

HOW TO TALK ABOUT 'ELEPHANTS' WITHOUT GETTING
STOMPED ON...USING WORDS THAT MATTER

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Chris Argyris' Action Science (as found in

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Action_research#Chris_Argyris.27s_Action_Science)

Main article: [Action Science](#) (go to this page for a chart)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Action_Science

NOTES PAGE:

Elephants-

Undiscussability-

Dysfunction (relationships and processes)-

The 'formula' for talking about elephants. Fill in the blanks.

- Give the _____ a name

- Identify the underlying _____, causes, as well as why the elephant is still alive

- Ask lots of _____

- Constructively discuss _____

- Problem solve versus finding _____

- Solve the right _____

Why do ‘elephants’ endure? Why is this important? Why should we care?

The goals of this session are to:

- Examine the key terms and concepts used by Chris Argyris, Sue Annis Hammond & Andrea B. Mayfield, and William Noonan to both describe and attack organizational dysfunction
- Apply those key terms and concepts to case studies
- Conclude with a look at individual responsibility for improving the work environment

“How do you develop confidence in a community, and in individuals, to speak, stand up for, to strive, to fight and to have hope?...It’s not so much what building you are going to build or what social program are you going to change. But it’s the people part of it, the part that has people investing themselves to make a difference, to make a change and to see that hope. That’s the difference. That’s the challenge.”

Che Madyun *Holding Ground: The Rebirth of Dudley Street* (as cited in *Transformational Public Service*, King & Zanetti.)

"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....

By participating in this training....

- You will learn key terms to help talk about ‘elephants’
- You’ll understand the influence of assumptions, attributions, etc.
- You’ll understand 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.

This course is not about actually naming existing elephants. **It is about learning and self-awareness.**

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“Try as we might, sir, our team of management consultants has been unable to find a single fault in the manner in which you conduct your business. Everything you do is a hundred per cent right. Keep it up! That will be eleven thousand dollars.”

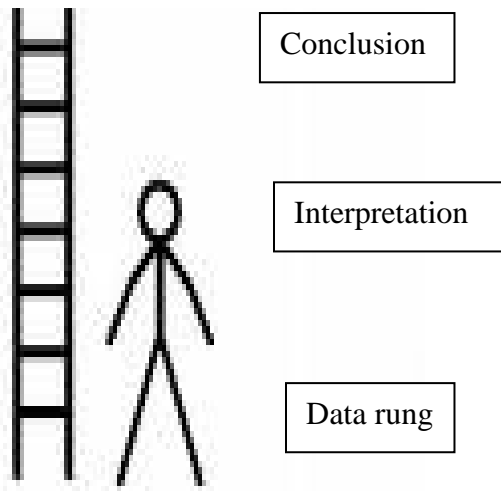
Key terms and concepts. (Derived by the work of Chris Argyris)

Key Terms	Definitions	Responses
Undiscussables	'Elephants.' Those things people perceive as dysfunctional but are afraid to mention, <i>especially in a group setting.</i>	Sounds like there is an elephant in the room. What is the elephant in the room? Have we stepped on an elephant? Does anyone else notice the elephant? Why is this 'undiscussable?'
Assumptions	Untested statements or opinions regarding the validity of information, processes, viewpoints, etc.	How do you know? Let's test that assumption. What are your assumptions? Is that data still valid? Does that process still work?
Attributions	Assumptions of cause and effect. Going beyond a review of the facts and determining peoples' motives for saying and doing things.	How do you know? You don't know a person's intention; so, talk about their actions; talk about the facts in evidence; talk about impact.
Multiple perspectives	The different ways individuals see a situation	How do you see it? Does anyone see it differently (or see it the same way that I do)? Why do you feel that way? Let's hear from so-and-so.
Espoused theory-of-action and theory-in-use	A gap between how we aspire to act and how we actually act. This is found at the organizational and at the individual level.	That sounds like 'espoused behavior', but in reality your behavior indicates... You think you're a team player but when you do X, you put yourself above the team. You think you're open to questions, but you're not.
Collusion	Acting in a way that supports the dysfunction, either directly or indirectly	How are you colluding with the problem? Sounds like s/he is colluding with the problem.
Defensive routines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How we <u>work around</u> or <u>cover up</u> the dysfunction; ▪ How we <u>rationalize</u> working around dysfunction; ▪ How we <u>deny</u> working around dysfunction. Actions that prevent identifying and eliminating the cause of embarrassing or threatening situations.	Sounds like, to avoid problem X, we do solution Y, even though we know doing Y is not the best way to do it. (Defensive routines are normal behavior. The point here is to recognize our defensive response and assess its impact, i.e., is it maintaining a dysfunctional situation.)
Valid Information	Having the most accurate, complete data possible from which to make inferences	Do we have valid data? How do we know? What else do we need to consider?
Barriers	Obstacles & impediments to implementing a change, getting information, etc. – financial, personnel, technological, informational, etc.	What obstacles need to be addressed? How might we resolve that obstacle? Sounds like we hit a barrier...Who can help us knock it down?
Single-loop learning	Automatic responses and patterns of thinking that govern our behavior and rule the day	Sounds like we keep creating the same problem over and over. Oh, when I do X and you do Y, we produce Z again and again.
Double-loop learning	Thinking that challenges the automatic responses and patterns of thinking and behavior	Let's examine the situation again. Let's stop the madness. Can we imagine a different outcome...how do we achieve it?
Accept Responsibility	Take responsibility for one's own role in a good or bad situation	I acknowledge...I see how I contributed to the situation. Oh, when I do this, you feel thusly.

