# The Elephant in the Room

The elephant in the room is a big, obvious problem that everyone can see and nobody names. The phrase is often linked to a fable by Ivan Krylov, in which a museum visitor notices every small detail and misses the elephant. At work it is seen and left alone, because speaking about it feels risky. This video looks at why teams avoid it, what that costs, and six practical steps: notice, name, prepare, raise, agree and follow up. It is a teaching aid, so each team should adapt it and check its own facts.

## 1. Why Teams Avoid It

Teams avoid the elephant for reasons that feel sensible in the moment. The first is fear, because raising a problem can look like criticising a colleague or a manager, and nobody wants to carry the blame for bad news. The second is hierarchy, because people assume that the senior person already knows, or would not welcome being told. The third is politeness, because many teams value harmony and treat a direct word as rude. Each person also guesses that the others are calm, so one silence becomes the proof for the next. Researchers call this widespread holding back of information organisational silence.

**Example:** An analyst notices that a monthly forecast counts the same large order twice. The director presented the forecast with confidence, so the analyst assumes that someone senior has already checked it, and the error goes to the board.

**At work:** Salma, an operations director at a furniture manufacturer, sponsors a project to replace the order and stock system. The weekly report shows every item in green, yet she hears in the corridor that old customer records are loading with errors. Every team member has seen the errors, and each assumes that the project manager, Karim, already knows and would not welcome the news, so nobody mentions them in the meeting. The go-live date stays fixed for the start of the busiest sales season.

## 2. What Silence Costs

Silence has a cost that grows with time. A problem that could be fixed in a week becomes large when it is left, because other work is built on top of it. Decisions are then made with incomplete information, and the people who know the truth stop offering it. Professor Amy Edmondson of Harvard Business School introduced the term psychological safety in a study of work teams published in nineteen ninety-nine. She defined it as a shared belief in a team that it is safe to take interpersonal risks, such as asking questions, raising concerns or admitting mistakes. In her study, this belief was linked to learning behaviour in the teams, and learning behaviour was linked to performance. It does not mean that everyone agrees or that standards are low; it means that honest facts can be said without punishment.

**Example:** A sales team knows that a key customer is unhappy, yet nobody mentions it at the quarterly review. Some months later the customer ends the contract.

**At work:** Salma asks what the silence could cost: if the errors stay, busy-season orders could go to wrong addresses. Fixing the data now means a delay of a few weeks. Fixing it after launch means stopping the warehouse while customers wait.

## 3. Notice and Name It

The method begins with two moves: notice and name. Noticing means asking honestly whether a topic exists that everyone sees and no one mentions. Typical signs are a change of subject whenever it comes up, a status report that never changes, and corridor talk that never reaches the meeting. Naming means putting the problem into one neutral sentence about the situation, not about a person. A good sentence states what can be observed and what it affects, and it avoids blame and guesses about motives. Writing it down first helps to separate the fact from the feeling.

**Example:** A finance team notices that every meeting skips a missing budget approval. The team lead says that the approval has not been discussed and that it affects the hiring date.

**At work:** Salma writes down one sentence before she speaks. The report is green, but customer data is loading with errors, and the launch date has not changed. It contains no name, no accusation and no opinion about anyone's work. She removes one adjective that sounded sharp.



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## 4. Prepare and Raise It

Next come preparation and the right setting. Preparation means collecting facts that can be checked: what happened, when, how often, and what it could cost. Two or three options for solving the problem show that the aim is a solution and not a complaint. A private conversation suits a problem that touches one person's work or pride, because it lets that person respond without an audience. A team meeting suits a problem that belongs to everyone, but it helps to tell the owner first so that nobody is surprised. The tone is curious and calm, with questions such as what are we seeing, and what might we be missing.

**Example:** An engineer finds the same defect in several batches. Instead of announcing it in front of the group, the engineer shows the supervisor the inspection records privately.

**At work:** Salma prepares one page with the list of affected records, the date each error was found, and three options. The options are to delay the launch for a few weeks, to launch in one region first, or to add a temporary team to clean the data. She meets Karim privately and says that she would like to understand the errors and look at them together. Karim is quiet for a moment, then admits that he was afraid to report a delay, and agrees to present the facts at the next team meeting, with her support.

## 5. Agree and Follow Up

Naming a problem does not solve it yet. The conversation should end with agreed actions, each with an owner and a date, so that the group leaves with a plan. It is wise to thank the people who spoke up, because the next honest word depends on how this one is received. A short follow-up meeting checks whether the actions happened and whether the problem has changed. If nothing moves, the issue goes one level up, again with facts and options. Over time, repeated safe naming becomes the norm of the team, and leaders can help by asking what nobody is saying and answering bad news with questions, not blame.

**Example:** A service team names a recurring customer complaint. The group agrees three actions: call the customer this week, fix the process error by the end of the month, and review the result at the next meeting.

**At work:** The meeting ends with four actions, each with an owner and a date. Karim's team cleans the oldest records, finance reviews a temporary team budget, the launch starts in one region, and a review follows in two weeks. Salma thanks Karim in front of the team for opening the data. At the review, the errors are falling and the report shows an honest status for the first time. The launch happens in time for the busy season, and team members begin to bring other problems earlier.

## Conclusion

The elephant in the room is a problem that everyone sees and nobody names. Teams stay silent because of fear, hierarchy and politeness, and the silence makes the problem more expensive. The method has six moves: notice, name neutrally, prepare, raise in the right setting, agree actions and follow up. Psychological safety, as Amy Edmondson describes it, grows each time an honest word is received well. This video is a teaching aid, so each team should adapt it and check its own facts.

### Sources


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- The story of Salma, Karim and the furniture manufacturer is an invented illustration, not a real case.




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