



THE ELEPHANT IN THE TEAM

By Rhonda Sparks-Tranks

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Photo taken by me – Pilensberg National Park, South Africa 2008

After facilitating a team development meeting one of the team (let's call her Jane) came up to me at the end to say it was a great day because at last the elephant in the room had been named. I felt quite pleased with myself then asked Jane "And what was the elephant?" "It's John of course and the way he micro-manages". My fleeting sense of self-satisfaction evaporated and I spent that evening frustrated at how little had been achieved. The next morning John emailed to thank me for the day. "At last we named the elephant in the room: finally poor performance in the team has been discussed openly and I think Jane got the message".

I often encounter cynicism when called in to do team development because of past team building events where people invested much of themselves and then not much changed afterwards. So of course I was very concerned that this intervention wouldn't fall into that category. Fortunately the meeting was part of a more comprehensive team intervention and we were able to "explore more of the elephant" so that performance and relationships were discussed openly and issues began to be addressed. It was a complex and difficult assignment as multiple layers of dynamics and problems dating back years began to emerge – many of which were beyond the scope of team development.

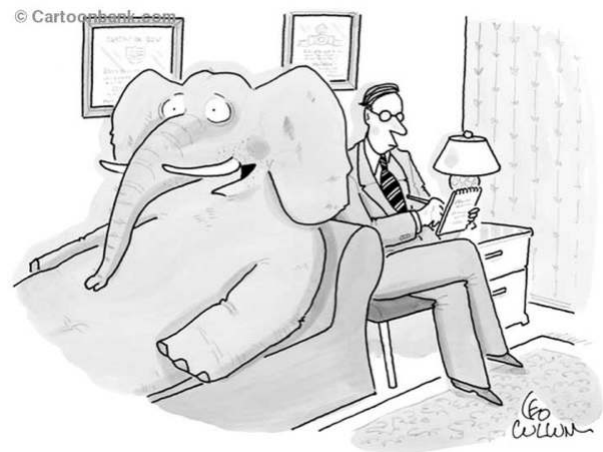
We've probably all been involved in team-building activities where the group worked together extraordinarily well to deliver on a task at hand during the team building activity when it had nothing whatsoever to do with the group's daily work and/or the stakes were suddenly much higher. There are many psycho/sociological explanations for this phenomenon and why the group soon slips back into old patterns of behaviour and cynicism gets another boost.

Despite the consultancy and diagnostic work that I do beforehand and the processes I design for the agenda, it's only when I'm with the group and see people relating as a team that the patterns and dynamics within the team begin to emerge.

I've learned that traditional "feel-good" team building activities very generally don't achieve lasting change. So, many years ago I became wary of using "games" in team development assignments and I now rarely use them. In my experience what does work is to "lean into the discomfort" with the team and work with the real issues people are having around the real work they do. It is then that the patterns of behaviour and group dynamics reveal themselves and we have "real data" to work with. This draws upon all my skills as a facilitator (and often my own courage) as we create a space for the team to learn how to have the difficult conversations and work together to address the issues.

For me a starting point with the team is often a psychometric or diagnostic tool as it provides a way to open up the conversation within a framework. One reason why I chose to work with the [KGI™ \(Klein Group Instrument for Effective Leadership and Participation in Teams\)](#) is that it is contextual. It looks at the dynamic interplay of how the members of a particular team relate as they work on the task at hand. It goes to the core of the tensions in teams around task and relationship. We can then open up discussions around perceptions of what the job is, how it is performed and the inevitable differences and blind-spots that occur when people are required to work together. A turning point is when people stop blaming each other and outsiders and start looking at how their own behaviour has contributed to the problem.

Most people have unconscious selective blindness about the elephant in the room. I'm often reminded of the ancient Indian parable about the six blind men and the elephant. Each feels a different part and each has a different understand of what is before them: a spear, a snake, a fan, a wall, a tree and a rope. And I use the word "feel" intentionally because it is the feelings and emotions connected with different perceptions that create the greatest challenges when working with work teams not performing at their best.



"I'm right there in the room, and no one even acknowledges me."

This is why people are blind to the elephant in the room – because what they are seeing is only their perception of the elephant or the real issues. And the added irony is if I tell the fable of the blind men and the elephant people often still disagree about what the story means.

What does it mean for you and your team at work? It's not easy to get people to acknowledge an elephant even exists, let alone agree what it is – then be able to discuss it in a mature way. An external and impartial facilitator or coach can help your team work through these issues

Contact me to discuss how I can work with your team to surface those elephants hiding in plain sight and get the team back on track.

Rhonda Sparks-Tranks,

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Rhonda has decades of experience as a trainer, coach and facilitator working with major corporations and organisations around the world. Her facilitation focus is usually: navigating organisational change after restructures, strategic direction setting and planning, and team development - particularly when work relationships have become dysfunctional.



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