

Episode #44: How to Address “The Elephant in the Room”

Welcome to THE CAREER ACCELERATOR, the podcast where corporate managers will find tips and tools to deliver results through others.

Hello. Today I will share three tips that can help you identify and address “the elephant in the room.”

I’m your host, coach Percy Cannon.

In our last episode I shared three philosophical principles that can help you become more action-oriented, extracted from the excellent book *The Obstacle Is the Way*, by Ryan Holiday. They were:

1. **Action and failure are two sides of the same coin.** Avoiding action to prevent failure leads, maybe in a bit hyperbolic way, to inaction. Conversely, if you take action and fail, you will have not only learned how *not* to execute a particular activity, but you will likely avoid a similar error in the future.
2. **Practice premortem: Hope for the best, prepare for the worst.** There’s nothing better than the peace of mind created from developing contingency plans for the most important elements of a project.
3. **Never let a crisis go to waste.** As a leader, you don’t want to miss the opportunity presented by a crisis, like the one we are still going through with the Covid-19 pandemic, to align your team behind a worthy goal. Likewise, you don’t need to wait until you face a crisis to break down internal silos and align all departments under a single goal.

You’ve probably heard the expression *The elephant in the room*. It is commonly *used* to refer to a controversial issue that everyone knows about, but nobody wants to discuss, usually because it makes the leader or some people uncomfortable.

Let me share three situations where *the elephant in the room* was identified and addressed.

In a previous podcast I shared a personal anecdote of how, as a team leader during my tenure inside the corporate world, I tolerated questionable behavior from a high-performance employee who reported to me. I was fortunate to receive feedback from a manager on my team, who had identified *the elephant in the room* and made me aware of how people within and outside our team were talking about it. Although I was also fortunate that this employee received a good offer from another company and left our team, I learned my lesson and became much more proactive in identifying and acting upon *elephants in the room*.

Let me share a second example. During a workshop I conducted with an international leadership team a few years ago, I noticed the presence of *an elephant in the room*.

Each team member had two bosses: A senior executive who shared the same business discipline in the corporate headquarters, who was the so-called “dotted-line” boss. They also had the

general manager, located in the country where they were operating, who acted as their “solid-line” boss.

The workshop was about how the local team could operate at high performance levels. At one point, I uncovered *the elephant in the room*: They didn’t seem to be clear nor aligned on which objectives were more important for them: Was it their individual discipline objectives, or was it the leadership team ones? This lack of clarity and alignment was very likely hindering the output from this team.

The general manager immediately jumped in. She stressed the point that, as a team, they had to prioritize the collective objectives over their individual ones. After a good level of discussion, it turned out that this team was not clear on what their collective priority was.

We spent time working on this, and the team eventually agreed on a collective goal, which all of them committed to prioritize.

A final example comes from another client engagement. In this case, *the elephant in the room* was not the absence of a collective priority. The issue was that each of the four divisions who shared this common priority felt accountable for only their specific portion of the work, and not for the overall company goal. They were comfortable working in their own silos and producing their own set of contributions. But they did not feel accountable for the overall goal.

As their consultant, I stepped in and uncovered *the elephant in the room*. After several group sessions and individual conversations with the employees in each division, we were able to break the silos and have all players commit to a common goal, with clear roles and responsibilities for each team.

The deal was sealed with a joint presentation to the CEO by the four division executives.

In summary, today we covered three tips that can help you identify the elephant in the room:

1. **Be proactive.** Always be on the look-out for *the elephant in the room*. Be humble enough to let your team members feel comfortable in bringing any *elephant in the room* to your attention.
2. If your team members have two bosses, one “solid line” and another one “dotted line”, **probe into potential silo situations.** Ensure your team is clear and aligned on their number one priority: a collective goal shared by all of them.
3. Even when you have a stated collective priority, **double-click on how accountable every team member feels about the overall goal.** There may be a silo situation that needs to be addressed.

Once you have identified *the elephant in the room*, bring them out in the open. Move those “hidden” issues from the background to the foreground. Beware that ignoring *the elephant in the room* can seriously damage the trust level and overall performance of employees. They can become cynical about your leadership and fail to perform at their best.

I hope you enjoyed today's episode. In the next one, I will share insights I gathered from the book *The Discipline of Market Leaders*, by Michael Treacy and Fred Wiersema.

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Percy's BIO

Are you an executive or manager in a large corporation who wants to accelerate your career growth and promotability? Percy provides corporate executives, managers and leadership teams with customized coaching programs that help them develop the skills and capabilities needed to significantly increase their business results through others and accelerate their career growth.

Percy is an "alumnus" from three multinational corporations, Procter & Gamble, IBM & Microsoft, with whom he spent close to three decades. Since 2011 he has been helping corporate executives, managers and employees *make the rest of their life...the best of their life*®.

Percy has worked in the United States and across several countries in Latin America as an Executive Coach, Leadership Team Consultant and Keynote Speaker, serving companies such as Microsoft, Procter & Gamble, Citibank, Tiffany, DSM, Farnatodo & Avianca.

Percy is a Certified Professional Coach from Wainwright Global, Authorized Partner for "The Five Behaviors of a Cohesive Team" and "Everything DiSC", a certified "Go-Giver" speaker & coach, and a CAPA PRO member, the official consultant and practitioner alliance for several methodologies from best-seller author Patrick Lencioni (e.g., "Organizational Health", "The Ideal Team Player", "The 6 Types of Working Genius", "The Truth About Employee Engagement" and others).

Percy published his first book in 2012-13 in English (*The Business Apostolate: Insights to Define and Achieve Your Mission in Life*) and in Spanish (*El Negocio Más Grande de su Vida*). He launched his first iPhone & iPad application, *LifePlan*, in English & Spanish, in 2016, and his podcast, [The Career Accelerator](#), in May 2020.

He is a consulting partner at Grupo Azimuth and the Chapter Director for the COO Forum in Southeast Florida. He has lived in 9 different cities and 5 countries, and speaks English, Spanish and Portuguese fluently. Percy is married, has 3 children and 6 grandchildren, and is a passionate runner & reader.

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