



Moving Out Elephants and Changing Cultures

There is an elephant in the middle of the room! This common word picture suggests either in a family, group or organization there is a huge, ongoing problem taking up space, causing major discomfort and it will not go away on its own!

Interestingly enough, the unmovable trouble at hand has become the company or groups normal to the point it has become accepted, ignored, tolerated and walked around for months or years.

It usually takes a new hire or fresh eyes from someone visiting and not familiar with the dysfunctional dynamic to spot the awkward and obvious size of the problem that no one else seems to notice. So they innocently ask, “What is that elephant doing standing in the middle of the conference room?” To their amazement the reply could go something like, “What elephant?” or “Oh yeah, the elephant, it has been around for years.”

The next questions go something like, “Has anything ever been done to move the elephant out?” and “Why has the elephant been tolerated and accepted?” The answers vary from “It has to be this way until there is a new supervisor” to “Nothing gets better until those who have fed the elephant admit there is a problem.”



Common Elephants

There are a variety of sizes and shapes of these kinds of gnarly and tolerated problems in the workplace, and one of the key signs there is a corporate elephant is the systemic problem grows worse with time and a lack of trust among staff and management continues growing. And while I’m on the subject of growth, the longer elephants are allowed to hang around, the larger and larger they get, and they eventually have baby elephants (more problems) that also grow with time.

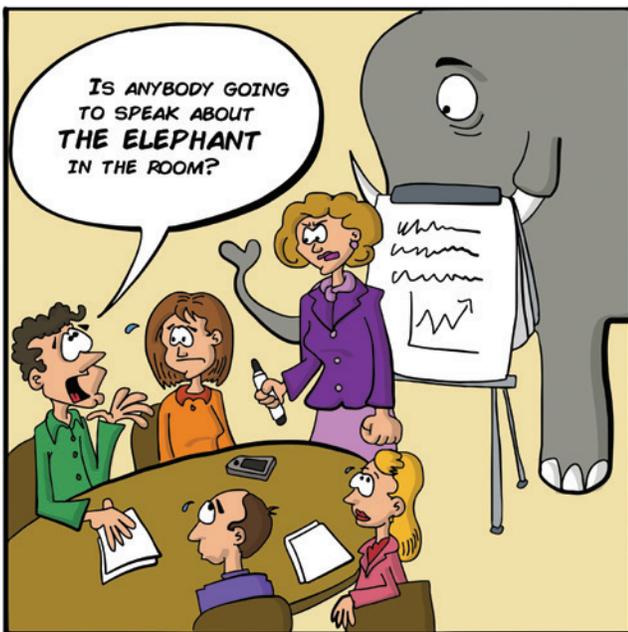
Common elephants are defined by these kinds of issues:

- Favoritism of certain co-workers by a supervisor.
- Past problems that have divided the staff that won’t be faced and dealt with.

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- Long-term employees that are entitled are allowed to remain employed despite their poor relational and communication skills.
- People who have to tiptoe around a manager who has micro-managing tendencies or a chip on their shoulder.
- A lack of ownership by administration or department heads if a poor judgment call was made that negatively impacted staff.
- Employees that have obvious issues and toxic ways in relating to each other or avoiding each other altogether. By the way, when these elephants appear they seem to have the capacity to draw an invisible line of division between coworkers and management.

Believe me, the list goes on and on, so you fill in the blanks. There are other facts about the elephant in the room that can help you identify common characteristics that could be developing...



More Evidence of an Elephant's Presence

- The problem is so large, people fear even trying to address it for fear of retribution.
- The issues continue to be swept under the carpet because nothing is done anyway.
- Frequently, production slows down, turnover increases, and long-term retention is a challenge for many once they realize the elephant is not going anywhere.
- The issue is never resolved.
- The fresh air of the corporate culture that once existed has now been reduced to a stuffy and toxic environment that sends people away rather than attracts them for business.

