

How an Elephant can make a Monkey out of your Business

Developing engaging relationships and credible communication for more creative and productive teams



An accountant, a marketer and a management consultant visit a struggling company. “Cut costs”, says the accountant. “Shed staff and reduce advertising.” “That’ll make things worse”, says the marketer. “You need to build the brand and invest in a marketing strategy. The management consultant disagrees: “Your systems and procedures are inefficient - you need more technology and new structures.”

This fictional anecdote chimes with the old story of the blind men and the Elephant: The first describes the leg as a tree trunk; the second thinks the ears are the leaves of a large plant; the third says the trunk is a fireman’s hose. None of them are right and yet each description is perfectly reasonable given the nature of the object and the limitations of the observers.

Now, I am not about to label accountants, marketers and management consultants as blind. But our individual perception is conditioned by who we are and the influences we have been subject to. Just as each of us is a unique human being, so our views will differ from one person to the next.

I recently asked the management team of a service organisation to each draw their business using simple symbols such as walls, mountains, rivers, cars etc. - in

fact anything they wanted to get their ideas across in a readily understandable way. Not surprisingly, each picture was different with some common strands. I then asked the team, one by one, to describe another’s picture to the group. This exposed a host of new perspectives and interpretations, some complimentary, some contradictory - some of them surprising, all of them interesting and revealing, I was quite struck by this vivid demonstration of collective insight. The team felt energised and engaged... and so did I.

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So the message is clear and simple: use your team to get a bigger picture and a better handle on your business. No rocket science yet then - this is what teams are for, surely? And many of us have had ‘aha!’ moments as a result of team interactions. But all too often the delicate and subtle conditions needed for team creativity and insight are swamped by other, deeply engrained behaviours.

3 MONKEYS

Enter the 3 monkeys that hear no evil, see no evil and speak no evil ... and substitute the word evil with negative or challenging. So we have one monkey that will not see the negatives, another that refuses to listen to them and a third that does not speak them. Note that the monkeys use their hands to block communication - this is not the involuntary blindness of the men in the elephant story - this is a deliberate filtering of reality.

Now ask yourself if you have ever sat in a meeting in the full knowledge that the real issues are being avoided and will only get aired later in smaller groups in the car park, or next to the coffee machine. I have sat in more of these than I am proud of, guilty of emulating all 3 monkeys at times. Meetings like these are not only draining; they also tend to reinforce the unchallenged issues, creating suppressed resentment, hostility and conflict to boot. They strangle creativity and obscure vision.

THE ELEPHANT UNDER THE TABLE

At the risk of mixing metaphors, we call the issues that no one dare speak about, Elephants under the Table. Everyone knows they’re there; they get in the way and obstruct progress, but everyone pretends that they are concealed by the table.

Why does authentic communication get blocked in this way? Why do the monkeys use their hands to prevent it? My feeling as both a participant and observer of this kind of behaviour is that it is to do with the overwhelming emphasis in business on the rational, to the exclusion of feeling and emotion. Whether we like it or not, as humans we are both thinking and sentient beings - we can play down our feelings, ignore them - even suppress them. But we cannot eradicate them as the CEO of a national charity illustrates:

“I was getting increasingly frustrated and anxious with our new financial manager and the procedures that he had been imposing on our accounting practices. Although I had instigated the changes, for the benefit of the organisation, it felt as though they were making it impossible to do things that had previously seemed simple. The relationship became tense. Not able to mask my unease any further, I admitted that I was on the defensive and felt thwarted and frustrated - the exact opposite of what I thought a CEO should disclose. To my surprise the manager confessed to being overzealous and digging in his heels. The relief was tangible and energising. It led to immediate shared solutions to the problems.”

This actual instance of authenticity - saying what you think and feel - acted as a catalyst, strengthening the relationship and paving the way for more meaningful and constructive teamwork.

What else gets in the way of this kind of communication? A major factor is the vulnerability associated with saying things as they are - the fear of exposing weakness, the fear of contradiction, not to mention the fear of saying something that might affect our careers:

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company to start their own business. “Why did the company go under?” I asked. “Because the whole strategy was flawed from the start.” was the rather surprising answer. “What did you do about it?” I asked, somewhat naively. “Nothing”, came the reply. “No one was going to threaten their huge salaries by saying something out of turn.”

So how do we get people to the point where they can start to engage more authentically with their colleagues and profit from more creative, spontaneous collaboration? What are the conditions needed for engagement, creativity and insight?

The Clarity Partnership, which I co-founded with Julian Burton and Johnnie Moore, was created precisely to address this need.

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The approach we have developed does not try to add what is missing, but rather removes the blocks that prevent creativity and insight from emerging naturally. Our collective experience is that any team has access, potentially, to a vast treasure house of new ideas, perspectives, solutions and directions. We focus on the quality of communication and relationship within teams as the key to open this resource.

One aspect of our approach is based on 3 guidelines: which, in practice, are as elusive as they are simple and obvious:

1. **Talk about your own experience:**

Express both your own thoughts and feelings about the issues at hand. Don't concern yourself with what others might be thinking - this is only supposition at best, fantasy at worst. Use 'I' language, not the impersonal passive voice - it might sound business-like, but it distances people instead of bringing them together.

2. **Be specific:**

Generalisations have their place, but many of them started life as a specific experience, so own up to your specific experience. It's invariably more interesting, relevant and human.

3. **Communicate positively:**

This doesn't mean avoiding the negative - it means finding a balance - trying to understand before trying to convince, listening as skilfully as you speak. Criticism may be required, but leave the path ahead open.

So let's look at a throwaway comment that I've heard more than once in the workplace:

"That woman's so annoying - she's always moaning about something"

Applying our guidelines we can see that direct experience has been replaced by a general indirect interpretation and it's not even addressed to the person concerned. It also tends to condemn the person with little chance of reprieve.

Putting our guidelines into practice, we would firstly address the person concerned directly and say something along the lines of:

"Sandra, I felt quite depressed when you said how much you dislike your work this morning. I'd like to hear what you appreciate about it as well..."



Now instead of indulging in more analysis of hypothetical communication, I urge you to go out now and find someone to talk to using your own specific experience, in a positive spirit, as the foundation for a conversation - see what it does to you and your partner. And start to notice how easy it is to slip back into habitual patterns of expression - or even silence.

Use it in meetings to name the elephants under the table and notice the galvanising effect it has - if it feels a little risky then you're probably on the right track.

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And use it to bring teams closer together, at an emotional as well as a rational level. Creativity (and that includes productivity) goes hand in hand with vulnerability - new ideas, just like any newborn living thing, are at risk from an early demise.

A lack of creativity is not the only indicator of blocked communication or poor relationship within a team - very often it's overshadowed by more tangible symptoms such as conflict, stress, absenteeism and sickness. The antidote is the same.

So don't let the monkeys and the elephants get the better of your business; encourage your teams to introduce more direct personal experience into their conversation, more specific observation, in a positive spirit. And start to unlearn the habitual styles of communication that tend to rely on debate, generalisations and critical judgement of others... and, of course, silence.

For help with developing team relationships, communication and creativity email Chris at teams@claritypartnership.co.uk

Chris Pearse co-founded the Clarity Partnership with Johnnie Moore and Julian Burton to develop ways of improving human interaction in the workplace. A Chartered Engineer, Chris has led several small and medium enterprises and continues to advise on strategy and management.

