

How to talk about 'elephants' without getting stomped on



Using words that matter

What is an 'elephant?'

Those things people perceive as dysfunctional but are afraid to mention, *especially in a group setting or to a supervisor.*

What is the meaning of 'dysfunctional ?'

Something that doesn't perform as expected, e.g., committee, process, organizational structure, relationship.

Why do dysfunctional situations endure, i.e., If it's broken, why doesn't somebody fix it?

Who's responsible?

Organization

Groups

Individuals



“Mort is dead”

Argyris' findings include:

- There is coercion in the work place (spoken or unspoken) to 'get in line' and maintain the status quo, including 'elephants.'
- Employees eventually come to participate in maintaining dysfunctional situations.
- Organizations and individuals develop "skillful unawareness" of undiscussables.

The goals of this session

- Review the terms and concepts used by Argyris and Hammond/Mayfield to both describe and attack organizational dysfunction
- Apply those terms and concepts to case studies
- Emphasize individual and personal responsibility in addressing dysfunction

Why do need a vocabulary to talk about elephants?

Small Group Exercise #1

The importance of language and common meanings

So what? Nothing will change.

Positive change starts with the individual

By participating in this training....

- You will learn key terms to help talk about 'elephants'
- You will understand the influence of assumptions & attributions and why they need to be discussed.
- You will increase the capacity to identify your own assumptions and attributions and assess their impact on how you interact with others
- You will increase the capacity to identify assumptions and attributions held by others and engage them in an examination of those assumptions and attributions
- You will understand how you can positively affect change in work processes and relationships.

"It is not possible to deal effectively with any subject if it is not discussable and if its undiscussability is undiscussable."

Chris Argyris, *Overcoming Organizational Defenses: Facilitating Organizational Learning*. 1990, p. 29.

Quick review

elephants + undiscussability = dysfunction

Rationale for not raising an issue:

To avoid conflict

To avoid being embarrassed

To not embarrass someone else

Let's talk...what would you add to the list?

KEY TERMS

- Undiscussables
- Assumptions
- Attributions
- Multiple perspectives
- Espoused theory-of-action and theory-in-use
- Collusion
- Defensive routines
- Valid Information
- Barriers
- Single-loop learning
- Double-loop learning
- Accept Responsibility

New Yorker Cartoon by Mike Twohy

ID: 47941, Published in *The New Yorker* March 25, 2002

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"It's funny how two intelligent people can have such opposite interpretations of the tax code!"

- Some assumptions and attributions are brought into the work place



<http://www.lifeisgood.com/>



<http://www.lifeiscrap.com/>

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- We tend to put things into categories, e.g., what constitutes food. We bring those 'categories' to work.



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- We also form assumptions and perspectives *within* the work place.

 - Supervisor
 - Change
 - Promotion
 - Transfer
 - Performance Review
 - Discipline

Assumptions and categories affect how we process information, including information given to us by others.

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How do you talk about elephants? What was that part about not getting 'stomped on?'

The 'formula:'

- Give the elephant a name
- Identify the underlying assumptions, causes, as well as why the elephant is still alive
- Ask lots of questions
- Constructively discuss solutions
- Problem solve versus finding scapegoats
- Discuss the underlying problem of why the issue an undiscussable to begin with

Teach to learn – Small Group Exercise #2

- Stay in your groups and pair up
- Select one key term to ‘teach’ to your partner(s)
- Review both the definitions and possible responses

- Example: “I’d like to introduce you to the term of X...I remember a time when I could have used this term to....”
- Or, “My term is X; it means Y; I plan to use it the next time....”

- Take 5 minutes each.

Columbia case study

- Feb. 1, 2003, the *Columbia* disintegrated over Texas & Louisiana
- A foam strike on the wing was the technical cause of the accident
- An investigative board concluded that NASA had a broken safety culture

NASA and foam...identifying some key dysfunctions

- Foam strikes categorized as 'turn-around' and not 'affecting safety of flight' (assumptions; single-loop thinking)
- NASA employees failed to test the categorization of foam strikes (valid info; barriers)
- Faster, better, cheaper strategic attitude (vs. espoused theory of action)
- Saying/doing gaps, e.g., safety first (valid info)
- Fear of reprisal for speaking up (multiple perspectives; undiscussable; defensive routines)
- Management's focus on maintaining flight schedules (collusion)

http://www.usatoday.com/tech/science/space/2008-08-11-nasa-constellation_N.htm

Quick Review of learning patterns

Single-loop learning: Automatic responses and patterns of thinking that govern our behavior and rule the day; occurs at the individual level and the group level.

