



Elephants: The Unseen Power

The expression “an elephant in the room” has been around for decades – if not longer. Readily recognized to mean an uncomfortable situation not talked about but clearly known to all, the phrase has made its way into literature, everyday life and, perhaps most often, the notes of therapists worldwide.

When elephants make unwanted appearances – at dinners, parties, meetings -- people get uncomfortable and begin to shut down. Once people shut down they begin to operate from assumptions and to draw conclusions based on their own perceptions, which may or may not be based in reality. Overtime, these actions may cause family relationships to erode.

To identify the elephants begins the process of removing them from the room. Putting a name to the problem ignites the power to lead the elephant out the door.

ELEPHANT #1: WEALTH

To many, the idea that wealth can be an issue may seem laughable. Yet in fact, wealth can be one of the most powerful elephants in the herd. Issues

surrounding wealth range from denial to guilt; fear of losing the money, and a sheer lack of financial literacy, which can have a devastating impact.

To explore the family’s relationship with money can be eye opening. Sharing the family story of wealth creation uncovers the work ethic, the sacrifices made and the underlying family values.

It is crucial to invest in building financial literacy skills across the family. Seek creative ways to talk about wealth and use trusted advisors or facilitators to talk about wealth concerns.

Most importantly, create a safe environment to discuss the emotional impact of wealth. Finally, model responsible money behavior.

ELEPHANT #2: DIFFERING VALUES

Often in families, the differences in personalities coupled with different styles, priorities, genders and generational traits, leads to utter confusion. Unaddressed, the confusion may result in unfair judgments and relationship rifts.

While values are always additive and never negative, people, even people in the same family, have

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different values. Understanding that our innate personal values help us identify our priorities and energize us to accomplish our goals, differing values could lead to opposing goals.

While family members can and do have different values, they also have shared values. Families benefit enormously from exploring their shared values and crafting values-driven vision and mission statements. Shared goals work as guidelines for joint decision-making.

ELEPHANT #3: STRONG PATRIARCH/MATRI-ARCH

Generally, a strong leader is sought after in times of stress, uncharted waters, and rough seas. But these same take-charge qualities can become challenging when it's time for the captain to give up the helm.

A strong patriarch/matriarch may refuse to cede control for a variety of reasons. He or she may harbor a difference of opinion on how things should be done, have a fear of change and/or innovation, or think no one else is prepared to fill his or her shoes.

Here again, visioning work and goal setting can ease the stress and identify the barriers to success. Getting to the root of why there is such reluctance to hand over or lighten up on the reins may uncover control concerns that can be worked through.

Conversations regarding succession must start early, not when a change in leadership is critical.

ELEPHANT #4: SIBLING RIVALRIES

Birth order has been talked about, investigated, maligned and turned into numerous books -- for good reason. The order in which a family is formed is powerful and cannot be denied. Family dynamics emerge without overt coercion. Competitiveness, jealousy, and estrangement occur, and without understanding and assessment, can be devastating.

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Education on family systems, sibling dynamics and birth order goes a long way toward understanding and accepting each member's qualities.

Type and style analyses – such as MBTI, Hall-Tonna Values Assessment and communication styles assessments – help highlight type differences, identify shared values and invite open communication.

ELEPHANT #5: BLENDED FAMILIES

In its most basic sense, a blended family is one where the parents have children from previous relationships but all the members come together as one unit. While blended families seem to be common place, the challenges of bringing two groups together have not changed.

What were once familiar surroundings become uncharted waters, which can bring fear of the unknown and a longing for the past. Although a fresh start can be exactly what is needed for some, differences in values, parenting styles, financial planning and age groups can feel very threatening.

The expression “time heals all wounds” may be cliché, but allowing time for everyone to adjust to change is crucial for the success of a newly formed family. Welcoming open communication, while exercising great patience will go a long way to surface concerns and fears. Plan time together through new activities that don't interfere with treasured established traditions to avoid the conflict that might ensue from such pressures.

ELEPHANT #6: UNPREPARED HEIRS

No one wants to be caught unprepared – neither

in a rainstorm nor a meeting. Being unprepared for wealth is no better.

And yet, parents reluctant to talk about wealth with the next generation leads to just that: inadequate preparation.

Add to that limited formal education around inheritance and the problem compounds.

To begin preparing the next gen, open family communication through regular structured family meetings. Establish a procedure for assessing financial literacy competencies and other areas of learning relevant to living a responsible life with wealth.

ELEPHANT #7: FAMILY SECRETS

Secrets and stress are near synonyms. Those “things” not spoken about put a stress on families. Not talking about “it” becomes the default position; making it easier but without resolution. Fear, despair, remorse, regret – all lead to conflict and distancing.

These secrets – addiction, infidelity, scandal, health neglect – require attention in order to be addressed. Exploring the family's shared values around family member well-being can uncover the core strength the group needs to be proactive. This is a time when families should seek qualified professionals and consider using a guided intervention.

ROUND UP THE HERD

A family whose home is full of unwanted “elephants” can begin to turn things around. Become informed, open communication, know the key players and embrace the process.



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