

Working through Uncertainty and Confusion to Achieve Success

Introduction

Fog is a natural phenomenon that may bring serenity and peace and tranquillity or frustration and chaos. It depends on what we are doing, our sense of urgency, and the extent to which we accept its presence without resistance. In mild forms of fog visibility is impaired slightly. As it gets more intense visibility can be totally lost. We may find our emotional and mental responses are heightened and cloud our ability to deal effectively with the situation. Just as travellers at a fog-bound airport tend to become increasingly frustrated and agitated, we may start exhibiting reactive behaviours, lose our calm, and experience increasingly strong levels of chaos and confusion.

Fog manifests itself in a variety of ways. Our clarity gets clouded, we feel lost, confused, abandoned, or a variety of other unsettling emotions, misunderstandings arise with partners, and conflict and confusion may develop.

Factors that contribute to fog for us personally include:

- Unclear life purpose, or working against it
- important decisions
- personal issues
- situations where we have limited 'control'
- pressure, stress and tiredness
- anger, frustration, worry, depression, and other "negative" emotions
- lack of confidence, insecurity, and other issues relating to self-worth
- lack of information
- lack of experience

It is important that we recognise factors that contribute to fog, and which unsettle us. As fog develops navigating our way becomes difficult. The path is obscured by the very issues we wish to steer around. We must be able to deal with ambiguity and not become overwhelmed by uncertainty.

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Abstract

Every endeavour we pursue necessarily involves change, and change stirs up fog which is any chaos or confusion (loss of clarity) we face. Personal effectiveness requires us to manage our response to fog, and also recognise, respond to and manage the impact of fog on those around us.

Keywords

Aggression, attachment, avoidance, confusion, control, denial, emotional intelligence, expectation, facade, fog management, forgiveness, freeze, integrity, pain, protection, relationship with self, relaxation, responsibility, self-awareness, uncertainty

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Recognising Fog

We have our generous complement of insecurities, foibles, personal issues etc, and patterns for exhibiting these. Though it may appear to help others through their fog we must first manage ourselves, or our issues are likely to be projected on to and mirrored back to us by those around us. We get to experience from others everything we have not dealt with internally.

Two instinctual motivators for all creatures are those of **seeking pleasure** and **avoiding pain**. Where a situation provides potential for both pleasure and pain, avoiding pain tends to be the stronger influence. Even when we know an outcome will be good for us, the pain involved in achieving it creates resistance. As humans we have the



Uncertainty and confusion! How can I work with and within it?

ability to master these fundamental behaviours, to some extent at least. We have many examples of outstanding individuals who have chosen to face significant pain (physical, emotional, mental and/or spiritual) and come out triumphant (whether in sport, business, battle or other environment). In every situation in life these two drivers play a part. How we deal with them is based on our values, beliefs, and rules we live by.

There are **three key sources of pain**, all of which we seek to avoid if possible. They are:

- **attachments** to the past that are stretched or broken
- personal **protections** that are shattered
- **expectations** that we fail to realise

Attachments include routines, patterns of behaviour, relationships with family, friends and others, memories, and anything else that link us to the past, the people we have known, and our experiences. Attachments are our source of security, our link to the familiar. Tragedy involving someone we love is a classic example of how having these attachments stretched or broken creates pain for us. At work we become attached to those we associate with, the job we do, and our routines. Even the things that we don't like are familiar and are sources of attachment. Any change that threatens our attachments causes pain and stirs up fog.

Personal protections comprise all the values, rules, beliefs, behaviours and attitudes we maintain to shield ourselves from threats, whether real or perceived. For example we establish ways of viewing the world to simply things for us, reducing the volume of information we process to function, and these necessarily filter out information that does not fit our adopted pattern. Generally, they are effective ways of dealing with an otherwise complicated world, but we come to grief when confronted with a situation that does not fit our pattern, and which forces us to change entrenched beliefs or patterns of behaviour.

