

(U) "Signal v. Noise" Column: Summit Fever

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(U) **Imagine that you have decided to climb Mount Everest.** You train for a few years, buy about \$8,000 dollars worth of equipment and \$3,000 of bottled oxygen, not to mention the training time, and then finally are ready to go. You buy the airline ticket for Nepal, maybe even go big and upgrade to business class (it is the trip of a lifetime)! Pay extra to ship your equipment, hire a Sherpa and a guide service (at least \$40,000), pay the \$10,000 fee to even take a step into the base camp area, and take three weeks off of work -- the longest vacation time you've spent away.

(U) Everyone knows you've been training for this and a daily Facebook countdown has spread the word to all of your friends and family who await to see a picture of you at the top of Mount Everest. Years of hard work, careful planning, and tens of thousands of dollars have gone into this trip -- there's no turning back. You arrive at the mountain, settling in a base camp and it's better than you can imagine. You are about to realize the dream. **Then, the weather starts to turn.**

(U) First it's some rain. Then the blue sky turns gray. The Sherpa looks nervous. The wind picks up, snow starts, and when asked if anyone wants to turn back, you reply, "No way! The weather will pass! I'll never get this opportunity again and I can't turn back now." **You and the group push ahead through everything as the weather gets worse.**

(U) The book "Into Thin Air" describes a real-life example. In 1996, "...of the twenty climbers who fought their way to the summit (during a rogue storm), five died. One of the survivors had such severe frostbite, that his right forearm, nose, and most of his left hand had to be amputated." They continued to the summit despite the clear and present dangers, at significant cost. **Imagine being a member of this trip, so dedicated to reaching the summit that you continued ahead even as one fourth of the climbing team died.** Continuing to reach the goal resulted in catastrophic failure, despite achieving the goal.

(U) **Mountaineers call this phenomenon "summit fever" -- when an "individual becomes so fixated on reaching the summit that all else fades from consciousness."*** I think part of this phenomenon is due to the high level of investment (monetary and spiritual) in the project that pushes people to make decisions that are not otherwise supported by objective data.

(C//REL) I believe that SIGINTers, like the world-class climbers, are not immune to summit fever. It's easy enough to lose sight of the bad weather and push on relentlessly, especially after pouring lots of money, time, and resources into something. From turning off a database or collection site to starting over from scratch on a target set or software code, it's difficult to let go of the dream and your work so far. Sometimes, however, it's the very best decision to make. Just like in summit fever, failing to reach a goal that no longer makes sense to pursue takes some perspective and one must "be okay" with failing.

(U) So, when the summit is the only thing you can see, it's time to step back and check the weather. Find those experienced "sherpas" in the organization, and ask for their *honest* opinion and give them permission to speak freely. We should not fear failure, because often failure teaches us something very important. Instead we should focus on "failing quickly" and "less expensively" to progress faster and farther.

* (U) Perkins, D.N., Holtman, M.P., & Murphy, J.B. (2012). "[Leading at The Edge: Leadership Lessons from the Extraordinary Saga of Shackleton's Antarctic Expedition.](#)" AMACOM, p. 70.

(U) Thoughts on this topic? Post them on the [related Tapioca Pebble.](#)