aka, Surface learning – Resolves the immediate problem

Double-loop learning: Questioning the automatic responses and patterns of thinking that govern our behavior and rule the day

aka, Deep learning – Resolves the underlying cause of the problem

Symptoms

Single Loop Behavior:

Inquiry is discouraged

Data is ignored when it doesn't fit our perspective

Control and winning are paramount

We treat our own view as obviously correct

We choose to hold on to past processes, decisions, and resentments rather than let go

Unillustrated attribution

Double Loop Learning:

We detect errors in our own thinking, *first*

Inquiry is encouraged

We ask more than we tell

We want to know 'why' and 'how' a situation developed or needs changing

Apply to MLA or work place committees/groups....

How many are currently a member of the best functioning group you've ever been on?

How many have ever been on a well-functioning library group?

In your small group, use the key terms to describe how a current committee/group is malfunctioning (no names). Start with a brief description of the charge of the committee.

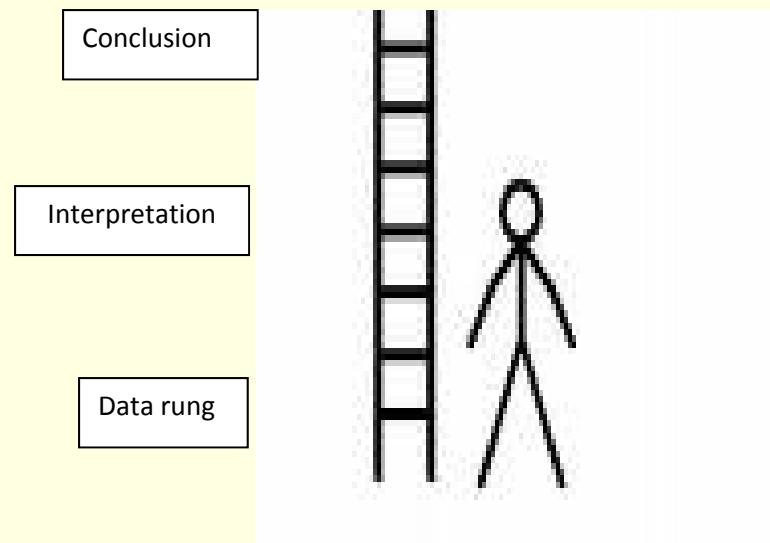
Something to think about

What if you....

- Interjected the key terms into MLA conversations?
- Were asked to report back to this group next week and shared your observations, i.e., how your co-workers and boss reacted?

But, when would I use these terms?

- Start small...peer-to-peer; with staff; in committees
- Ladder of Inference



Ladder of Inference

- Select data from an ocean of data
- Interpret the data
- Draw conclusions

Errors:

- Conclusions are often presented as factual when they are actually inferential.
- We fail to question the outcome of steps 2 and 3.
- We fail to invite others to question steps 1 and 2.
- We begin discussions at step 3 and fail to move 'down' to steps 1 and 2 when conflict occurs.

“Solutions”

- Be aware of our own starting point
- Listen for where others start
- Walk them down the ladder

DVD example

Noonan, William R. 2007. *Discussing the Undiscussable: A Guide to Overcoming Defensive Routines in the Workplace*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

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- Return to the Challenger case study
 - Apply to the conversation of Debris Assessment Team members and supervisor...imagine a different, more productive conversation.

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- Mental model = the structure of the ladder and hold the steps of our reasoning process, e.g., a positive interpretation v. negative perspective
 - Advocacy = Expressing a view or making a statement about your position.
 - Inquiry = Exploring the views of others through questions.

- Advocacy:

Share your data; Tell others about your reasoning; Acknowledge your assumptions; Test your conclusions, rather than stating them as facts; Explore alternative explanations of the data.

Inquiry:

- Ask questions that surface reasoning and data; Search for alternative views; Keep your curiosity going.

Small Group Exercise #3

- MLA receives an unrestricted donation of \$25,000 for each of the next three years
- Take a second and write down one idea for the money
- Go round the table and share your ideas
- One volunteer per table present his/her idea to tablemates
- Use advocacy/inquiry formats along with key terms to test assumptions

But then there is 'Unilateral Control'

- 'Unilateral' means there is a one-sidedness to the thinking, and what one person is thinking is imposed on others.
- Win, do not lose
- Verbal cues of a Unilateral Control exchange:
1) Loud voice 2) Fast pace 3) Repetition

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- Three reactions to Unilateral Control:
 - 1) Not me!
 - 2) Get rid of it!
 - 3) What's wrong with Unilateral Control?

