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### Leadership Through Learning Part 3P: Does Reflexive Practice Really Work?

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“Some people may ask, ‘How can I find my purpose in life?’ The question itself suggests that it is a search, a process of figuring something out. Actually, it is the very opposite of that. We are not looking for our mighty purpose, it is looking for us. We do not discover our purpose, it discovers us. A better question might be, ‘How can I place myself in a position so that my purpose can find me?’ One thing is certain: We cannot be *found* if our minds are full of noise and confusion”.

— James Ballard, **What’s the Rush? Step Out of the Race, Free Your Mind, Change Your Life** (1999)

A reflexive practice approach is often used to understand and deal effectively with situations in which:

- You are unsure that others’ motivation and actions come from the best of intentions.
- You observe that your own and others’ positions, feelings,

interpretations, and actions are unpredictable and polarized.

- In reacting to others’ actions, you experience contradictory impulses.
- You confide your thoughts only to people you trust.
- You are hoping that things will turn out okay, but deep down inside, you fear that it will not improve.
- You feel a lack of progression in communication, ending up back where you started.

### Reflexive Practice and Conflict

In 2003, a not-for-profit organization’s board had terminated the executive director. This termination had created two opposing camps, in which one group still supported the old director, and the other group did not support the old director, and was glad the director had been terminated. Two months after the termination, the two opposing camps were now entrenched in their own positions. A new director had been hired, but would not start for a couple of weeks. The two groups wanted to get past their opposition to each other before the new director started. We facilitated a one-day session with both groups in attendance. We used the strange loop pattern to develop a set of questions that each person answered and shared with the whole group. For example, questions included asking about the pressure people were experiencing as a result of the termination, and the expectations and hopes people had about each other and the new director.

The session started out with a lot of anger and frustration from both groups, mainly directed at each other and the board. By mid-afternoon, all participants were open to hearing each other and were ready to move forward together. Participants stated that what they appreciated the most about the session was that there was no blame, and that grace was given to everyone for what had happened in the past.

### Reflexive Practice and Managing Transition

Reflexive practice can also be used to analyze what might happen when people are trying to manage transition. In 2005, a major oil and gas company wanted to assist cross-functional teams to manage a transition that involved selling certain assets in which these teams resided. We were asked to help the members of these asset teams to decide if they wanted to stay with the company, go to the new company, or do something else. In a one-day session, we facilitated the team through the strange loop pattern to help members of the teams to understand what they were experiencing, and how to deal effectively with this experience.

The session started out with a lot of confusion, worry, anxiety, and misinformation about what people thought might happen to them during this transition. By mid-afternoon, all participants were in a calmer state, feeling much more in control of their own futures. They had also gelled into a support group for each other, willing to listen to each other’s worries and frustrations, and to support each other in whatever way possible.

### Reflexive Practice and Planning

One of the things that reflexive practice is able to do is to bring the *patterns we live* and the *stories we tell* to the surface. This results in being able to decide whether or not we want to continue living these patterns and telling these stories, or start living different patterns and telling different stories. In 2006, an executive group in a school system decided to use reflexive practice to help to understand the *stories told* and *patterns lived* about the budget. As a result of using reflexive practice, the executive team was able to save over \$2 million.

### Reflexive Practice and Coaching

Recently, we were asked by an individual in an organization how he could deal with attractiveness principle and his inability to say no. Using questions derived from the strange loop pattern, we discovered that this individual felt trapped and unable to see any future in the company in which he worked. His solution to this situation came when we talked about the six reflexive choices. He had already decided that he wanted to leave the company as a result of his frustration. So, he chose *exit the relationship* as his reflexive choice. As soon as he made this choice, he felt much more in control. Suddenly, he could see how he might be able to manage his work in order to exit gracefully. A few months later, he told us that he believed he could not leave the company at this time, but that this perspective that he was still going to exit in the future was continuing to help him to manage other people's expectations of him.

Like systems thinking (see **InfoMine**, Vol. 11, No. 6), this approach to reflexive practice creates an environment in which people can easily trust each other, respect differences and diversity,

communicate with honesty, collaborate successfully, and be accountable to each other. As in the opening quote, reflexive practice places people in the position of the answer finding them, rather than them frantically searching for the answer. This is because:

- Everyone's perspective is critical to understanding the situation and the relational system. In many cases, this is the first time that people have felt that what they have to say is considered by others. People often say: "I'm surprised that other people listened to me, even if they disagreed with what I was saying!"
- Individual perspectives are connected to everyone else's perspectives, resulting in a complex and systemic understanding of the situation that clearly defines and values people's experiences. Often, this is the first time people have seen the situation with a clarity that creates both understanding and meaning. This approach to reflexive practice creates a *shared vision* of what is, and what can be (see **InfoMine**, Vol. 2, No. 4).
- This approach to reflexive practice also produces actions that are doable, and that produce measurable and sustainable results. Even more interesting is that, collectively, team members agree with the collective actions, and are willing to implement these actions. In many cases, team members cannot wait to start taking action because they are so excited about what will occur as a result.
- Team members feel a collective ownership of what they have achieved. Even more important is the fact that they want to share their collective understanding with others, and to get others on board. Team members often want others to experience what they have experienced because they have found it to be such a rich and rewarding experience. A surprising emergent property is an increase in

loyalty to each other, to the team, and to the organization.

- People who experience reflexive practice tell us how much reflexive practice has changed their relationships with themselves and their family. Some people have used reflexive practice to help them to make life decisions. Others have used it to guide conversations with people who might be frustrated and angry. The most revealing insight is when people tell us that they are surprised at how much better they feel when they engage in a mindful conversation using reflexive practice. They feel connected in a healthy and helpful way. What is also surprising is that even if the relationship they are working on does not turn well, they feel they can accept and live with the relationship or exit the relationship without feeling guilty or remorseful.

"Human beings have trouble letting go sometimes, but it is the very opposite of effort. You just do it".

— James Ballard, **What's the Rush? Step Out of the Race, Free Your Mind, Change Your Life** (1999)



**Complexity, Relationships, and Strange Loops: Reflexive Practice Guide**, see [www.mhainstitute.ca](http://www.mhainstitute.ca) for more information

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