# OCEANIC DISTRESS

## Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

Whatever you might think about Nokia CEO Stephen Elop, one thing is certain: He sure can wield a metaphor. Elop caused a stir with a vivid memo to Nokia employees [1] explaining that the company's strategic situation was like that of a man on a burning oil platform who has only seconds to decide whether to jump or be consumed in flames. This graphic allegory was later revealed to explain Nokia's choice for abandoning the open-source MeeGo mobile OS (presumably, the burning platform) in favor of the closed source Microsoft Windows mobile variant Windows Phone 7 (presumably the place of refuge).

Nokia's move was quite controversial within open source circles, and elsewhere among mobile watchers, who wondered if it is really in the company's interest to lock their fortunes with Elop's former employer in Redmond.

Many had opinions on the decision itself. I found myself more fascinated with the decision process and the arguments used to justify the choice. It is occasionally prudent to consider the power of metaphors and the danger of bringing them into a business context. Of course, images are a great way to rally the troops – if you already know what you're going to do. But to use them for decision making is downright dangerous, leading to a condition known as frame blindness: solving the wrong problem because you are led along by your reference frame rather than by the facts.

We have another word to describe the state of the man who jumps off the oil platform: It is called panic. In a well-told story, we just assume the narrator has complete knowledge of the situation, but in real life, we don't always see that clearly. In this case, everyone knows Nokia is struggling in the high-end smartphone market. We all know Symbian has some limitations, and they are having trouble getting MeeGo to work on their phones. The question is, is this a time to invest, dig in, and tap unknown reserves of resolve, or is it a time to jump off the platform and take the whole company into crisis mode?

The life-and-death metaphor has the effect of squelching calls for deliberation. Who's going to argue for more analysis when

you only have two seconds to live? This opens the way to a strategy that places 100% of the emphasis on short-term survival and 0% on long-term development. Nokia *might* have succeeded in their short-term problem: putting a next-generation smartphone on the path to market. But it really seems like they have sold out part of their future by making themselves dependent on an operating system controlled by another company.

In the clarity of fiction, the guy on the platform happens to guess right by diving for the icy water, but for every one of those stories, there is another story of someone who perishes in a fire, on a battlefield, or in the wilderness because they click into fight-or-flight mode rather than stopping to analyze. Consider, for instance, the accidents and (unconfirmed) reports of deaths caused by the 1930 radio broadcast about Martians landing on the Earth [2].

Of course, Nokia management would argue that there isn't really anything panicky or irrational about it. It could be a very rational choice to jump off the platform if you're absolutely sure you'll die if you don't jump.

So the question is, how certain is Nokia that they will die a terrible death if they don't take drastic action? I looked online for their 2010Q4 quarterly financial report (dated January 27, 2011-- less than two weeks before the burning platform memo) and was interested to read:

*In Q4 we delivered solid performance across all three of our businesses, and generated outstanding cash flow. Additionally, growth trends in the mobile devices market continue to be encouraging.* [3]

Wow, that sounds pretty desperate. Abandon ship!

## INFO

[1]  Burning Platform Memo: *http://blogs.wsj.com/tech-europe/2011/02/09/full-text-nokia-ceo-stephen-elops-burning-platform-memo/*

[2]  War of the Worlds Broadcast: *http://history1900s. about.com/od/1930s/a/warofworlds.htm*

[3]  Nokia Q4 2010 Financials: *http://www.nokia.com/about-nokia/financials/quarterly-and-annual-information*

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