So...How can I apply it at work in the moment?

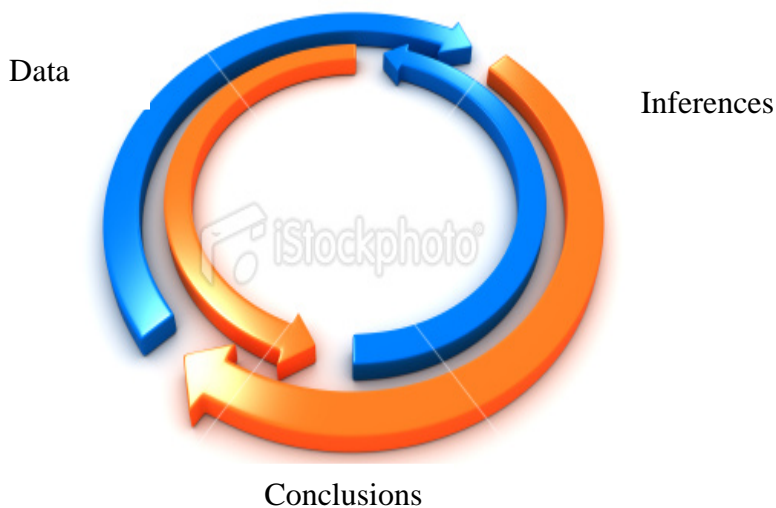
The Ladder of Inference

- 1) Select data from an ocean of data
- 2) Interpret the data
- 3) Draw conclusions



Key Points:

Our conclusions are affected by how we interpret data...the data we select impacts the next steps...currently held conclusions affect the data selected to support the conclusion.



Typical problems:

- Conclusions are often presented as factual when they are actually inferential (“How do you know?”)
- We fail to question the outcome of steps 2 and 3. (“How do I know? What assumptions am I making?”)
- We fail to invite others to question how we selected data (step1) and what we inferred from the data (step 2). (“How do you see it? What questions do you have? Have I missed anything?”)

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

Small Group Exercise #3

Advocacy statement lead-ins:

What if...?

I'm assuming....

I wonder what MLA groups would support this idea....

What questions do you have about the proposal?

Write down advocacy statements that you might want to try in your next advocacy moment.

Inquiry lead-in statements:

Tell us more....

What do you see as the benefits?

Have you thought about...?

What obstacles would need to be overcome?

Who else needs to get onboard...?

That gives me a corollary idea to do....

Write down inquiry statements that you might want to try in your next inquiry moment.

Looking at Ourselves

How do people react when you contribute a comment? How do people feel about approaching you with a question or comment?

Something else to think about when difficult situations occur...are you an 'active victim,' or a 'passive victim,' or a 'Lord Voldemort'? How long have you been aware of this?

Individual Exercise #1

What about us...as individuals? What needs to change around here? What part of that change belongs to you? How can you exert influence...in words, in action, in behavior?

