

The Elephant in the Room:

***Five Communication Strategies to Name It, Discuss It,
and Resolve Its Presence in a Safe, Productive Way***

November 2nd, 2009

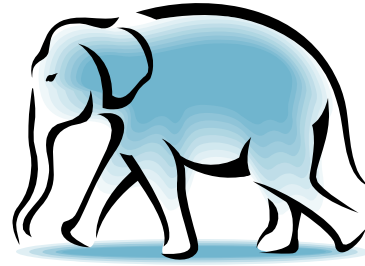
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The Elephant in the Room

WHAT is the elephant in the room?

- It can be a situation, topic or problem that two individuals -- or a team -- is aware of, but are unwilling to openly identify or discuss.



WHEN do certain situations, topics or problems turn into elephants?

- When they pose a threat (e.g. when my sense of competency is threatened)
- When they have the potential of embarrassment (e.g. when I am made to “look bad”)

WHY is the elephant allowed to hang around?

Because in calling attention to it...

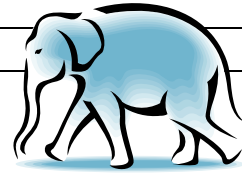
- I might hurt or damage a relationship
- I might say something I’ll regret
- I might be perceived as negative or antagonistic
- I might be retaliated against
- Sooner or later someone else will identify it and bring it out in the open
- It just might disappear on its own (wishful thinking!)

HOW do we name it, discuss it and resolve the elephant’s presence in a safe productive way?

By using the following communication strategies:

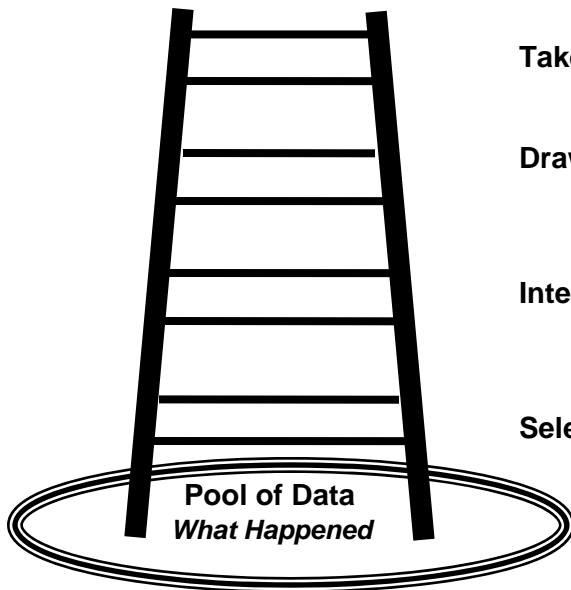
1. The Ladder of Inference
2. Advocacy and Inquiry
3. Addressing the Right Issue (CPR)
4. Paraphrasing and Perception-Checking
5. Giving Feedback

Elephant Strategy #1: Using the Ladder of Inference¹



The Ladder of Inference is a model that can help us understand how we select, interpret and process information. It will help us:

- improve our reasoning
- understand how our thinking diverges or converges with the thinking of others
- better use information to make decisions and draw conclusions



Take Action: based on our understanding of the problem

Draw Conclusions:

Explain and evaluate what happened
Propose action

Interpret Data:

Shaped by our values, beliefs, assumptions,
attitudes and past experiences

Select Data:

What & why do we select what we do?
What do we ignore?
What determines our selection?

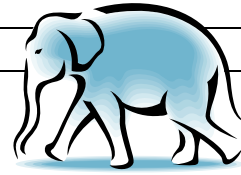
Using the Ladder of Inference to generate productive conversations will:

- explore our own reasoning process
- draw out more information from others
- identify where our views differ

Start by reflecting on these questions:

- How is it that we see the issue, problem or situation differently?
- What does the other person see that I may be missing?
- What can I learn from others' perspectives?
- How can I discover the reasonableness of the other person's perspective?

Elephant Strategy #2: Advocacy and Inquiryⁱⁱ



Advocacy and **Inquiry** are two tools to help you climb up and down the Ladder of Inference. They are not necessarily “either/or” tools; instead they can be used together to:

- surface the undiscussables
- narrow the gap between differing points of view
- bring clarity to a conversation

Advocacy is expressing a view or making a statement about your position. It allows you to:

- state your assumptions
- explain the context of your point of view
- give examples of what you propose and what is driving your action
- welcome debate

Phrases for Effective Advocacy

- “Let me tell you what I’m thinking and why...”
- “And here’s an example.”
- “I’d like to share what led me to this conclusion.”

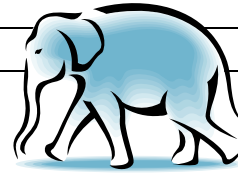
Inquiry explores the views of others through questions.

It allows you to:

- diffuse defensiveness
- invite alternative perspectives or opinions
- lessens the pressure on the other person to prove their point

Phrases for Effective Inquiry

- “What do you mean by...?”
- “Could you give me an example?”
- “What is your reaction to what I’ve just said?”
- “Do you see it the same or differently?”
- “What did I say that triggered your comment?”
- “What is your understanding of what I am proposing?”



A “crucial confrontation”¹ takes place when three elements are present:

1. the stakes are high
2. opinions vary
3. emotions run strong

How do you know you’re naming the right elephant in a crucial conversation?
You can unbundle the issues by practicing **CPR**.

