

The Elephant in the Room: How to Confront Difficult Business Scenarios

**Confrontation is hard for everyone. Get over it.
If you can learn to identify and tackle the disagreements
you will be successful in all you do.**

By Dr. Erica Miller

Not infrequently, everyone, whether in personal or business situations, finds themselves facing potentially uncomfortable and untenable situations with peers, colleagues, subordinates, family, and friends. When the tendency is to avoid dealing with them, it's commonly referred to as the "elephant in the room." It means there is an obvious problem, obstacle, or challenge or that people don't want to address. For self-employed business owners, the 'elephant' characterizes a pesky pachyderm that most companies cannot afford to disregard. Why?

Because it:

- Distracts you and your employees from productive, creative work
- Delays your ability to move forward
- Drains your energy
- Damages the morale of every person on your team
- Doesn't clean up after itself



Avoidance in dealing with difficult scenarios and conversations (a.k.a., the elephant) can prevent you from achieving the growth and success you desire.

Five steps to overcome the elephant in the room

Step 1: Do not ignore it!

It seems counterintuitive. The elephant's presence is so obvious we shouldn't be able to overlook it, but we do. However, it has been proven that ignoring a prickly situation only makes it worse.

Step 2: Acknowledge it is there when it first enters the room

The problem (i.e., the elephant) must be recognized for what it is quickly. It takes leadership, courage, and a sincere desire to problem-solve. To address the issue productively, avoid criticizing others.

For the best outcome, recognize all parties involved are important. Deliver information calmly, positively, and without emotion or disapproval. When approached in this way, everyone involved will be more open to listening and looking for solutions toward an acceptable goal shared by the majority of the participants.

Step 3: Address the condition it has created head-on

Don't back away or be timid. Be honest, transparent, and stick to your guns. Identify all the issues making the uncomfortable topic or scenario painful, and figure out how to discuss it without judgments or attacking. It's often this kind of confrontation that makes the parties involved uneasy, but as they say, the only way out of something is by going through it.

Step 4: Brainstorm to create options and alternatives

While some issues can be dealt with in one session, and the resolution will be swift, others will require more time and effort. Listen, negotiate, collaborate, innovate, and "think different," as the late Steve Jobs would say.

Step 5: Make a plan for resolution and follow-through

Define what success will look like. If progress is slow in the beginning, don't give up! Before you leave the room or meeting, make sure everyone is on the same page and understands what will happen next. No one is allowed to miss the next meeting, should one be required.

What's at stake if the elephant stays?

When people avoid emotionally charged situations, the quality and quantity of communication diminish. Conversations and meetings become unproductive; and if interaction deteriorates, business comes to a halt. Maybe not overnight, but eventually.

Little problems fester and become big problems (i.e., elephants) if they're ignored. Especially in smaller companies, elephant dodging is deadly, but it applies everywhere. The news and social media outlets stay in business by selling stories about companies and people ruined by denying their elephants' existence.

The situation starts internally. If people in your company aren't communicating well amongst themselves, then eventually, external communications break down. As the company and its outside stakeholders—vendors, investors, and customers—struggle, the entire business is at risk.

It's not easy, but it is possible to corral the big guy. It is critical to take care of the issue because the elephant will not go away on its own. Lawsuits often find their best resources in the elephant paddock.

'Wish and hope' isn't a strategy

Younger and newer business leaders might find dealing with the elephant more uncomfortable than seasoned veterans, but that's not always the case. There's no doubt about it: the "I-wish-it-would-just-go-away-by-itself" elephant-in-the-room fills our lives and businesses with stress.

Confrontation is hard for everyone. Get over it. If you can learn to identify and tackle the disagreements in your business (and in your personal life) in a proactive, caring, but objective way, you will be successful in all you do.

About Erica Miller

Dr. Erica Miller is a multi-faceted, dynamic speaker and international best-selling author with a long history of “telling it like it is.” A Holocaust survivor, entrepreneur, mental health professional, and world traveler, she captivates audiences with her colorful stories and authentic conversations of guts, grit, and gusto. Her three books are: Chronologically Gifted: Aging with Gusto, Don’t Tell Me I Can’t Do It: Living Audaciously in the Here and Now, and The Dr. Erica Miller Story: From Trauma to Triumph. For more information, visit drecicamiller.com.

