



The Elephant in the Room

To paraphrase Wikipedia - An "Elephant in the room" has become a management saying meaning an obvious truth that is being ignored or goes unaddressed. It applies to an obvious problem or risk no one wants to discuss and based on the idea that an elephant in a room would be impossible to overlook; thus, people in the room who pretend the elephant is not there have chosen to concern themselves with tangential or small and irrelevant issues rather than deal with the looming big one.



I don't know whether it's because elephants are now protected by law or not, but I'm coming across many more of them than I used to!

Tackling the difficult topics in business life is hard, really hard, especially if you're not used to having these sorts of conversations. You can choose to ignore difficult conversations and still survive in business and many do! If you're thinking, yep that's me, then I'd advise you to think again. If you want to be the best you can be, then you absolutely need to read on. If not, this post is not for you.

The breadth of difficult conversations is huge, so I'm not going to be prescriptive. There are so many examples, but I'll name a few, so that we're on the same page:

- 🌿 Poor performance or capability
- 🌿 Discrimination
- 🌿 Bullying
- 🌿 Indirect aggression
- 🌿 Actual aggression
- 🌿 Sabotage
- 🌿 Poor relationship

I see two distinct types of Elephant in my line of work...and two ways of tackling them. The Management Elephant and the Leadership Elephant.

The Management Elephant

The Management Elephant tends to be when you have a member of your team that is exhibiting behaviours that are not what they need to be. I was going to write 'behaviours that are not acceptable', but therein lies the fundamental problem. Because these behaviours are often ignored, because the conversations that need to happen to change the behaviours are hard, and therefore don't happen, makes the behaviours acceptable....that bit is your fault!

You owe it to your company, yourself and, if you want to be a good manager, your employee to have these conversations. Below are some steps that I have found will help you to get the most from these often tough conversations:

1. Prepare

Whatever the conversation, don't just turn up to the meeting without preparing, especially if you are angry about the situation. NEVER lose your temper. Believe me, YOU will feel worse about it afterwards, not them. Think about as many of the potential reactions and outcomes as you possibly think of and prepare your response.

2. Privacy

These sorts of conversations can often lead to the recipient being upset. Respect their privacy and ensure that the meetings are conducted in private and that they can exit the meeting into a safe environment.

3. Be direct

Get to the point, but talk about behaviours and impact. Be direct AND sensitive

Example:

Direct and Insensitive - You're passing the buck. You have to change

Indirect and Sensitive - Have you thought at all how you interact with others?

Direct and Sensitive - Working with other departments is key to our success. I received feedback that others are having difficulty working with you and we need to explore how to improve these relationships.

4. Discuss consequences / impact

Depending on the issue being addressed, there could be a whole range of consequences from mild to serious. The fact you are trying to tackle the issue means that this is at least important to you and your relationship.

Many larger businesses have policies for capability / competence / performance etc and obviously there are potential legal ramifications for other more serious offences such as harassment or bullying.

Obviously if you are having the conversation early enough and in the right way, you can hopefully sort the problem before any of these consequences are invoked.

The key here is for you to convey the seriousness of the issue and what may happen if the behaviours are not altered.

5. Discuss action

Ensure that you work with your employee on an action plan to rectify the behaviour and ensure this is time-bound and you have one or more follow-up conversations to ensure the issue is resolved. If it isn't in a timely manner then you start to apply the consequences outlined above.

6. Be supportive

For some people, unacceptable behaviours may have been tolerated by previous management or they may be completely unaware on the impact their behaviour is having on others or the organisation. As a good manager you have an obligation to help them through the process and if you don't feel equipped to deal with the situation, take advice from peers or a Human Resources expert (internally or externally).

Obviously if someone is breaking the law or in serious breach of their employment contract, then serious consequences must be considered and invoked immediately.

The Leadership Elephant

The Leadership Elephant is an entirely different animal to the Management Elephant. These Elephants often appear in Senior Management or Leadership Teams and are more difficult to fix.

I'm a firm believer that if you have a strong team that is truly focussed on the same goals and vision, plus believing in and displaying the same values you can be successful in any market, anywhere.

Easier said than done! And the larger the business or team you lead, the harder it can become. By virtue of their position (but not always), Senior Managers are competent in their own field -Marketing, Finance, IT, Engineering, Sales, Manufacturing, Product Development, Human Resources etc. However, many of these managers have had limited or no development / experience in Leadership and certainly not in creating or being part of successful Leadership Teams. They also tend to operate day-to-day in isolation to the other senior managers as they have their own teams, challenges, and budgets to worry about and so many Leadership Teams are not teams at all, they are a collective of Senior Leaders with the same boss.

The 'unsaid' or Elephant in the Room, within a Leadership Team can have a profound impact on the rest of the organisation, if left unchecked. Leadership Elephants centre around a few key areas:

1. Clarity of Vision
2. Positive conflict
3. Accountability
4. Honesty
5. Commitment to each other's success
6. Delivery of results

1. Clarity of Vision

As a team, what are you leading for? Not as Marketing Director or Sales Director or Head of Product Development....As a TEAM, what are you COLLECTIVELY leading for?





When Leaders are pulling in different directions, the results are a tug of war and wasted energy. When everybody is pulling in the same direction, that creates forward momentum.

Lack of an agreed, cohesive vision can result in poor orientation, competing agendas and misunderstandings. Teams function much more effectively when working with one vision and one set of goals within a strategic plan.