Well, on that positive note, let's flip the scene to an environment that can become vibrant and effective once again. There is hope for a new dynamic day and a strong, recalibrated culture IF the organization is ready to move the elephant out once and for all.

Moving Them Out and Restoring a New Culture

Impossible you say!

I once worked with a department in an organization that was filled with about 25 confused and angry staff.

We spent a few sessions and hours going back over how they got to this place as a group of once contented and loyal workers.

A lot of it had to do with how some past changes were micro-managed by leadership and a few long-term entitled employees who controlled the emotional climate of the entire department. As time went on, one particular troublemaker was terminated, the director moved on for other reasons and one of the assistant managers was asked to serve as the new interim director.

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I returned two years later for a working breakfast to facilitate a discussion on upcoming changes. As I walked into the meeting room, and scanned the people, there were sounds of laughter, everyone was engaged in conversation and the atmosphere was completely inviting and electric.

My first question was, "Is this the same group I met with two years earlier?" They laughed and explained the culture was completely different now. I cover the details of what reformed this particular broken culture in my newsletter entitled "Empowering Staff" at teamworks-works.com

Where Do We Begin?

It Starts at the Top

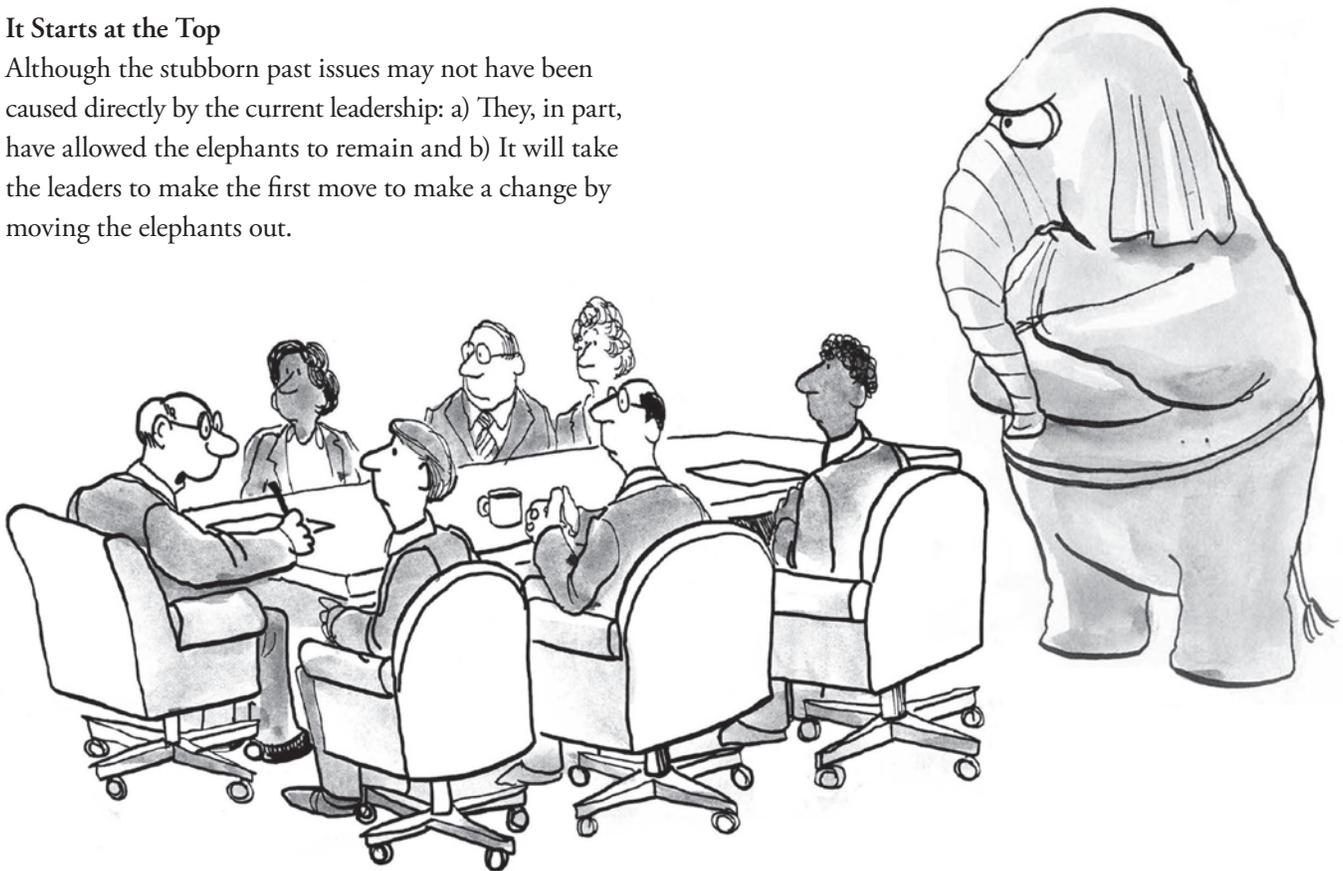
Although the stubborn past issues may not have been caused directly by the current leadership: a) They, in part, have allowed the elephants to remain and b) It will take the leaders to make the first move to make a change by moving the elephants out.

