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BUSINESS ADVANCEMENT INC.®

## *The Harper Report:*

# How To Take Control of the “Elephant in the Room”

From time to time, leaders of even the most sophisticated and innovative organizations must take control of an issue that almost everyone sees but no one wants to face, otherwise known as the “elephant in the room.”

Organizational elephants often are born and grow from good intentions. These can include the desire to avoid unnecessary conflicts and maintain relationships, or to be seen as a team player. However, when left unresolved, organizational elephants produce a situation where people become focused on preserving an illusion that erodes trust, wastes time, drains resources, robs you of talent, and steals opportunities.

The sooner you take control of an organizational elephant by spotting it and freeing it, the less power it has over your company’s success.

This dynamic is especially common in the face of the uncertainty and risk that go hand-in-hand with ambitious innovation strategies. For example, take the case of a global company that was expanding into a new country with an ambitious line of new products. When we met the head of the company, he was concerned that meetings with his executive team produced mostly superficial overviews rather than significant conversations about issues and opportunities. This insightful executive could see disconnects between what was being said at meetings and the number of unexpected delays and other challenges that were threatening to impact

their revenue targets, and he decided that it was critical to take charge of the situation sooner rather than later.

If you’re in a similar situation where you’re getting superficial conversation or silence during meetings, it’s likely that an organizational elephant exists.

### **Spotting the elephant**

While an organizational elephant can stubbornly resist coming out of hiding, there are a number of common phrases, behaviors, and situations that can signal its presence. Here are three common examples of the many elephants that exist:

- **“We’re on the right track, but...”** The strategy or line of innovation isn’t working out as intended. Everyone keeps talking about it, but no one is bringing up what’s really at the heart of the problem, and the options for moving forward.
- **“It’s all important...”** Key priorities have shifted and resources are being diverted elsewhere, but no one is discussing what has to be let go in order to achieve milestones.
- **“Just get it done...”** Deadlines and windows of opportunity are repeatedly missed, yet everyone is focused on increasing efficiency and moving forward, and no one is discussing what else could be behind the issue.

The more that you can pair disconnects between what is being said and what is actually happening, the more

likely it is that you'll find an elephant lurking in the corner. It's time to take action.

### Freeing the elephant

Once you've spotted an organizational elephant, you're in a position to find out what is actually feeding it and take the necessary steps to move forward.

- **Search for "elephant food"** – Just as with their counterparts in the animal kingdom, organizational elephants thrive on different types of food. We've found that there are multiple sources that go into preserving illusions, and they are often surprising. These include unrealistic expectations, mistaken assumptions, misunderstandings, misperceptions, and a deep fear that facing the issue will create more problems than it solves. The more contributing sources you find underlying the elephant, the more likely it is that you will be able to take control of the real issues and move forward.
- **Open "critical conversations"** – As we define it, a critical conversation is a candid exchange based in reality, which addresses the most important issues necessary for success. Freeing the elephant through critical conversations, while not a comfortable process, actually brings with it a tremendous amount of power. For example, In the case of the company we described above, there was a palpable wave of relief as the executive team cleared away misunderstandings and misperceptions. In the end, they were able to tackle a number of difficult issues without breaking down, as some

had feared. As a result, the company sped up progress on their objectives by six months, and saved millions of dollars in the process.

- **Reinforce a positive dynamic** – The more that everyone can see the connection between critical conversations and appropriate action, the more likely it is that this new dynamic will continue. It's also important to consider associated elements in both the formal culture (e.g., performance management systems, compensation, and other policies) and informal culture (e.g., stories of "heroes," what it takes to get the most resources, and other unwritten customs) that contribute to reinforcing candor and openness.

### The Bottom Line

Ultimately, with all of the complexity and uncertainty in the business environment, there's no way to totally prevent elephants from being born. However, you don't have to let them grow to be destructive forces.

The more regularly you check for signs of elephants in your organization, the more likely they are to be discovered at an early stage in their development, and the easier it is to free them. When an issue is particularly sensitive and critical to success, it can be useful to bring in a neutral third party who has experience finding and addressing these issues.

When you open critical conversations with your stakeholders and positively reinforce them with appropriate actions and adjustments in your organization's culture, you can take back control and accelerate effective, profitable innovation and growth.



### About the authors:

**Pamela S. Harper** is the Founding Partner and CEO of Business Advancement Inc. (BAI), based in Glen Rock, NJ. She is an internationally known business performance expert, author, and professional speaker with over 20 years experience in internal and external consulting to entrepreneurial, middle market, and Fortune 500 companies in a wide range of industries, all going through extraordinary growth and change. Pam is the author of the critically acclaimed book, *Preventing Strategic Gridlock®: Leading Over, Under & Around Organizational Jams to Achieve High Performance Results*. She has published and been quoted in prominent media outlets including: *BusinessWeek*, *Investor's Business Daily*, *Red Herring*, *Entrepreneur*, *Forbes.com* and major global newspapers.

**D. Scott Harper, Ph.D.** is Sr. Partner and COO of BAI. He is a globally recognized expert in innovation processes and systems with a unique ability to translate technical insights into desired business results, gained from over 20 years of leadership experience in Johnson & Johnson Consumer Company, Pfizer Consumer Healthcare, and Warner-Lambert Company.

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