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How To Talk About The Elephant In The Room

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The dreaded “elephant in the room”. Those conversations that should happen, but most of the time do not. Or as explained by definition:

“A major problem or controversial issue that is obviously present but avoided as a subject for discussion because it is more comfortable to do so”

There are many reason why these conversations to address the “elephant” never happen:

- **Fear** – that bringing it up could cost you credibility or your job
- **Comfort** – that it's easier to not make waves and just work around the problem
- **Underestimation** – not realizing that the situation has bigger ramifications than one realizes
- **Apathy** – not caring enough to address (“It’s not my problem.”)

By not having the tough conversation about the situation, the following fallout usually happens:

- **Fear culture persists**
- **People gain undue and unchecked power and influence (colleagues, managers, shareholders, etc)**
- **Decline in productivity, efficiencies, and other metrics leading to declining performance overall**
- **Disengagement due to low morale and discontentment**

In never addressing the “elephant in the room” a general uneasiness and untrustworthy environment settles in that can wreak havoc throughout the organization.

It’s imperative that any conversation that needs to be had to address those “elephants” needs to occur. In order to break the silence and overcome the anxiety to have straight talk, you should use these following guidelines to get the discussion out in the open:

- **Resolve not to be remiss.** Omitting an issue causes more harm than good always. Purpose to start the discussion by knowing that you owe it to others to bring this topic to the forefront.
- **Foster professionalism.** How you approach the conversation can ease the tension. Anger, outrage, and other non-professional conduct can greatly hamper the effectiveness of the discussion. Be calm and set everyone else at ease.
- **Make it constructive.** Make it clear that you want to have a working dialogue of the issue at hand. Set the expectations early to get the most out of the talk and allow everyone opportunity for input.
- **Be objective.** This can be tricky, especially when items such as harassment or bullying come into play. But having as much facts to back up what is being discussed can solidify the validity of the issue and not leave room for people to shrug it off.
- **Find other audiences.** Sometimes the people that need to hear the message are the least receptive. By finding others who share the same opinion about the issue will make it not about you but about the issue and how much it impacts others.
- **Create a dialogue.** Get as many others talking about it as possible in the discussions. It is important to also note that these talks may not be just once and over with. Constructive issue resolving may take multiple discussions to reach understanding and solutions. Keep it open at all times.
- **Get actionable steps.** Have those involved including yourself take responsibility for a portion of the solution. Some people may have to take full ownership for their actions as no one else can. Others may need to help with processes, checks and balances. Everyone at least needs to work on fostering a culture of open talk without fear or apathy. Make sure those steps are being taken seriously and followed through.

Elephants in the room are not pleasant beasts. They need to be herded out and having everyone skirt around the issue only makes matters worse. Your culture may not be conducive to talking open, but it only takes one person and some of the suggestions above to start changing that in your organization.