interviews, we would be seeking understanding about key themes and concerns in relation to this dilemma. Having listened to the *heart and mind* of the community, we saw our responsibility as feeding these themes back to the community, even if the themes were ones that the community members felt they should protect. The community members agreed, relieved that the consultants were concerned for the fragility of the situation, but with hope that the consultants were helping them (potentially) to move out of their *stuckness*.

This intervention had the function of enabling the consultants to move outside the strange loop pattern that we were in. It helped us to find a way of speaking about a pattern instead of enacting it, thus providing one model for the community for how to extricate itself from the strange loop pattern. We were able to articulate *unspeakable* dilemmas and paradoxical patterns that were holding the community members in their power. Being able to speak about the *unspeakables* became a position of legitimacy, thus setting a context for an intervention to move things forward.

We said that, in our listening to the community, we had heard about the destructive effects of the split, and the

desire for change. We also appreciated that people needed to learn how to change. We suggested that the community members needed to practise new ways of relating, using an exercise that we had designed for that purpose. The next newsletter will outline that design.

"The representation of the community's experience in the form of a strange loop enabled the focus to become more complex – rather than two opposing sides the focus became a *system of rules for meaning making and action*, which showed itself in *patterns lived and stories told*. This systemic focus helped to detoxify the poisonous *us and them* discourse that had been governing relationships. It also created a feeling of all being *in the same boat,* which restructured the polarised *us and them* discourse into a - *we are all suffering fallible humans* - discourse. I hope it created the increased potential for the giving and receiving of help. The seeds were sown for that possibility."
— Christine Oliver, **Reflexive Inquiry: A Framework for Consultancy Practice** (2005), London, Karnac

Complexity, Relationships, and Strange Loops: Reflexive Practice Guide, see www.mhainstitute.ca for more information

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