Happy Holidays!

mentoring human action

Leadership Through Learning Part 3L: Reflexive Inquiry Intervention
by Christine Oliver

"We are invited or pressured into particular experiences of self or *subject positions* in relationships. ... We do not have to take up these invitations to participate but choosing not to take up a *subject position offered* in a pattern, requires *critical reflexive skills* and the ability to act, when appropriate, counter-intuitively".
— Christine Oliver, **Reflexive Inquiry: A Framework for Consultancy Practice** (2005), London, Karnac

In the last newsletter, I spoke about a situation in a religious community in which we, as a group of consultants, used reflexive practice to help this community to better understand their paradoxical pattern of relationship. The consultants had heard about the destructive effects of the split that had occurred in the community, with the leader and a group of supporters on one side and a group that challenged the leadership on the other side. The consultants had also heard the desire for change, but

appreciated that people needed to learn how to change. The consultants suggested that the community needed to practise new ways of relating.

The consultants proposed an inquiry process designed to facilitate self and group reflexivity, positioning each participant's behaviour as contributing to the systemic pattern of connections. All participants were asked to work with another with whom they felt they could work, and everyone stayed in the one room.

Stage 1
Participants wrote a statement (a paragraph or less) about how they felt they had contributed to misunderstanding, mistrust, and distancing in community life, particularly in relation to the conflict that had triggered so much unhappiness.

The consultants gave examples of how people may have contributed – through blaming others without seeking understanding, through silence, through withdrawal.

Stage 2
Working within the small groups of two, each person read the other's statement. The two participants interviewed each other from a position of curiosity and concern about the assumptions in the statement.

Stage 3
Participants then wrote a response in the form of a letter to the other person, stating:
• What effect it has had on you to experience this conversation

• What you have understood about the other's motivations and concerns
• What you wish for the other at this point in time

Stage 4
Participants shared their letters with each other, and made verbal responses about what they had learned from reading the letter.

Stage 5
In the large group, participants reflected on the experience in their small groups, and how it affected their stories about identity, relationship, and community.

In this community reflection, one person's response conveyed the spirit in the room. He said, "The exercise fitted with our own valuing of confession. It is the first time I have been challenged to take responsibility for my contribution to the malaise. Previously I have tried to analyse what went wrong or tried to put it right. This is a new position to be in."

Discussion
The community members agreed that they had participated in unwanted patterns; however, they were unclear about how their patterns of relating created the demoralising consequences that they experienced. This reflexive inquiry helped them to create a shared moral awareness about responsibility for constructing both the past and future. The exercise was intended to challenge a pattern of *side taking*, and to facilitate the image of a web of connections — of individual contributions that both shaped, and were shaped by, the whole. The exercise implied that all members had

played their part in contributing to the whole. The communication methods used in the exercise created new potential for shaping community and relational culture.

This *confessional* exercise gave community members a new vocabulary for accountability. The *lived pattern* only legitimised a calling to account of each other in the context of a right/wrong polarity. This accountability was being conducted through the mechanism of creating *third persons* (e.g., *we have poor leadership*). That context resulted in great mistrust of the motivation of others. The new form of accountability invited speaking and listening by *first persons* to *second persons*. This now happened in the context of inviting community members to be sensitised to the impact of contributions on the other through the wording of the exercise. For example, when asked *What do you wish for the other?*, the embedded message was that one has the other's interests at heart.

The invitation to inquire into the assumptions of the statement each person made allowed participants to examine the *contextual logic* within people's actions (i.e., the *stories of obligation* and *entitlement*). The loop pattern (see previous **InfoMine**) gives community members some clues as to what these stories might be, and how they might need to change for movement to take place. For instance, in the context of a relational story of conflict, the obligation becomes *for the sake of justice, I must win*. A more constructive story of obligation might be *for the sake of justice, I need to risk sharing more of my own motivations and needs.*

When community members act on *stories of obligation*, particular

experiences of self are invited and constrained. In this case, the story of obligation is about a self that struggles with feelings of anger and rejection toward others, and a feeling of demoralisation about not being able to change this position. The exercise was designed to help community members to become conscious of the choices involved in these pulls and pushes of the stories of obligation. When community members inquired into the assumptions in each person's statement, this allowed the potential for respectful challenge. The action of being curious represents, in itself, a structural change. It encourages humility toward one's own position while, at the same time, encouraging a sharing of responsibility for the development of the other person's story. In the group reflection, one person expressed how they were made more *attractive* to each other through the exercise.

In asking people to consider how they had contributed to the difficulties, the consultants were drawing attention to how people either used or silenced their voices. Participants repeatedly stated that a characteristic pattern (part of the loop pattern) was shown in the way that people were fearful of asking questions about how others felt or what they thought. Through the exercise, this way of positioning self in relation to others was seen as having an active and destructive effect. The community members were also becoming aware of the mechanisms of critique in the group:

- **First order critique** was the characteristic pattern of *us and them*. People were blamed, either for supporting an unjust process, or for disloyalty to the leadership. No other position seemed possible. It seemed impossible for motivation to be ascribed as complex, or to consider that people were *acting for the good of the community*.

As was stated many times, *we caricature each other*.

- The exercise invited **second order critique** through positioning individuals to reflect on their own contribution to a pattern. The exercise facilitated a connection between development for the individual, and the ways another might be able to encourage such development.
- The exercise also facilitated **third order critique** through inviting the community to take a reflexive position on how community was created through individual behaviours and relational patterns.

"When we examine an individual action and seek explanation for why it has occurred, our resources are limited unless we can explore how that action is embedded in a larger pattern of experiences and stories. We can resort to explanations such as, *he is a difficult person* or *they are a lazy team*, but such explanations offer limited possibilities for action if they fix the part while leaving the whole unattended"
— Christine Oliver, **Reflexive Inquiry: A Framework for Consultancy Practice** (2005), London, Karnac
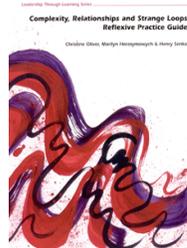
Complexity, Relationships, and Strange Loops: Reflexive Practice Guide, see www.mhainstitute.ca for more information

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