

Dealing With Organisational Elephants

What Are They?



“Organisational Elephant” is a term used by organisational consultants to describe situations where a group is unwilling or unable to confront an issue that is impeding further progress in a meeting or the resolution of an organisational problem. They are those organisational issues that surface either slowly or abruptly in meetings or workshops that no one is willing to acknowledge is present, but which everyone knows is there and in the way.

Organisational Elephants are a group creation and require at least tacit understanding from everyone in the group that the problem situation is not open for discussion. They simply choose to ignore the Elephant in the room, no matter how big it is and no matter how much noise it makes and no matter how much damage it has the potential to do.

People do talk about their Organisational Elephants, but the problem is they never do so in the forums that matter. You will often find Elephants the topic of discussion around the table in the lunch room or at an informal business lunch, around the water cooler, over a cup of coffee at someone's desk, after work at the pub, in informal emails between trusted colleagues. And individuals usually do find ways to deal with their Organisational Elephants, but it is always a “work around” that limits organisational performance and left unacknowledged, Elephants have the potential to cause serious harm to an organisation.

There can also be one or many Elephants impeding progress depending on how long the problem has been ignored. Another problem is that Organisational Elephants, just like the real things, are social animals that prefer to live in herds and over time, if left undisturbed, they will “herd up” and multiply.



Dealing With Organisational Elephants



Dealing With The Elephants

The question is: How does an organisation deal with its Elephants?

Step One: Stop Digging

First off, if you suspect there is an Organisational Elephant impeding progress in your organisation, don't ignore it. At the risk of mixing metaphors, I'll quote Will Rogers, "If you find yourself in a hole, stop digging."

If you're in a meeting, or working with a group and you think the group is failing to confront an issue, just state that you feel perhaps not all the issues are on the table. Introduce the concept of Organisational Elephants and raise the prospect that you think there may be one lurking beneath the table. Be prepared to name the Elephant yourself, but you will probably find that others in the group will speak out, as they too are feeling the same way and will be relieved that someone has finally said something.

Then on the other hand, they might go into avoidance. What people might say at this point:

- ◆ "What elephant? I don't see any elephants...."
- ◆ "Maybe you have an Elephant problem, but I / we don't..."
- ◆ "Yes, but it's only a small Elephant, we can learn to live with it."
- ◆ "Ignore it and it will go away eventually."
- ◆ "Yes, we did have an Elephant here like that, but it's gone now."

Tip: Hire an Elephant Hunter

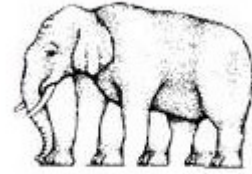
Hire a good consultant who has the skills and experience to deal with the problem. They will have the "distance" and the necessary external authority to confront the situation – something an internal consultant will not be able to do. If they are facilitating a workshop or meeting, they can more easily identify the presence of unseen elephants and will be experienced with the difficulties of dealing with them in group situations.



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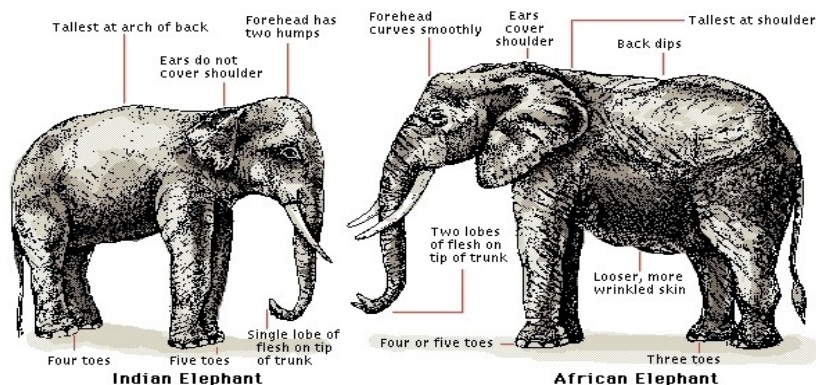
Step Two: Naming the Elephant

Once someone starts to describe your particular Elephant, you then need to come to a consensus understanding of particularly what type of Elephant you're dealing with. This is not always as easy to do as you may think. A number of issues can surface at this point, including:



How many legs does your elephant have?

Issue	Solution
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Unequal Power: if the Elephant is the responsibility of a senior member of the organisation, then the group may be unwilling to confront the situation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Never mention people, instead describe and list problem organisational behaviours, impacts and outcomes.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Multiple Identity: there can be many perspectives as to the exact nature of the problem Elephant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Don't sweat the detail, over time the Elephant will reveal its true identity.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Vested Interest: This Elephant is useful for some members of the group and they are reluctant to participate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Identify and understand what it is that they are fearful of losing if their Elephant is named.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Proximity: You're <u>too close to the problem</u> to have a holistic understanding of it. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ What actions can you take to get a better perspective? Who outside the organisation has a better viewpoint?



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Step Three: Elephant Free Zone

Once the problem is defined, then spend some time deciding what an “Elephant Free” organisation might look like. If you can quantify the outcomes you are aiming for, then you can more carefully craft your solutions to meet them. The more specific you can be here, the more practical your solutions will be to implement. Perhaps you might want to consider turning your Elephant to productive ends? A trained working Organisational Elephant can be a very useful tool. If there are vested interests within your organisation who need this Elephant because it is useful, then there is potential to turn it to fully productive use – a “win – win” outcome for all parties.



Step Four: Keep An Eye On Your Elephant

In spite of its great bulk, it can be very surprising just how quiet and stealthful a real elephant can be in the bush and the same can be said for Organisational Elephants within organisations. A fundamental property of all systems and by extension, all problems situations (*read Organisational Elephants*) within systems, is that they begin to change once you begin to understand and take action to improve them.

What To Do?	How To Do It?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Dedicate specific resources to the problem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Allocate a budget to it. You can't hunt elephants without a good elephant gun.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Monitor the movement of your Elephant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Develop specific short term feedback systems and metrics dedicated to tracking changes.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Seek allies – rampaging Organisational Elephants are often an issue for others, too 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Seek the assistance of affected stakeholders. They may hold solutions you haven't considered.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Use multiple strategies – a well entrenched Organisational Elephant will be difficult to move. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ One strategy alone may not work, but the right combination of multiple strategies may do the trick.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Be persistent – a well entrenched Organisational Elephant may take a long time to move. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Take the long view and use both short and long term strategies. If this Elephant has been here for a while it will take time to remove it.

