

Confusion is Progress

(Breaking the Chains of Mental Habits)

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Are you overwhelmed? Do you find that you have taken on too much yet again? Is your life off balance between the demands of your career and the expectations you have for your personal life? Have you been told by your manager that you cannot take on any more responsibility and therefore are not being considered for the next promotion? Confused? Congratulations! Confusion is progress.

We live in a world that prizes certainty. We feel safe when we know exactly what is going on and can predict what is going to happen. Our cultural heroes are portrayed as always knowing the answer. Yet, living with ambiguity is not only necessary, it is an extremely valuable skill. In fact, it is a trait most highly prized among top executives. How can we capture this leadership skill for ourselves and use it in making decisions and recapturing balance both in our careers and our personal lives?

We can start by recognizing that our confusion is, in fact, progress. It is not just an uncomfortable feeling, to be moved through as quickly as possible. It is the beginning of a new understanding and the opening for enhanced learning.

As we engage the world, we have certain working assumptions or beliefs about how it is supposed to be. When the world, for whatever reason, does not line up with these beliefs, our understanding of unfolding events becomes insufficient and we become confused.

The typical reaction to confusion is to immediately move back into certainty. Consider, instead, lingering in this space of uncertainty and exploring its possibilities. Indeed, we can deliberately seek it out, especially when we are searching for new and creative approaches to the same old “problems” or situations.

We all have habits. Habits are useful. They are efficient ways of dealing with the world that allow us to move more easily through life. With mental habits, we have a preset worldview that we apply without reflection. This is convenient, as we do not have to constantly review every little aspect of what is happening. At the same time, this means we stop paying attention to what we are doing and what we are thinking. It becomes automatic and transparent to us. Therein lies the danger.

Unquestioning certainty in our current worldview prevents us from understanding or even considering any other perspective or possibility. Mental habits leave us with unexamined blind spots, limiting our ability to move forward. They become mental chains that inhibit quick learning.

The gift of confusion is an opportunity to break the chains of these mental habits. Welcome confusion like a trusted friend with a message. Declare that you need a new understanding. Question your assumptions about what is happening. Look for another viewpoint.

Let us contemplate, as an example, feeling off balance and being continually overwhelmed. Deliberately stay with the confusion. Now, add another viewpoint and consider the situation from the perspective of Yes and No.

Yes and No are declarations that work together. Yes creates connection and gets you moving forward. No creates boundaries and gives you

space. Yes, without the ability to say No, is weak. It leaves you overwhelmed and often resentful. No, without the ability to say Yes, leaves you isolated and unapproachable. We need to be able to say No, in order for Yes to be meaningful. We also need to be able to say Yes, for No to be meaningful.

In reviewing your particular situation, what are you always saying Yes to? Are you saying Yes to fixing the work of your direct reports when they give you incomplete assignments? Do you automatically take on the responsibility to follow through on a project? Are you saying Yes out of habit? Could you, should you, perhaps say No?

Conversely, what are you usually saying No to? Are you saying No to a ten-minute work break or a thirty-minute evening walk? Are you saying No to a challenging assignment by not volunteering? Are you saying No to your own power, by not speaking up with your own observations about a situation? Is this when you might want to say Yes instead?

Reconsider your dilemma and question each instance. Whatever you are not changing, you are choosing. What do you want to start doing? What do you want to stop doing? What do you want to continue doing? Try mixing in a few No’s where you would typically say Yes, and vice versa. Little changes can make a big difference.

You are now managing the space of confusion with questions, rather than answers. The questions offer a different perspective. A new path will begin to emerge and your focus will be clearer.

Certainty and order are a temporary condition. When you find yourself feeling confused, embrace it and linger! See it as a signal that it is time to expand your understanding and learn anew. Break the chains of current mental habits. Approach confusion with questions and make it a space of possibility.

Confusion is progress! ■

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