

Fog Management

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ABSTRACT: *Fog represents the chaos and confusion that life presents to us in many forms. It is natural and expected, and always offers an opportunity for growth. In this article, Stephen explores fog as it applied to organisations, projects and individuals, and mechanisms available for managing our process through it and the results we obtain.*

I am alone on a journey in a wild and inhospitable wilderness. The terrain is treacherous. It is night and to make matters worse a thick, black fog has descended, obscuring what little light I did have, so now nothing is visible. What can I do? Fear mounts. The desire to resist the reality of being stuck grows. The rash idea of stepping out simply to feel progress is being made is strong, but I know that doing so would certainly spell disaster. Whatever it was that brought me on this journey yells, "You must hurry. We must press on. You are wasting time..." And yet for all this urgency there is nothing to do but be still, stay where I am, and accept the realities of my predicament.

Here I am sitting on a flight from Singapore to Auckland. It is a full flight. The journey is a short ten hours in a seat I long ago learned has a broken head rest. I am not going to sleep on this trip. The person next to me tosses and turns, for some reason believing that the world should have served him with a seat that takes up more than his seat width. I am much bigger than he is and could use force to resolve his little tussles for space; a pointed elbow "accidentally" directed at the offending limb extending into "my space", but to what end? I could sit here and stew, resent the invasion of my space and privacy, and fester with anger. I could fight the fact that I am still four hours from home, and the tiredness I feel will simply grow and wipe out a day of productivity.

I am part of a team and we have spent a long and concentrated day discussing issues and seeking the best approach for establishing a globalisation strategy for our organisation. We have pushed, poked and prodded at the subject, turned over every stone we could find to examine and explore options. We are tired. A feeling of despondency and confusion has descended because, for all our efforts, we feel further from a solution than we were eight long hours ago. All the issues are present, swirling in the mental and emotional fog that has descended on our little group. We know the discussion has been important, but where is the progress, when

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will it come, and what will it look like? The deadline for creating a solution is drawing nearer. There is urgency, but urgency will not force an answer. As a group we could resist the unknowing, seek to fight against the reality of the confusion we are in, label the experience unproductive or bad because nothing concrete has come from our effort. As a team we struggle with this. Individually, we each face our own internal voices that offer their judgments and opinions of how we are doing, and this adds more darkness and confusion to the situation we are in.

Our company is struggling financially. It is suffering from criticism by market analysts of poor returns. External forces have not been kind to us, and despite our best efforts we seem to be getting sucked down into a whirlpool of issues, insurmountable problems, and our best efforts only make things worse. Our employees are growing increasingly uneasy. They feel insecure for their future. In their growing anxiety and need to survive, they add to the other voices full of suggestions of what we must do to redeem the company. Everyone knows best and they demand that we listen to and act on what they tell us. They do not carry the burden of responsibility, do not have to deal with the daily barrage of problems we are confronted with, but they know they are right, and that we should hearken to them, and they have the media on their side. They send different, confusing and contradictory messages. These groups do not have at stake what we have. We run this organisation. If it fails they will buy shares in another company, or not, or get a job elsewhere. We have the responsibility for creating an environment of success for everyone. Our livelihood, reputation and futures rest in whether we can successfully work out of the chaos we are in. We seem to be failing as a group and individually. Surely if we work harder, keep fighting the nagging, sinking feeling that is overwhelming and consuming us, we will find a way out. Or we can blot out the doubt, ignore the anxiety and confusion, pretend it does not exist, and then we can act with apparent clarity. We seem to be drowning. The struggle seems to be vain. The world will judge us harshly in the morning.

Whatever form it takes, **fog** is **often interpreted as that somewhat unpleasant experience of not only feeling lost but of having no sense of how to find one's way**. It mixes in physical, emotional, mental and spiritual turmoil and says, "You are lost and there is nothing you can do to get out of this." And generally it is right. In each of the examples offered above what is there to do? 'Doing' only serves to make the situation worse. However, the most difficult thing to do is often NOTHING!!! Surely we should be acting, fighting for another solution, actively engaged in unearthing another option we have overlooked. Yet nothing can be the best thing.