Examples of how our protections may be manifest include:

- When working with others, we hold rigid concepts of how things should be organised and run, but others do not buy in, and prefer an alternate approach. Frustration, anger or other emotions indicate things are not as we would like.
- We behave arrogantly and aggressively as a protection for poor self esteem, whereas a person more comfortable with themselves might be more quietly assertive and achieve the same outcomes in an easier, less aggressive way.
- Criticism results in us being aggressive or defensive, either being reactions that result in us

failing to address the issue, and increasing the level of strife and confusion.

Expectations relate to the future in that we aspire for or want things. There is pain when we recognise that we will not realise, in full or part, what we were seeking. Realising our marriage is not working out or that a job is toxic are examples of expectations being soiled and pain developing. Often as our expectations are placed under threat we retreat to our protections and exhibit 'stress' behaviours. Trust for others may diminish (lack of trust is a protection against feeling vulnerable), and conflict is likely to increase.

Anything that disrupts the status quo may cause an adjustment to our expectations. Change increases confusion and uncertainty in our lives. In other words we experience heightened fog.

Other examples of situations that contribute fog include:

- Taking positive steps into the unknown (even the good things create confusion!)
- Inaction or indecision placing us in a situation with diminishing options
- Shifting balances of power between ourselves and others
- Lack or loss of personal balance
- Not having our needs met (at any one or more levels).

We each have different tolerances for confusion. At one extreme there are people who seem to live in confusion, enjoy it, and never emerge. It is problematic when confusion becomes an excuse for lack of action. At the other extreme are those who loathe confusion. They resist its existence. At this end it becomes an issue when certainty is artificially created. For example jumping to a speedy decision will create certainty, but it has closed out other potentially more beneficial options that further exploration would have identified.

All the factors listed above are compounded in team, group and organisational settings. Our different personalities, priorities and interests, and the various ways of learning, problem solving, reaching decisions and communicating we have aggravate fog factors. Tension and conflict can quickly develop. Understanding this can be most useful when working with others and recognising behaviours that indicate they are facing fog.

Managing Fog¹

There are plenty of ineffective ways of managing fog. Categories of ineffective strategy include:

- **Avoidance** – do anything but confront or deal with the area of concern; (e.g. Delaying tactics.

Perfectionism may be used as a means for staying put and thus not having to venture where there is uncertainty)

- **Denial** – Refusal to accept the problem exists. (e.g. Refusing to acknowledge a crisis and pushing forward rather than facing it, hoping it will go away)
- **Aggression** – Passive or active (e.g. attack the messenger rather than face up to some painful news or stark reality)
- **Façade** – Erecting a mask and attempting to portray something other than what is being experienced (e.g. false portrayal of confidence, using diversions to shift attention)
- **Over-Control** – Exerting control stemming from fear rather than prudent management (e.g. micro-managing, which typically arises from trust issues). Also included are 'control dramas'. These are forms of behaviour used to manipulate relationships, stifle or corral the actions of others, and to elicit a specific response. They constitute aggressive patterns (intimidation and interrogation) and passive patterns (aloofness and 'poor me').

Key strategies that are effective in managing fog include:

Be responsible FOR yourself: Take ownership of our own behaviours, actions, feelings, results etc. Accept that it is up to us to manage our situation, and any issues we have. Recognise that we choose how we act, feel and behave and in large part determine the results we achieve. It energises us because as we choose and pursue our desired outcomes we strengthen the connection between choice and result.

Be responsible TO others: Act morally, legally and ethically and communicate our thoughts, feelings and needs appropriately. We will:

- fulfil our duties and obligations to others
- offer support
- work with others in a manner that promotes joint activities
- express issues and concerns directly (e.g. to management and/or clients) rather than bury them
- clarify when there is a misunderstanding
- seek support when we need help
- interact and work with others openly and with integrity
- be authentic in how we present ourselves to others
- not take responsibility for others, but encourage them to do that themselves.

