



Improve culture by taming those 800-pound elephants

HAVE YOU EVER faced an 800-pound elephant? No?

What about that awkward conversation with one of your board members when you had to sidestep the “real issue” due to political infighting among your board members?

Or perhaps it was that think-on-your-feet response to an employee’s question about potential layoffs that you aren’t quite ready to announce. Recognize the elephants now?

Let’s face it, we’ve all experienced those 800-pound elephants, otherwise known as those unspoken issues that keep you from getting to the heart of the issue for whatever reason – personalities, internal politics, communication styles.

Thus you begin the tense and tenuous dance with the elephant: talking around the issue, talking to the issue and talking about the issue, but never addressing the root cause nor making any real progress.

When most professionals sense an elephantine issue, they try and sidestep it to avoid creating further conflict. Yet avoidance is one of the factors that contributes to the problem.

Instead of identifying the issue and having a conversation to clear the air, we create our own “stories” about what we believe is true, make decisions on half-truths or misinformation, push off our problems onto others, and make mistakes and bad decisions. The results are often disastrous.

[tips]

1 | Observe your own reactions, and introduce

them into the conversation. For example, say: “You know, I think you lost me there.”

2 | Watch for the reactions of others, such as an angry face. Call it out and ask for more information. For example, say, “I couldn’t help but notice” or “It looks like that causes you some concern.”

3 | As tough as these issues can be, taking the time to deal with and solve communication barriers indicates that you care about your employees and your customers.

Calling out the elephants

Fortunately, there are some simple (and some courageous) solutions you can learn that will help you sniff out the elephants, call them out before they escalate into a crisis, find the opportunities they present, and use them to build better working relationships.

Let’s say you are working with a member of your management team and despite every attempt to get your

point across and reach an agreement on how to proceed it only results in a circuitous conversation. Your frustration begins to build as you realize that you are just spinning your wheels. What can you do?

Observe your own reactions: The first thing to notice are your own internal reactions. Where did you lose your footing in the conversation? When did you feel you were disengaging? Where did you begin to feel frustrated?

When you begin to notice these reactions introduce them into the conversation. For example, “You know, I think you lost me there...” or “Perhaps, I’m not quite understanding what you mean when you say...”

Often in the heat of the moment, you can’t process everything that you are hearing. By acknowledging your own internal reactions in the moment you have the opportunity to clear up potential misunderstandings and let your colleague know where you need more information, and what details you might want to discuss further.

Watch for other’s reactions: The second thing to notice is your audience’s reactions: When did you lose their attention? When did they seem to uncomfortably shift around in their chair? Was that a puzzled or angry look that just came across their face?

When that happens, call it out and ask for more information. For example, “I couldn’t help but notice...” or “It looks like that causes you some

concern, can you tell me more..."

Watch for story telling: "Stories" are the emotions that you attach to the information you see and hear to explain what's going on. In the book *Crucial Conversations*, the authors make the claim that the emotions you express are solely your own: "...others don't make you mad. You make you mad. You and only you create your emotions...therefore, you can take back control of your own emotions by telling a different story."

To root out the stories, the *Crucial Conversations* authors suggest:

Separate the facts by focusing on behavior; can you see or hear this thing you are calling a fact?

Watch for "hot" terms: "She sounded very sarcastic," or "He was very angry." Watch for terms that express judgment or attributions, and in turn, create strong emotions.

Watch for "clever stories" – stories that justify your behavior; i.e., victim stories, villain stories or helpless stories.

Once you have rooted out the stories, either your stories or your audience's, you can call them out. For example, "Perhaps you are seeing something I'm not – how was that comment sarcastic?" Or, "That's one impression. What might be some other ways of interpreting her comment?"

By eliminating the stories, you and your audience can begin to build a shared understanding based on the agreed upon factual information.

Opportunities found

The good news about calling out the elephants is that when you handle them well, you can make a great impression on your audience and build, or rebuild, stronger working relationships.

Often long-held beliefs that limit

our thinking can be found within the elephants. And the longer those beliefs go unchallenged, the more that limited thinking grows inside of organizations.

It takes courage to call out the elephants, but when you do you will often be recognized by your colleagues for saying something that everyone else had been thinking.

People don't quickly forget how you had the courage to pause the conversation, acknowledge what wasn't being said, and work through the root cause issue.

Likewise, when you don't handle these situations well, it takes its toll on a good working relationship or further deteriorates a difficult one. How you handle the 800-pound elephant is critical not only to the matter at hand, but also to your ability to effectively communicate and relate to those individuals in the future, long after the elephant is gone.

As tough as these issues can be, taking the time to deal with and solve communication barriers indicates that you care about your employees and your customers.

By stepping outside of the run-and-gun style of communications,

you get to collect additional information to clarify decisions and create a common ground of understanding.

And one additional benefit: You will improve your working relationships. After all, who likes to work with people who can't communicate?

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Quote
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— Sayre Darling, *Courageous Communications*