

# An elephant in the room? How meeting agendas get hijacked: How meeting agendas get hijacked

by [Bradley N. Hill](#) in the [February 8, 2012](#) issue



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"When are we going to talk about the elephant in the room?" asked Susannah. Members of the church council looked at each other. "What elephant?" each person thought. Nobody wanted to seem dense and admit that he didn't see an elephant.

"The pastor was seen with another woman in a restaurant over on Fifth Street," Susannah volunteered. "Two women from our church were out shopping and looked in the restaurant window and saw them. He had his hand over hers and their heads were close together. One of the women pulled out her cell phone and snapped the picture." Susannah passed the photo around.

"There might be an elephant in this room," retorted another council member, "but it's not the pastor and this woman. That's his sister in the photo. I happen to know she was just diagnosed with breast cancer."

The *real* elephant in this meeting was gossip, a church culture that tolerated it, and the lack of a carefully formed agenda that would have dealt with a serious issue before it came up as melodramatic and even untrue.

Yet time and time again in various pastorates, I hear about elephants in the room. One night, after yet another announcement of an elephant's appearance, I quipped, "How do you know it's an elephant? Maybe it's an aardvark."

By "elephant in the room," one generally means a huge and hot topic present that is so volatile everyone tacitly agrees to ignore it. The elephant is an obvious but hard truth that is not being addressed, in part because to face, name and own the related issue would be frightening. Honesty becomes taboo. No one wants to cause embarrassment. The group prefers avoidance and feigned ignorance to bold but painful confrontation. It is a form of denial.

Certainly there is sometimes a serious issue that's being avoided. But in many cases, shouting "Elephant in the room!" is an attempt by one person or several people to control the agenda and to avoid other, lesser, lurking creatures—like aardvarks.

It begins when one person "cries elephant," often following that announcement with "We need to tell the truth here" or "Where are the truth tellers?" or "Who's going to admit that the emperor has no clothes?" The person who cries elephant startles everyone else into submission: in a reactionary move, they elevate the "crier" to the status of courageous truth teller. Only he or she, it's implied, is bold enough to name the unnamable; the others are ostriches with their heads in sand. The crier is perceptive and insightful; the others are willfully blind. The crier has what it takes to "man up" and name the problem; the others are unwilling to take risks or wrestle with the beast.

As a result, the elephant crier takes over the meeting and the elephant—whatever it is, however big or small—defines the terms of engagement. We must deal with the elephant before we can do anything else. The elephant crier usurps the agenda and owns the floor. He or she may plunge ahead or back off with "I don't know how to deal with it, but I felt somebody had to out the elephant." Either way, any other discussion is cut off because of the urgency of the "new" issue.

Some of the elephants I've met include:

- declining membership
- poor preaching
- missing generations
- unresolved personal conflicts

- unaddressed sin issues (pastor, staff and members)
- pastoral attire
- poor tech
- dwindling choir
- weakening finances
- erratic follow-up
- failure to deal with difficult personalities

Then there's a diagnosis. The problem is not just declining membership, for example. It's that membership is declining because of the music or the lack of maintenance. It's not just the poor preaching; it's poor because it's not "expository" in nature. The younger generation is not just missing; its members are missing because they don't have a youth room. All too quickly, assumptions are made about the issue, its root causes and its oh-so-obvious solution.

The board of a developmental organization in an African country was working through a long agenda and addressing how to fund road repair, build bridges and come up with marketing strategies for a "majority world" economy. Suddenly a board member put down his pad with a thump. "This discussion is a waste of time until we address the elephant in the room." The board members looked at each other. They thought they were already discussing some elephants, as well as hippos and gorillas. But the elephant crier forged ahead. "We cannot move forward until we deal with the president. He is hard to work with, and he's mishandling our funds."

This was not news. Those present knew that the president was difficult to work with—some of this due to cultural conflicts and differences—and the apparent mishandling of funds had been a point of disagreement with previous presidents as well as the current one. So, although what was needed was a steady and informed watch on these issues, the board found its own agenda aborted and spent the rest of the time talking about the president. The elephant in the room turned out to be the elephant crier.

In a church leadership meeting, we shared prayer requests, then bowed our heads and prepared to pray. Suddenly an older man said, "I don't think we should pray until we address the elephant in the room." We all dutifully raised our heads and opened our eyes. "Is our youth pastor gay?" he asked. He pointed to the youth pastor's recently acquired earring as the telltale sign. This may have been an elephant for that man, but he was the only one with that perspective. Crying

elephant is often an attempt to bolster one's rather thin position. It is tantamount to saying, "I am speaking for many others as well." It's a power play when a speaker declares in advance that his or her words will be crucial. With this setup, the other people in the room are in the position of having to contradict the speaker if he or she overstates something. Why not just present the case and let them respond freely to the truth and content?

I might try this at the next national church assembly. I would take the mic on the floor and after being recognized as Dr. Bradley Hill from Vancouver, Washington, I would say to the delegates, "What I am about to say will hit you like a tsunami. Rarely have I experienced such transforming power in such a small book. It will rock your world. If you don't read *Who Moved My Cheese?* you are missing the opportunity of a lifetime. I move that the denomination buy a copy for everyone here." I didn't use the word *elephant*, but it's the same idea. When I declare the importance of my opinion, I create an elephant. The delegates would have to hold back their snickers out of respect for me—after all, I'm an ordained pastor and hold a doctoral degree. They would wonder what was wrong with me, but they wouldn't say it. They'd be forced to discuss my motion—carefully—instead of other key and urgent concerns.

What if, you ask, there's a real elephant in the room—a huge, potentially destructive issue that must be immediately addressed? Unlike the situations I've described here, serious, embedded issues are communally discerned and identified. It is rarely the prerogative of an individual to decide what the problem is. After all, dangerous elephants don't suddenly, stealthily and invisibly tiptoe into the room. They have histories and leave trails. When I lived in the Congo, I sometimes crossed elephant paths. They're hard to miss. An elephant mashes flat everything in its path. With carefully honored agendas and an alert council, leaders will observe the trails and the issue will find its way to the front.

Proper agenda formation is key. "Proper" does not mean a list of things the pastor or chairperson thinks the council should discuss, jotted down in haste and sent by e-mail the night before a meeting. Not all participants will read such an e-mail. Finally, in desperation, somebody interrupts this agenda and yells elephant just to get the attention of everyone in the room.

Good agenda formation, in contrast, begins at the end of the previous meeting. "What do we need to put on the agenda for next month?" This approach allows all

members to consider the bigger picture as well as the nagging items of mundane business. If an urgent issue surfaces, any member can ask for it to be included.

Good agenda formation also has ways and means for congregational input. The committees all have a procedure for bringing issues to the table. Sometimes this process results in a preliminary agenda that's long and unwieldy. When this happens, the chair sends it out and asks for prioritization, once again giving control of the agenda to the group.

That's when good things happen: real elephants rise to the top and are dealt with effectively.