Develop emotional intelligence: This is a lifelong activity and focuses on the four main emotional competencies – self-awareness and self-management (personal

¹ In my subsequently published book, 'Appreciate the Fog', I refer to ineffective strategies as survive reactions or fear-based reactions that are tactics, with the specific categories being fight, flight, freeze and fabricate.

competencies), social awareness and relationship management (social competencies).

Apply 'negative' emotion for positive outcomes: For example:

- **Frustration** indicates that **current actions are failing** so it may be time to consider trying an alternate approach (different action, new behaviour, change in attitude);
- **Anger** often indicates **we feel violated**, that a boundary has been crossed so taking steps to identify and strengthen the boundary and clarify what you consider inappropriate or unreasonable actions on the part of someone else may be required.
- **Anxiety** indicates **we feel unsafe**, and do not trust we will be alright during or at the end of whatever is happening. It may be useful strengthening internal trust levels (of self and others) and/or speaking to someone who can help address the insecurities.

'Negative' emotions are powerful indicators that some shift or change is required, usually within ourselves. By acting positively on the feeling, which may often be through adjusting our own attitude or approach, we create power for ourselves.

Deal with resentment quickly: Resentment is a responsibility issue, where a person has allowed someone else to take responsibility for them, or they are failing to be responsible to someone else. Blame and guilt are common companions. If not recognised and dealt with, resentment can grow like a cancer and resultant behaviours can undermine relationships.

Clarify and maintain boundaries: Fog increases where personal boundaries are allowed to shift and change without agreement. It suits some people to deliberately push and manipulate boundaries. If permitted, confusion increases. E.g. a partner pushes for actions from you that you are uncomfortable with, even if you are not clear why you are uncomfortable.

Don't confuse action with movement: Making decisions and taking action do not contribute if investigation, reflection, planning and other preparation activities are required. Fog can instil a false sense of urgency where taking time for reflection might provide solutions. Maintain the eagle's strategic vision while our tactical view is obscured by the jungle.

Confront control dramas: Giving into these dramas robs the relationship of honesty and vitality, and within a project can undermine team performance. Find positive ways of diffusing the use of such dramas.

Acknowledge your weaknesses: Surround yourself with people who complement you. If you are defensive of

your weaknesses much energy will be spent erecting protections against these becoming apparent.

Act with integrity: Do not compromise core values. Take right action regardless of consequence or criticism. Apologise where it is appropriate. If your values are significantly at variance to those of the organisation it is unhealthy to stay there long-term.

Appreciate fog: It is always an opportunity to take stock of and get better acquainted with a situation. Fog is also often a call for creativity and problem solving, and can be an opportunity to strengthen the team relationship and working capacity by appropriately involving them.

Use relaxation techniques: Any methods, practices and techniques that assist in creating a personal sense of peace and well-being enhance your ability to weather storms and manage fog more effectively.

Be forgiving: Expect performance and forgive shortcomings. Apply this to yourself as much as to anyone else. When things go wrong many of us have a critical voice that creates discord within, reminding us of our shortcomings. Quiet the critic within, and do not be a critic of others. Be positive and supportive of colleagues, with an attitude of forgiveness. Where issues must be raised create a safe environment within which to provide feedback. Create a tolerant, accepting environment that enables people to learn, grow and develop safely.

Conclusion

Fog is a daily reality. Dealing with it effectively requires personal awareness, application of self-mastery and self-discipline, openness to alternatives (even when they are not clearly identifiable), sound communication and interpersonal skills, a capacity to cope with ambiguity, and a willingness to learn and grow as an individual. Our attitude to and approach in dealing with fog has a powerful impact on future results. If we resist fog, fight

For more information related to themes in this article, refer to: Harrison, S. G. (2012). [*Appreciate the Fog: Embrace Change with Power and Purpose*](#). Auckland, New Zealand: Xlibris Corporation.

Coaching can support you create the best outcome when working with areas covered by this article.

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it, we can create a monster that will eventually beat us into submission. If we appreciate fog, and see it as a neutral indicator of potential issues and as a natural outcome of change it becomes a powerful ally. By relying on fog to indicate areas we need to focus more attention we have greater opportunity to create positive results.

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