For your eyes only...How do things typically work? *For questions 1-3, circle one response.*

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

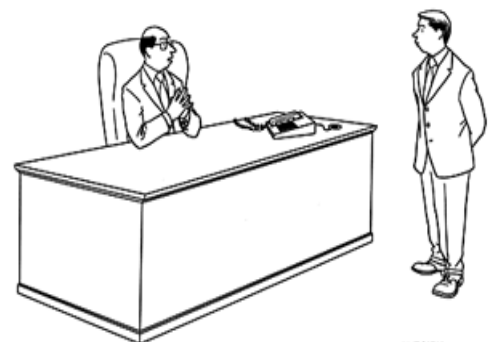
How do you know?

Small Group Exercise #4

Look at the key terms table; identify a couple of terms that you could begin working on today that would contribute to improved working conditions within your unit or department or a committee, etc. Share with your table mates.

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

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"I'd like your honest, unbiased and possibly career-ending opinion on something."

Quick Review II

So, how do you talk about elephants without getting ‘stomped on?’

- Do you have valid information?
- How do you know?
- How long have you been aware of a problem?

Your role....

- Demonstrate a willingness to talk about how you, individually, contribute to dysfunctional situations, processes, etc.
- Encourage inquiry
- Surface multiple perspectives and assumptions
- Use valid information
- Slow down – Seek understanding before moving to problem solving
- Make a point to ask about elephants

Let’s Apply

1. Discuss in small groups: Think of a library committee on which you serve or a group in which you are a member. In what ways does it operate in a single-loop format and in what ways does it demonstrate double-loop thinking?
2. If you had to describe the organization in one word, what would that word be? Take 30 seconds and write down your first and second choices. I’ll ask you to share your first choice; use your second if someone mentions your first choice. Is it safe to tell the truth in this organization? If this group can’t tell the truth, then don’t expect the rest of the organization to do so. Ask your new members if they feel safe speaking up.
3. What about morale around here? In what way might low morale be the result of single-loop learning? How would you discuss it from a double-loop approach? Share with the larger group.

Models of 'learning' (addendum)

A few symptoms of single-loop learning:

- Achieve the task, as I define it.
- Control the task, unilaterally.
- In win/lose situations with others, try to win and avoid losing.
- Inquiry is discouraged either explicitly or implicitly. You might hear things like, "Let's not talk about the past, that's over." And, "We don't have time today to discuss things in detail."
- We assume to know what others are thinking or how they will react and when we do share info we don't take the time to clarify our reasoning.
- Assume you need to protect yourself and others, without questioning the assumption.
- Ambiguity is allowed to persist. The corollary is that confirmation of understanding is not sought.
- Data is not collected, or not questioned, or ignored if it doesn't fit our perspective.
- We hold on to past resentments, processes, and decisions.
- We cover up errors by another by performing the task rather than confronting the person.

These behaviors contribute to a climate in which participants act defensively and closed. Even if one person wants to 'break out' of the mold, s/he hesitates or declines, anticipating the negative reaction of others, e.g., Who are you to question me? We just don't have time; We don't have time to do it your way; We 'know' the answer; Can we just get through this meeting?

- Pressure is exerted to stay the [single-loop] course for problem solving.
- Participants collude with the above symptoms and perpetuate the cycle.

When actions are designed to achieve the intended consequences *and* to suppress inquiry about the who, what, where, when, why, and how, a single-loop learning cycle is in effect.

Measures of double-loop learning:

- Inquiry is encouraged, e.g., do we agree on the problem definition; what other info is relevant; is the info out-dated; are the key players here;
- Give and get valid information; request and share observable data.
- Assumptions are tested, i.e., this is what I think, does it make sense to anyone else, or does anyone else agree, or what details am I missing?
- Barriers are identified and addressed that lead to a lack of time, info, etc.
- There is a 'skillful awareness' of the value of breaking the Model I cycle when dealing with complex problems.

For a good listing of Model I and II characteristics, see

<http://www.infed.org/thinkers/argyris.htm>

(Slide) Group Exercise– Using the key terms in a case study – *Columbia* shuttle disaster

Work as a group and jot down your observations from the handout of the NASA case study on the following table, e.g., what assumptions were made within NASA; what single-loop learning took place? Don't worry about filling in all the blanks.

Key terms	Observations from the case study
Undiscussables	
Assumptions	
Attributions	
Multiple perspectives	
Espoused theory-of-action and theory-in-use	
Collusion	
Defensive routines	
Valid Information	
Barriers	
Accept Responsibility	
Single-loop learning	
Double-loop learning	