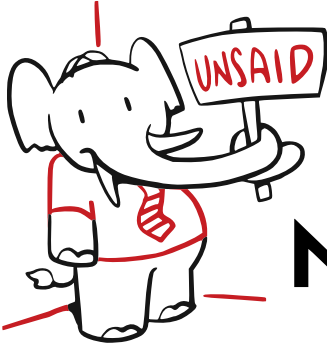


RESONANT

Ideas That Carry Further



Name the Elephant in the Room

A leaders' guide for creating a more candid culture

With all the talk about what's OK to say in the workplace, what about the thing that goes unsaid? The Elephant in the Room.

The awkward thing that everyone “knows” – but no one says because it feels uncomfortable or impolite.

Until you have the conversation, the elephant owns the room.

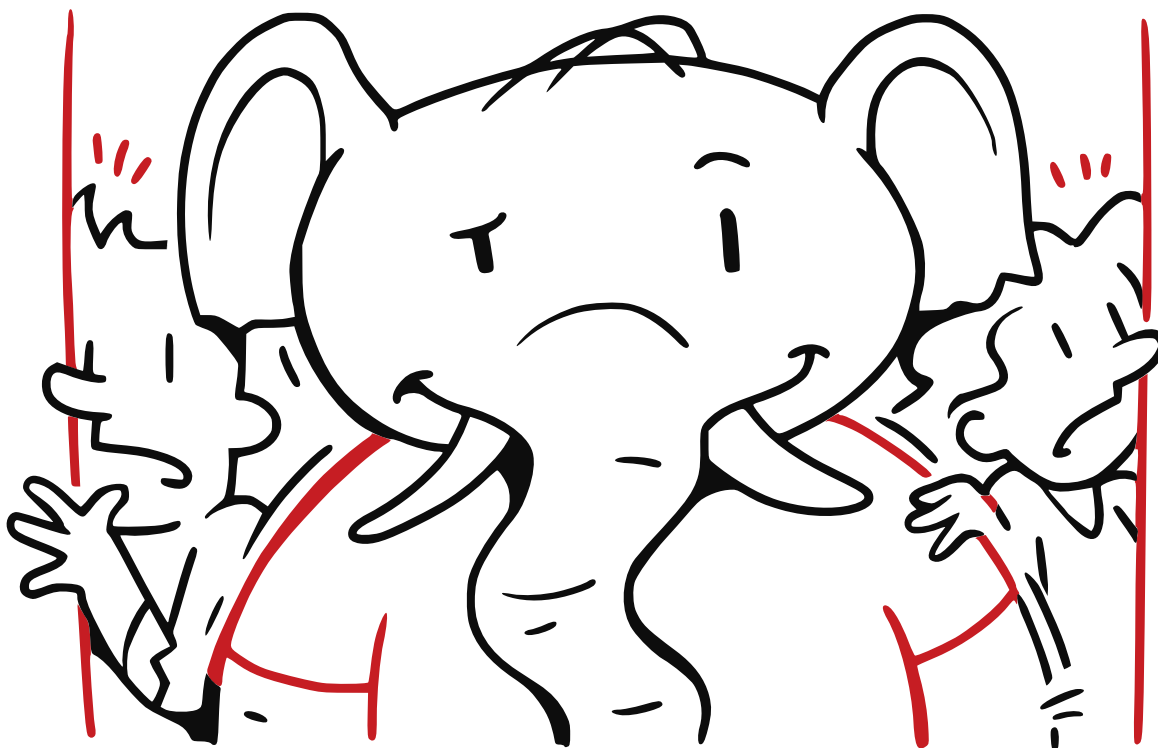
Learn how to say it skillfully, get more done, and create better working relationships in five straightforward steps.

Until you name it, the elephant owns the room.

- You know those moments when no one is speaking up, but there are lots of glances going around the room?
- Those times when someone brought in an outside consultant who wound up saying what “everyone knows” but no one has said to the whole group?
- Those 1:1 conversations that get awkward because there are things you “can’t” say?

Until you name it, that elephant owns the room. You can't fully get anything else done, because something important hasn't been said out loud.

Someone has to say something. How do you do it skillfully?