It Takes a Team

The leaders, however, need a team that will back them in this new cultural change. Generally, stubborn problems are only fed by a very few who have controlled the emotional climate of the office for a long time. From management down, people need to be ready to pull together to push the elephant out, never to return again.

It Takes Transparency

Somewhere in this process, usually early on, the entire group (management and staff) need to meet to finally expose the long-standing problems and call them out for what they are.



"I suppose I'll be the one to mention the elephant in the room."

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I suggest training on trust or a candid facilitated discussion that takes place with the entire group. On occasion I will send out confidential survey questions beforehand to each attendee with questions similar to:

1. What is the strength of your staff and leadership?
2. What is the area needing the most improvement among your staff or organization?
3. If you could change one organizational concern, what would it be?

Usually the response is so telling that I work them into the discussion points of the training. The answers are usually such that it doesn't take long to spot the elephants of the organization which need to be methodically and persistently moved out.

I actually begin the discussion time by going over every answer so that everyone present can see and hear firsthand what the overall consensus is from their co-workers and management concerning the state of their workplace environment.

It Takes Time

It is said you can only eat an elephant one bite at a time. The same concept is true in this case. The elephant in the room has generally been there for quite some time so it is going to take patience, persistence and a plan to remove it.

Staff Reflection: In conclusion, I leave you with a few questions to think about:

1. When has this occurred in your company, crew or division?
2. Was the elephant removed?
3. Is there an elephant still there?
4. What is the first step to removing him?

For more information regarding elephants and culture, go to teamworks-works.com and click on the Workshops link – navigate down to Track #08 – Building Trust With Staff In The Workplace. You can also find an interview on YouTube – “Bill Gallagher How to Deal With the Elephant in the Room.”

For more information regarding Professional Boundaries in the Workplace go to teamworks-works.com and click on “workshops” or email me at bill@teamworks-works.com



Bill Gallagher has been counseling and working with professionals since 1980. His emphasis in the workplace is to help develop both relational skills and professional standards among administration and staff. He has worked in multiple organizational settings and of recent has spent most of his time addressing workplace issues in healthcare and city government.

Bill formed TeamWorks in 2001 to help organizations achieve their goals for establishing high morale and client satisfaction. TeamWorks currently specializes in offering one-on-one surveys and evaluations for management and staff to assess the current culture's needs and recommended trainings going forward.

In addition to conducting a variety of workshops and in-services on workplace issues, Bill mediates conflict among partnerships and staff relationships, speaks at conventions, facilitates management retreats, and offers personal consultation and counseling for staff.

Bill's strengths are in public speaking, mediation, and understanding the complexities of relational dynamics in the workplace. He lives in Medford, Oregon, with his wife Jenny, and enjoys spending time with their five children and five granddaughters.