

From The Thin Book of Naming Elephants: www.thinbook.com

THE THIN BOOK OF[®]
NAMING
ELEPHANTS

*How to Surface Undiscussables
for Greater Organizational Success*

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What You Are Going to Read

In the summer of 2003, we were working with a client organization on culture change. The future of the company depended on people behaving very differently. If they didn't change, they were going to go out of business. We were trying to help them understand how to change their organizational culture, a complex task at best. The concepts and measures we used just frustrated them further. *How can we possibly change an organization with 60,000 people scattered across the country in time to save our business?*, they asked.

We stopped and regrouped. We challenged ourselves as consultants. *How could we make this simpler?* After some experimentation and thought we both agreed that it was time to return to the basics. There are lots of books and theories about how organizations work, however, most people just need to know what small change they can make today. When we look at all the possibilities of what an organization can do to be more effective, it boils down to actually accessing more of what people already know. There are plenty of smart people working in organizations right now who have never offered their ideas about how to do things differently. People learn very quickly that it is better to be quiet than to speak up and look naïve, stupid or subversive. People truly fear for their jobs if they bring up the subject that no one is talking about, thus the saying: *There's an elephant in the room that everyone knows about but no one is acknowledging.*

Everyone talks around the elephant and thinks that *everyone else knows about the elephant*, but until the elephant's presence is made explicit, the level of dialogue — and therefore the quality of decision-making — is limited. The elephant stands for all the things no one talks about in an open forum. Make no mistake, people do talk about the elephant, but they do so at the proverbial water cooler, which is now electronic. The elephant is discussed in an unmanaged and potentially destructive, rather than constructive manner. People are fearful of naming the elephant because they are afraid they will lose their jobs or “face.” However, not naming elephants can eat away at a person and at an organization. Unnamed elephants can pull the pillars away from your organization's foundational strengths, bringing down the entire structure. The real challenge is to decide which is more destructive: acknowledging the elephant to deal with it or ignoring it at your organization's peril.

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The goal of this book is to show how to name elephants in a constructive way. We also want to convince you that it is imperative to do this because the consequences of not doing so can be disastrous. We believe that if you can build the skill, have a common language to do it, and the motivation to do it, you can begin to name elephants when the stakes are low. Once naming elephants becomes a comfortable practice for your organization, you will find people will do so when the stakes are higher.

Think about it this way: You are sitting in a meeting and your stomach is flipping because you want to say something. You are afraid to say it because you might look like you don't know anything about what you are supposed to be an expert on. Yet you think the group is missing an important point. You're not sure because you only have one piece of the puzzle. You weigh the potential benefits of speaking up versus keeping quiet. If you keep quiet, no one will ever know what it is you are thinking.

Precisely our point ... no one will ever know what you are thinking. Multiply that by 60,000 people and you miss a lot of ideas, questions, data and knowledge. Yes, some of those ideas are unworkable. But we have all heard the stories of the great breakthroughs because someone had the persistence and courage to say aloud what was bothering them, and another person recognized the seed of a great idea or the avoidance of a disaster. As consultants, we believe our client organizations have vast quantities of untapped brilliance in the form of small statements or questions that name the elephant on everyone's mind. This book will show you how to name them and explain why it is important. We begin with a cautionary tale of how the un-named elephants at NASA created the environment which resulted in the tragedy of *Columbia*.

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