 - Competency = The requisite or adequate ability to get done what needs to be done and to do it effectively.



■ Break?

Looking at ourselves

- Human actions → designed to achieve intended consequences
 - norms develop
 - dysfunctional norms get maintained

- Ideas & comments → shared
 - received
 - interpreted
 - reactions

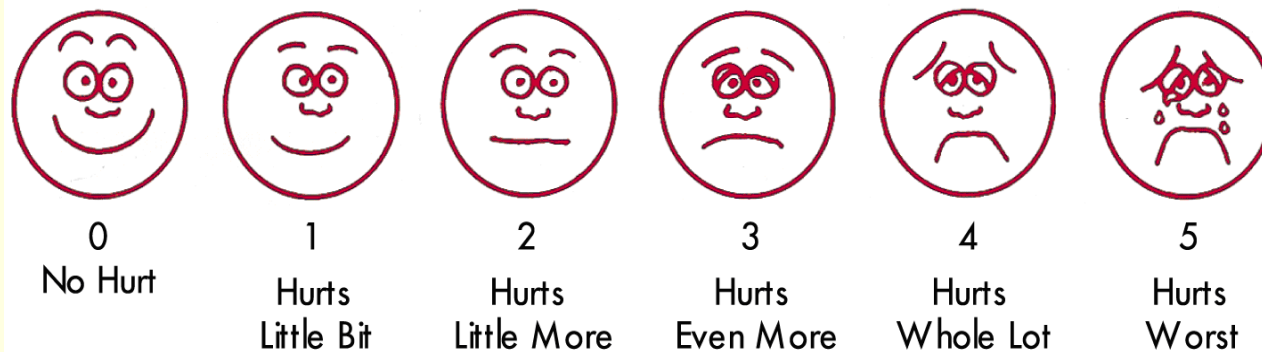
Looking at ourselves

How do people react when *you* contribute a comment?
What's your observation?



Looking at ourselves

Equally important...how would people describe your typical reaction when they think about approaching you with questions or to make suggestions?



Wong-Baker chart, www.nhpco.org/images/wongbaker.gif

Looking at ourselves

What is our response (or contribution) to dysfunctional situations...is there a pattern?

- AV or PV or LV?

What's missing from this list?

Looking at ourselves. How do things typically work?

Individual Exercise #1

- Do you encourage or suppress inquiry from others?
- Do you tend to leave people feeling inspired or frustrated?
- Is it safe to question your opinions, data, or conclusions? Yes or no.

How do you know?

Apply to library committees/groups...Part II

Refer to the key terms; identify a couple of terms that *you* could begin to work on starting today that would contribute to the success of the committee/group. Share with your table mates.

Make a pledge to do one thing differently starting today
– share with your table mates.

Basic Questions – Quick Review

Argyris' basic questions that need to be asked:

- Do you have valid information?
- How do you know?
- How long have you been aware of a problem?
- What aspects of this problems made it difficult/easy to solve?
- Is there a way we can check or verify our solution?
- Are there other useful approaches for finding a solution?

Basic Principles – Quick Review

- Validate the information
- Produce informed choices about ways to use the knowledge; and
- Monitor how well you are doing the first two

Your role....

1. Talk about yourself, e.g., how you contribute to dysfunctional situations, processes, etc.
2. Encourage inquiry of statements you make
3. Surface multiple perspectives
4. Use valid information
5. Seek understanding before moving to problem solving
6. Make a point to ask about elephants

Your suggestions?

Other suggestions

1. Question underlying assumptions.
2. Discuss saying/doing gaps
3. Identify why a problem exists and how it is being maintained

“It is a healthy thing now and then to hang a question mark on the things you have long taken for granted.”

Bertrand Russell, English Mathematician and Philosopher

“We learn to do something by doing it. There is no other way.”

John Holt as cited in ‘More Language of Letting Go: 360 New Daily Meditations,’ Melody Beattie. 2000.

Progress, not perfection

Last Exercise: What to do you think, now?

What if you....

Spent the next week evaluating your thought patterns and actions from an Argyris and Hammond/Mayfield point of view?

Interjected the key terms into conversations?

Were to report back to this group next week and shared your observations, i.e., how would your co-workers and boss react?

New Yorker Cartoon by [Mick Stevens](#)

ID: 28162, Published in *The New Yorker* October 3, 1994



"I don't know how it started, either. All I know is that it's part of our corporate culture."