- | | |
|----------------------|---|
| C ontent | What is the problem at hand?
Discuss the issue itself |
| P attern | Is there a pattern of behavior you need to address?
Discuss the fact that the issue keeps recurring |
| R elationship | Is the problem leading to a loss of trust or respect?
Discuss the fact that the issue is affecting the overall relationship between you and the other person |

Guidelines for unbundling the issue or problem:

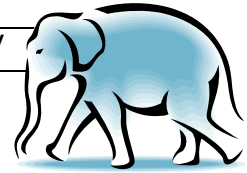
1. Resist jumping to quick conclusions
2. Describe the problem in neutral terms
3. Reduce the blame by investigating what others might have been up against
led them to think and act the way they did
4. Summarize the learning
5. Mutually design ways to alleviate the problem in the future

When having a crucial conversation, create a safe environment by reinforcing the “Mutuals”:

- **Mutual understanding**
- **Mutual trust**
- **Mutual respect**

¹ Patterson, K. and Grenny, J., *Crucial Confrontations*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005

Elephant Strategy #4: Paraphrasing^{iv} and Perception Checking^v



Paraphrasing and Perception Checking are two tools that will assist you in moving up and down the Ladder of Inference to better understand what was motivating the other person to do or say what he or she did.

Paraphrasing: An advocacy statement that puts into our own words what we believe to be another person's point of view without inserting our own inferences.

- It mirrors -- through your own words -- the key meanings that the other person has expressed ("What I hear you saying is...")
- It summarizes what is important to the other person
- It provides an opportunity for a high-level inquiry to ensure accuracy of the paraphrase ("Did I capture what you said accurately?" "Is there anything you would like to add or change?")

Perception Checking: A tool incorporating observation and inquiry which avoids jumping to conclusions and diffuses defensiveness.

It has three parts:

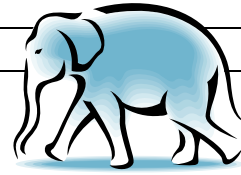
1. A description of the behavior you noticed
2. Two possible interpretations of the behavior
3. A request for clarification about how to interpret the behavior

Example #1:

1. I noticed that you seem to be running behind schedule on your advising appointment lately and we've gotten a few complaints about people having to wait longer than they had expected to.
2. Could it be that the Front Office staff are booking your appointments too close together or are the issues that you are discussing with the students more complex lately?
3. Is there something I can do to help you make your appointment flow more smoothly?

Example #2:

1. This morning when you got up and left the meeting abruptly without saying anything...
2. I wasn't sure if you were frustrated with the way the conversation was going or if you had an appointment you needed to get to?
3. What was up?



Use **A.I.R.** to share your concerns and give feedback.

AWARENESS: People may not be aware of what they are doing and the repercussions their actions or behavior may be having. The following phrases can help create awareness:

- “I don’t know if you’re aware that...”
- “I’m sure it wasn’t your intention to...”
- “Perhaps you didn’t realize that ...”
- “As you may already know...”
- “I noticed that...”
- “I’m getting the impression that...”
- “It seems that...”

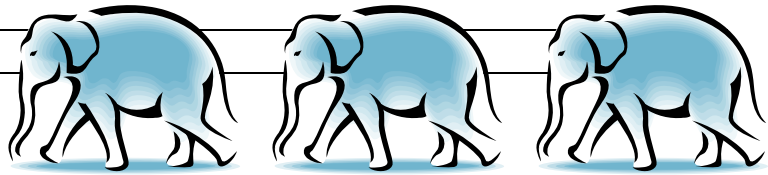
IMPACT: What are the repercussions of the persons’ behavior? The following phrases can assist you in sharing with them the consequences of their behavior:

- “I’m concerned that...”
- “I worry that...”
- “I feel that...”
- “When you do....it makes me feel...”
- “When you say... it affects the team by ...”

REQUEST: What do you want the person do differently the next time? What specific changes would you like to see? The following phrases can preface a concrete request and keep it from becoming a demand:

- “Would you be willing to...”
- “Could you please...”
- “Next time I would like you to...”
- “I would rather you...”
- “How can we resolve this?”
- “What are our options?”
- “Would you consider...”
- “Let’s...”
- “Can we...”

Endnotes and References



Endnotes

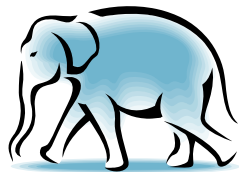
- ⁱ Noonan, W.R., *Discussing the Undiscussable: A Guide to Overcoming Defensive Routines in the Workplace*, San Francisco:Wiley & Sons, 2007 (p. 17)
- ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, (p. 29-33)
- ⁱⁱⁱ Patterson, K. and Grenny, J., *Crucial Confrontations*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005 (pp. 32-33)
- ^{iv} Noonan, W.R., *Discussing the Undiscussable: A Guide to Overcoming Defensive Routines in the Workplace*, San Francisco:Wiley & Sons, 2007 (pp. 50-53)
- ^v Adler, R.B. Rosenfeld, L., Proctor, R., *Interplay: The Process of Interpersonal Communication*, 9th edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004 (p.71)
- ^{vi} Maybin, S. *If You Can't Say Something Nice, What Do You Say?* Booksurge LLC, 2006 (pp. 6-10)

Additional References

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