

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

Session Leader Guide



The “Elephant in the Room” (in some countries they say “Moose on the Table”) is a phrase that means the problems we all know exist but don’t have the courage or ability to talk about. These issues or problems get in the way of performance and employee fulfilment and if left unresolved will just get worse and worse.

It is critical that we address these ‘undiscussables’ in a safe but honest way so that we can shift the negative energy leaks and get back to more productive work and harmonious relationships. In our experience, these sessions will be difficult to start but once the issues are out in the open, people will generally be relieved and have a sense that they can move on.

PURPOSE

To address the problems that are caused by people, process or policy issues that people are unwilling or unable to discuss by themselves.

OBJECTIVE

To increase productivity, quality or employee fulfilment by clearing the negative energy that is getting in the way.

PARTICIPANTS

Ideally, bring the whole team together. If you have to select a smaller group, make sure there is a good cross section of the team members.

TIME

This exercise can take between 2 and 4 hours depending on the size and complexity of the issues that arise. You may have a sense of the issues before the session but be prepared for anything to come up. By definition, these are issues that are below the surface and not being talked about so there may be surprises.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Thin Book of Naming Elephants: How to Surface Undiscussables for Greater Organizational Success Sue Annis Hammond (Author), Andrea B. Mayfield (Author)

BEFORE THE SESSION

1. Anchor the decision to do the exercise in your team.
2. Select participants and book a meeting room.
3. Send out an invitation at least two weeks before your meeting. Communicate Purpose and Objective, when, where and who.
4. Make sure the meeting room is ready with all the material needed.
5. If you intend to use a meeting evaluation or reflection, have it prepared in advance (see page 172).
6. Try to come at least 20 minutes before everyone else.
7. Write the Purpose, Objective and Agenda on a flipchart so that everyone can see it during your whole session.

DURING THE SESSION

1. Present the Purpose, Objective and Agenda of the meeting. Highlight when you intend to end the meeting. Ask if everyone will be able to stay for the whole meeting.
2. Ask the manager to express his/her personal view on how important it is for each participant to clearly understand and articulate their personal values as one of the starting points in our values journey.
3. Introduce the exercise by sharing the steps to be taken. Make sure everyone understands the exercise. Recognise that this may be a difficult discussion so set ground rules for honesty and respect. Disagreement is welcomed but only if it is done respectfully. Allow time for questions and concerns.

AFTER THE SESSION

1. How do you intend to reinforce your team's reflections and conclusions (if any), and make your progress visible, that is, visual aids, questions, recognition, etc.?
2. Now that you have started to create a shared understanding of personal values and hot buttons, make sure your behaviour and priorities are aligned e.g. how do we walk our talk?

Agenda

(proposal and facilitator notes)

1. Introduction to the Exercise 15 min

Go through the Purpose, Objectives and Agenda. Be open to questions.

2. Individual reflection and writing 5–10 min

- Pass out 3 index cards/post-it notes to each participant.
- Ask them to write down the top three things the group needs to talk about and isn't (undiscussables). This can be done before the session or during.
- Collect the cards and shuffle to provide some anonymity.

* See variations 1-3 below

3. Group Prioritisation 15–30 min

- Ask the group to work together to put the cards on a continuum from the most discussable to the least discussable. (You just need a wall and some masking tape.)
- Pick the three "most undiscussable" cards and have the team discuss them one at a time. Let the group pick which they will tackle first.

4. Group Dialogue 1 to 2 hours – take breaks when necessary

- Hold the space for both honesty and respect.
- Encourage exploration of the issue from various perspectives.
- Start to think about possible solutions.

5. Group Reflection 15–20 min

"What is the major benefit that has come from our dialogue?"

Note down the different response on a flip chart with the heading "Connect" as they come up. Verify the responses and note where they are shared and agreed.

• Variation 1

Everybody writes their issue on a card and after a shuffle and redistribution reads the one in their hand as if it were theirs. Even if it is, the discussion is directed at the secret... not the person.

• Variation 2

Before prioritizing and tackling the index cards, ask the participants to list gains and losses for themselves personally and for their work group (or the whole organisation) of not addressing the issues. So for each issue you've got a grid with personal and team gains and losses. This gives a strong visual about how the undiscussable is weighing the organisation down.

• Variation 3

Post the cards during a break and have everyone come in and read all of the posted undiscussables. After a few minutes for participants to absorb the content, the process questions include:

"what have you learned about our organisation?"

"what price do we pay for having these undiscussables?" and

"Are there any of these that should stay undiscussable and why?" Then go into the prioritisation and dialogue.