

# How to Address the Elephant in the Room

By Nicole Wolfe and Travis Bradberry, Ph.D.

There you are, just sitting in the conference room minding your own business and waiting for the meeting to start. Then in it comes—a gray 10,000-pound trunk-swinging monstrosity. To your dismay, it plants itself firmly in the center of the room. The meeting begins as expected, but everyone’s attention is drawn to the unwelcome centerpiece. As the meeting concludes, everyone is only vaguely aware of what was said because they were too distracted by what was not said.



Click on the image to view this clip.

We have all experienced the elephant in the room—a situation where everyone avoids a looming and important issue. Unaddressed issues of such gravity foster confusion and make everyone distracted, preoccupied, and even fearful. These emotions consume time and impede productivity.

Many prefer to avoid the unsettling emotions that come with addressing the elephant in the room. It is a leader’s responsibility to confront the elephant head on to avoid its damaging effects on productivity. If your group is without a leader—or at least one who is willing to take action—an elephant in the room is an opportunity for

you to demonstrate your leadership skills. Recognizing the elephant is an important first step, but the challenge comes in addressing the elephant in a manner that enables everyone to discuss the issue comfortably and move past it. The strategies that follow will show you how to do just this.

**1. Make Sure It Is an Elephant.** Thinking carefully before you speak is especially important if you want to address an elephant. Before you bring the issue to the group, you need to make sure it is an elephant for everyone. Bringing up an unsettling topic that was not on everyone’s minds may create a new elephant. Try consulting with another member of the group to verify that others also see the elephant. This critical test of your social awareness skills will ensure that you are all on the same page, which will allow you to begin planning an appropriate approach to the topic. If you and your ally agree an elephant in the room exists, consider the ramifications of clearing the air, including the reactions you are likely to see from various members of the group. Brainstorming with an ally will not only prepare you for talking with the larger group, but will also boost your confidence in addressing this necessary issue.

**2. Make a Plan and Stick to it.** Bringing up an uncomfortable or controversial topic often produces a flood of emotions in yourself and those around you. Having a concrete plan ready beforehand will enable you to maintain the clear head you need to manage the discussion. An effective plan includes two basic elements: what you are going to say and when you are going to say it. First, decide what needs to be said, jotting down these important points. Organize these points conceptually

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to keep the conversation organized and on topic. Next, carefully evaluate the ideal timing for each of your points. Good timing will ensure your audience is as receptive as possible to discussing the elephant.

When the time finally arrives to have the discussion, remember to stick to your plan so that an emotional hijacking will not lead you astray from naming, discussing, and moving forward from the elephant in the room.

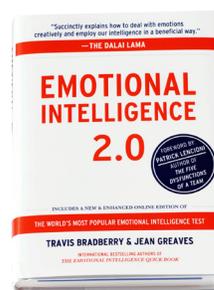
**3. Be Direct, Honest, and Thorough.** A difficult issue becomes an elephant in the room when it is ignored, despite everyone being aware of it. By naming what everyone is avoiding, you will transform the elephant into an obstacle that the group can tackle. Be open with the group and present the details to the best of your knowledge. Directly spell out the truth about what the elephant really is, in its entirety. It is essential to be straightforward about all of the information, even if it is unpleasant. Tiptoeing around even small aspects of the issue will only perpetuate the tension surrounding the elephant. Being direct enables you to manage others' perceptions and prevent the elephant from becoming distorted by rumors. Being direct, honest, and thorough shows respect for your audience and builds their trust in you as a leader.

**4. Open Up the Discussion.** Once you have had the opportunity to clear the air, it is time to open the floor to others. Like you, your audience has many concerns about the elephant in the room and needs to express them. Use your social awareness to determine the most appropriate timing for giving others a chance to respond. Before doing so, be sure that you convey everything that

you had planned. Presenting a thorough description of the elephant will ensure that the session continues to move forward rather than becoming a rehashing of false information. Asking the group to share their input and concerns regarding the issue displays consideration for their perspective, as well as creates unity in solving the problem. This open forum approach allows the group to discuss a once “forbidden” subject and sets the tone for continuing to speak about the issue to prevent it from reverting to ‘elephant’ status.

**5. Closure.** Memories of an event are shaped by the moment where the emotion peaks and by how things come to a close—regardless of how many road bumps are hit along the way. Before the meeting concludes, be sure that you have discussed all facets of the elephant and that everyone understands the issue at hand. Make a plan together for how the issue will be tackled going forward. When people leave feeling confident about the discussion because lingering questions were addressed and the next steps are clear, the elephant is unlikely to continue as a distraction. Even if the discussion of the elephant in the room was a rocky one, ensuring closure is a sure-fire way to give everyone confidence that brighter days lie ahead. 🚀

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