Step 1: Timing is everything

Choose the right time. Ask yourself:

- Do you have the facts that you need to describe the situation?
- What else is happening in the conversation? Is the issue relevant to the conversation and what's on the agenda?
- Is the person you need to address in a receptive frame of mind? Is the conversation already heated?
- If there are others in the room, will you embarrass the person you're addressing? Should you make it a private conversation?

These questions will help you decide when it's the right time to name the elephant in the room.

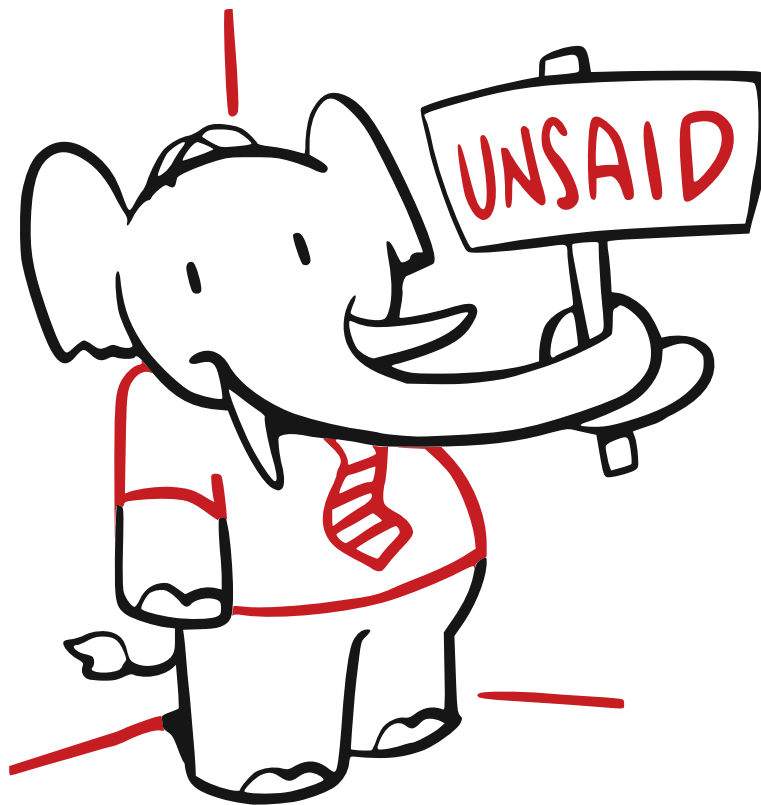
Step 2: State your intent

It takes guts and skill to name the elephant in the room. To (temporarily) raise the level of discomfort in a conversation. To speak up and say what really needs to be said, but no one feels able to say.

To do it well, first state your intent.

Tell the others in the conversation **WHY** you're naming the elephant.

That creates the opening for people to truly hear what's important when you name the elephant, rather than just having an immediate, negative reaction.



Some examples:

- "There's something no one has been saying. I know you'd want to know about it so you can address it, and you won't have the opportunity to fix it if no one tells you."
- "There's something you should know, and while it's hard to be the one to speak up, I think it's the right thing to do and I want to see our business grow."
- "I'm sharing this because I want to see you succeed."
- "I'm sharing this because if I were you, I'd want to know."

When you're clear and open about your intent, your honesty and transparency lower the perceived threat level, enable a good conversation, and create an opening for you to name the elephant in the room.

Step 3: State the facts, then stop talking and listen

Start by sticking to the facts.

Why? Because leading with your interpretations and perceptions is a great way to create an argument. If the other person doesn't agree with your perspective or feels threatened by it, and you lead with that perspective, their reaction is likely to be immediate and negative.

Instead, start by stating the facts. Here are a couple of examples.

Example 1

Intent: "There's something you should know, and while it's hard to be the one to speak up, I think it's the right thing to do and I want to see our business grow."

Facts: "We've had a lot of staff leave and our remaining team members have been working very long hours. Adding work will be challenging for them."

Notice that it doesn't say "our teams are stretched to the limit," "this will be bad for morale," "I think this is a bad idea," or something else that's an interpretation.

