

The Spiral of Accountability™

Carol's Explanation

Early in my career, I lived in Texas and worked for several years in healthcare, specifically at a for-profit psychiatric hospital. I remember a time in 1990 when I noticed that our senior leaders were in closed door, multi-day meetings with corporate bigwigs. When our leaders emerged, they were quiet and distant. I was in middle-management, and my fellow managers and I were confused and clearly out of the loop of what was going on in those closed-door meetings. We were in the Fog.

Uncertainty can spark a wide variety of emotions and those emotions often lead to destructive self-talk. Our self-talk then has the potential of intensifying those emotions. It is circular. They feed each other.

In my Texas scenario, as managers, our initial reaction to our Fog experience was fear and anxiety and that fear promoted self-talk statements like: "This can only be bad;" "Uh oh, maybe we are being sold or closed." And, "I bet heads are going to roll." We were beginning to Spiral Down.

As our self-statements became more and more absolute, we began to not only think the hospital was closing but that corporate was out to get us and weren't being fair and our executives were just trying to save their own jobs and leaving us out in the cold. The fear and anxiety were intensifying. Some of us lost sleep and our work suffered as we stewed.

We also started to share our thoughts with others as if we knew all the facts and what was going to happen. That of course leaked out into our staff. At this point our behaviors were becoming destructive.

When we Spiral Down, we engage in multiple destructive behaviors like avoidance (we may ignore the problem all together or avoid certain people), or we make excuses, we gossip, and we assign blame. These behaviors are making the situation actively worse.

Then, we then expand our destruction by recruiting others to join in the misery. No one wants to be alone in their misery. We want others to justify our misery and our destructive behavior. Well, we had successfully done that and now our staff was also in the Spiraling Down. It was easy for them to join in the rumors and speculate with information none of us had.

As you can see an important evolution happens along the way down the Spiral. That event or situation that initiated the Fog transitions into a narrative and then that narrative becomes a saga, and no saga is complete without a distinct villain to be lashed out at. In our case it was "corporate" and our "executives." And the stories we made up in our heads and with each other became very dramatic and we started to bond together with, "How can they do this to us?"; "We deserve better; This place can't function without us!"; "we should just all barge in there and give them a piece of our mind!"; We had a fully generated group of commiserators and were in full blown misery.

The emotions of fear and anxiety that once had us feeling unsure and vulnerable now have us feeling self-righteous and full of contempt. The very destructive energy associated with self-righteousness and contempt are alluring; this is why it is so easy to generate commiserators. It can even be energizing and addictive, so much so that we really do not want a solution to the initial problem because it could lessen our contempt and we could lose our perceived power.

While it is very easy to Spiral Down in such a situation as we did, there is another way to approach the Fog of uncertainty. If we flip the Spiral, we can Spiral Up instead of down because here is the deal...The Fog can also spark feelings of curiosity, empathy, and even excitement that lead to more effective self-talk such as, "There has to be more to this story." Which lead to questions,

- "How else can I look at this situation?"
- What are my facts and assumptions?
- Who else, can give me more information or perspective?
- What is my best response in this situation?"

These questions invite productive behaviors like dialogue, discussion around ideas, teamwork, and leadership. As we learn more, the feelings of curiosity and empathy intensify too. We also start to involve others to explore ideas and solutions with us. We seek collaboration in our problem solving because we know problems do not get solved alone. This is work we do together.

Here's the good news in my Texas story. As middle managers, a couple of us came together and realized we couldn't just stand by. We needed to choose a different path that would enable us to spiral up or our staff's attitudes and performance would suffer to the point of affecting patients. To do that we would have to get curious about what was happening behind those closed doors and not assume we knew. We would have to be brave enough to seek clarification from our leaders so that we could truly know the actual situation.

When we chose to actually do this, we discovered the meetings were an intense training around a new quality program corporate was implementing. We also found out that our leaders were stressed out about how the rest of the organization would react to the program, so they were keeping the initiative under wraps. It turned out they were in the fog and spiraling down just like we were. As a leadership team, once we realized we were in the same place, it was easy to change our focus from complaining and commiserating to considering our options of how to go about implementing this new program and getting staff on board. We were ready to communicate and collaborate rather than assume and make excuses.

The evolution that happens when we Spiral Up changes from a destructive obstacle to a door to opportunities that build strong connections and collaboration. These experiences build resiliency and Synchronicity in individuals and teams and leaders. I am not going to lie to you, this is hard work (spiraling down is easy), it is not nearly as addictive in its intensity, but it is much more rewarding and inspiring. We were empowered to solve a problem. And that power was real.

The difference between whether a Fog experience sends us Spiraling Up or Spiraling Down is all in our mindset and questions are the key. The next time you experience a Fog, ask yourself,

1. What am I assuming and is it true? Because I can be wrong.
2. Am I exaggerating or overreacting? Because I can do that too.
3. How else can I look at this situation? Or Who can give me insights I cannot provide myself?

Those questions will lead you to even more questions, ones that you need to involve others in answering. Be particular about who you choose to help you. Seek the others that bring the light, not the darkness, that bring the light that helps you to see clearly so you have the courage to move into what is ahead.