Fog in our lives, whether individually, in teams or as an organisation, **is an invitation to get intimate with ourselves**. It is an opportunity to explore the inner realms of our soul and appreciate better the messages, voices and desires that exist within us, and listen in the quiet. We are often so busy with the intensity of life and our need to do things. We are sometimes presented with situations where there is no clear way forward and eventually we either tire and collapse in futility and frustration, have a

mental (or organisational) breakdown, or we learn to be still by choice. It is then that we start to gain a different perspective and see that perhaps light does exist, but not where we expected. If external movement is not possible, because of fog, then the movement has to be inward. ***As we open up to ourselves and the words, fears, concerns, quiet desires, dreams for something different, and other messages from within, we start developing a deeper sense of who we are, what we want, and what really matters to us.*** If only this was an instantaneous experience, but it is not, and for good reason. Engaging with ourselves, getting deeply intimate, open and honest about who we are, what we want, and what our true priorities in life can be a rich and rewarding though often frightening experience. All the examples above include the individual journey. Sometimes the journey is totally alone, and sometimes we share it with others, but the experience is still always ours. And the moment of enlightenment is such a powerful and wonderful experience, where, as if by magic, the cloud lifts and with clarity the answer presents itself, and we feel the rush and thrill of new certainty and direction. It may come as a new attitude or realisation. It may be a change in belief or paradigm. Something we were holding on to as significant may diminish or be let go. The art is to know when action is good and when to be still and allow things to settle, incubate, and to listen to the messages from within.

As Chair of the Globalisation Project Action Team, responsible for developing PMI's globalisation strategy, I remember with great fondness the day in Seattle where we struggled as a team with what model to use. I vividly recall what it was like, and how very real the fog of confusion was at the end of the day. It was a great team to be a part of, and when I suggested we break for the day, enjoy an evening together, and drop the subject until the next day, the team accepted this and we took time out. The next morning, within 15 minutes of reconvening we had a model drawn, and though it did change very modestly with time, it was largely there, complete and robust in an incredibly short time, once we let go of urgency and allowed incubation and stillness on the subject to be part of the process.

I have not been in management of a company on the stock market, but have had my own business for a number of years. I have experienced the pain of failure where my dreams seemed to come crashing down, people who depended on me found themselves exposed by my failure, and then I had to deal with their voices and my own as I worked through and found a way out of the dilemma. The way came from getting clear about what was important to me, what my real desires were, and exploring the intimate recesses of my passionate soul. I was able to rewrite my purpose and re-emerge into the light with a greater, but different, conviction of what I really wanted to do. Finding that peace amid the turmoil is precious.

And as to the flight from Singapore to Auckland...I am on that right now, and I am still getting thumped and bumped by a person who is taking more than his allotted space. And I have got some real value out of it because I have let my passion emerge again and written something of meaning to me.

Fog management is facilitating the development of clarity and meaning from among the confusing and contradictory situations and messages that confront us. It is a process of growth and development in a deep and meaningful way. There are times when effort and action are required. More often than we allow, there are also times when we need to step back out of the fray and allow peace to exist as we stop fighting the thickening fog. We need to go deeper within ourselves and get reacquainted. Organisations can get so busy dealing with crises and issues that they lose the plot, disconnect from their purpose (and I do not refer to the analytical statement written and published) that would otherwise provide the glue that binds everyone to a common cause and direction.

Not everyone who reads this will agree, and that is fine. We all have our own processes, and life has a habit of serving up the right mix of events and growth opportunities as and when we need them. Some people do seem to cruise through life and experience little need for introspection. That doesn't make them wrong. I simply appreciate what I have learned to be a richness of getting acquainted with myself, and the power that this brings me as I embrace the process, and get clear about what is important to me, and then align my actions with my soul.

What does fog mean to you? How do you handle fog in your life? Do you have natural tendencies that aggravate the situation? What can you do differently that would increase your effectiveness in managing confusion and enable you to draw more from each situation? How does your need for certainty complicate or confuse situations you face with other people where recognising there is a rightful state of confusion and ambiguity could enable deeper exploration and understanding of the issues? What can you specifically do that would increase your ability to lead yourself and others through such situations to achieve better results?

There is richness and beauty in becoming truly acquainted with ourselves and with those we are working with. Clarity may be artificially introduced when we fear the fog, or it may come as a result of embracing the unknown and emerging at the other end; then it is a celebration. Embrace life, appreciate fog, and enjoy the learning and growth opportunities served to you on your journey through life.

As much as I hope this article causes you some reflection, I would also appreciate any feedback you might care to share with me. As an area of specific interest to me I am gathering ideas and concepts to strengthen my breadth and depth of understanding of this topic. No personal examples will be used without permission.