Example 2

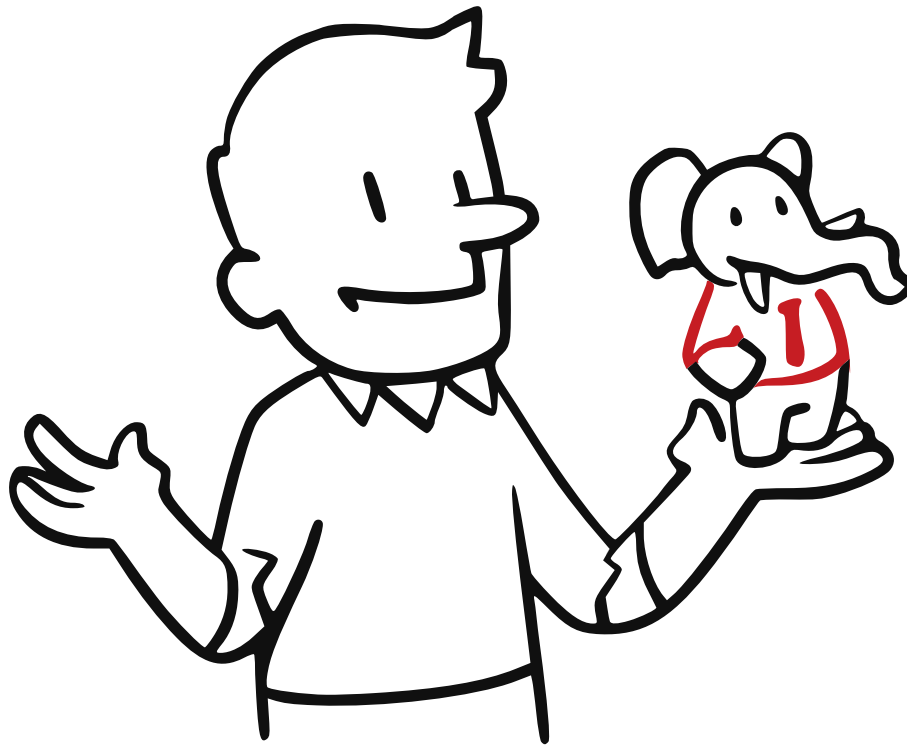
Intent: "I'm sharing this because I want to see you succeed."

Facts: "I've noticed that in our meetings, you interrupt when other people are speaking."

Notice that it doesn't say "you don't respect others in the meeting," "you downplay what others are saying," or something else that's an interpretation.

Stick to things that everyone can see and hear.

Then stop talking and listen.



Step 4: Offer your perspective or interpretation

Create an opening for conversation.

Give the other person a few seconds to digest, think about what you've said and respond to what they've heard. You're inviting them to consider the same facts that you're observing and to share their interpretation. You create an opening for conversation rather than setting the stage for the other person to get defensive.

Only then, make it clear that what you're about to say next is your opinion.

Why offer your perspective after you've offered the facts? Because if you offer your perspective first, the other person will only hear judgment and is likely to shut down. When you separate facts from opinion, you're inviting your conversation partner to do the same.

Here are a couple of examples.

Example 1

Intent: "There's something you should know, and while it's hard to be the one to speak up, I think it's the right thing to do and I want to see our business grow."

Facts: "We've had a lot of staff leave and our remaining team members have been working very long hours. Adding work will be challenging for them."

PAUSE

Perspective: "I think you're going to get a lot of pushback and this will actually set your cause back." or "I wonder if there are alternatives to your plan that might not add burden to our staff."

Example 2

Intent: "I'm sharing this because I want to see you succeed."

Facts: "I've noticed that in our meetings, you interrupt when other people are speaking."

PAUSE

Perspective: "I'm concerned that people will think you don't respect them."

Some useful phrases to use:

- "I wonder"
- "I have a hypothesis"
- "I'm curious"
- "I think"
- "I'm concerned" or "I'm worried"

Step 5: Ask for their response

What do you think?

Now that you've stated the facts and your perspective, it's time to open up the dialogue by asking a simple question: "What do you think?" This invites the other person to share their thoughts on the facts and perspective that you've offered and creates a path for shared exploration.

Summary: Discuss the elephant in the room

1. Choose the right time.
2. State your intent.
3. State the facts, then listen.
4. Offer your perspective or interpretation.
5. Ask for their response.