If you haven't got a clear vision and goals as a team - this has to be your first job. [Full Steam Ahead](#) by Ken Blanchard and Jess Stoner is a great book to help you get started!

2. Positive Conflict

Conflict can be useful. When used correctly and depending on the attitudes and perspectives of those involved, conflict can:

-  Diffuse a more serious conflict.
-  Spark action to search for more facts or solutions.
-  Increase team performance and cohesion.
-  Find out where you and the rest of the team stand on a particular topic.

So how do you get to a point where conflict can influence and help facilitate positive outcomes?

- 🌿 Accept conflict as helpful
- 🌿 Stay focused on defeating the problem, not each other
- 🌿 Be prepared with facts to solve dilemmas
- 🌿 Consider the main issue, circumstances and relationships involved
- 🌿 Remain open about the other people's position (remembering anger is often natural reaction of conflict)
- 🌿 Be respectful, professional and focus on outcomes

Don't over simplify things and falsely resolve a situation by avoiding the source of conflict. Avoidance is often seen by withdrawing from a situation to save the fight for another day, or smoothing the situation saying "let's not argue," or "It's not really that important."

You're more likely to succeed if you identify the real issue, the circumstances and relationships that factor in to the situation, and consequences of the resolution.

3. Accountability

When we fail to hold others accountable, we reap the consequences. While everyone is busy pointing fingers at each other, deadlines don't get met, work remains below standard, or customers continue to be dissatisfied. Worse yet, things won't get better until people stop trying to affix blame and start addressing the issue that caused the problem in the first place. This cycle will continue until people take accountability for their contribution to the problem and focus on seeking solutions.

In my view, the greatest impact of not holding others accountable is that it creates a negative perception of the leadership team. When other members of your teams see you letting someone get away with not producing the agreed output or keeping commitments, they begin to wonder why they are working so hard. They wonder why you don't take action to address a poor performer who is creating problems for the rest of the team.

Failing to hold others accountable reflects on you as a leader. It raises questions about your willingness to hold everyone to the same standards and creates the perception that you don't treat people fairly and equitably. Pretty soon others on the team get the message about "what it takes to succeed around here" and the extent to which they can count on you as a leader.

Lack of accountability creates and reinforces a culture of blame-which, in turn, generates other problems. You may notice increased evasion and avoidance as well as a pervasive "don't get caught" attitude. Innovation plunges as people become less willing to be creative and think out of the box. Employees take fewer risks (or stop altogether) because no one wants to be blamed if something goes wrong. Finger-pointing sessions proliferate, creating a cycle of blame that ultimately shuts down communications.

4. Honesty

If you want to receive honest feedback, start by giving it. As the people on your team observe your honesty, this will make them feel more comfortable being honest themselves. On the other hand, if you don't practice what you preach, it's much tougher to influence others to practice that same thing.

Where I find that most leaders have the biggest problem related to honesty, is in saying those things no one wants to hear: the bad news, the opposing opinion, the refusal, the negative feedback. This is why I think the trick to becoming more honest is becoming more courageous and talking about these kinds of things. When you can honestly talk about the sensitive stuff, being honest about anything else is easy.

People often get defensive when they hear something they don't like. They start to deny, blame, explain and criticise others. This may lead to other team members restraining themselves from saying all they intended to say simply because they don't like the reaction they're getting. If you want your leadership team to speak freely and honestly, it's essential that every time one of them starts saying something difficult, instead of getting defensive, you do something much more constructive: you get curious and ask questions. This way, you prove that you are not afraid of the truth and that your main interest is to understand facts and opinions, not save your own skin.

5. Commitment to each other's success

Sounds easy doesn't it? Why wouldn't you want to commit to your other Leadership Team members' success? Well you would be surprised...or maybe you wouldn't.

Great business people are naturally competitive. They want to win in business. Some are quite happy to win at the expense of others in their team and even the success of the business. To build a truly great business, I'm a firm believer that if each of you is truly committed to one another's success you can achieve so much more, especially through the tough times.

I'm sometimes amazed at the tricks, lies, back-stabbing and U-turns that people perform to try to get themselves ahead in business. Maybe I'm naive, but I think this can only lead to longer term issues - lack of respect from your peers, your teams and no doubt your customers will suffer too.

If you want to take your business into significant growth, you need to support your team and they need to support you. You don't need to be best friends with everyone, but you do need to watch everyone's back, be there for each other when they need support and focus on your collective goals and vision.

6. Delivery of results

A team that is not focussed on COLLECTIVE results fails to grow, loses its best people, is easily distracted and focuses people on their own careers or internal quarrelling. Every Leader has an obligation to deliver - for their stakeholders, their people and their customers and not just in financial terms. To avoid distractions, leadership teams need to prioritise the results of the leadership team over their individual or department results.

All sounds straight forward and easy doesn't it? Well there are a few things that tend to get in the way - Self-promotion, Career Progression and Money to name three. The ironic thing is that all three of things are likely to happen anyway if you are in a high performing leadership team, all working towards one vision, one set of values and collective results.

Most senior managers naturally focus on the results of the teams they manage, not the teams they're members of. They spend more time with their own people, they probably get bonused on the performance of the teams they manage and they probably don't invest as much time in building relationships with their peers. Imagine the possibilities of having really powerful relationships with your peers, where the team is accountable for the whole and not the part and when you collectively focus on your customers and positive outcomes in your marketplace....

None of the above can be fixed overnight, and needs a huge amount of collective energy to get results.

But when the results come, your competitors better watch out!

