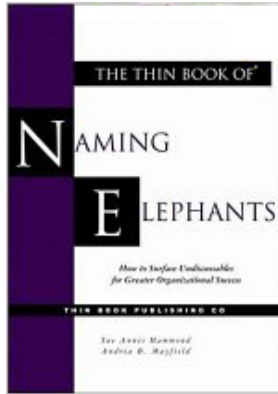




The Thin Book of Naming Elephants:

How to Surface Undiscussables for Greater Organizational Success

By: Sue A. Hammond & Andrea B. Mayfield



Anyone who has worked in a corporation knows that an elephant is not just an animal with four legs and a trunk...

...an elephant is an issue or problem standing in the middle of the room that everyone knows about but no one is willing to acknowledge or deal with.

Elephants are “undiscussables” present in every organization. The size and depth of these “undiscussables” are proportional to the vitality of the organization. It’s my experience that high-performing, well-functioning companies have cultures in which honest debate is welcomed, assumptions and conclusions are openly mined for their basis in reality, and people are skilled in managing conflict. Unhealthy, dysfunctional organizations almost without exception have many elephants as a hallmark.

In the book “The Thin Book of Naming Elephants—How to Surface Undiscussables for Organizational Success,” authors Hammond and Mayfield utilize the chilling report issued by NASA’s Columbia Accident Investigation Board (CAIB) as a striking case study on organizational culture. The CAIB report concluded that NASA’s broken safety culture had as much to do with the accident as the foam, and that the nature of the numerous undiscussables at NASA, the pressures of rigid hierarchy, and many unquestioned assumptions led to the fatal disaster.

While not every organizational elephant can lead to the loss of life or livelihood, the author’s brilliantly make the case for a “simple but not easy” component of business’s success: dialogue as a core

competency. Specifically, they outline clear how-to strategies for achieving the following:

- Speak up and share any concern or idea
- Respectfully disagree or agree to disagree
- Share and debate multiple realities
- Question those in power
- Explore many alternatives before shutting down discussion or making decisions
- Take turns playing devil’s advocate or the contrarian

Much of my work involves helping leaders discuss and debate issues in ways that produce shared understanding, informed decisions, and high-quality solutions. I consider “The Thin Book of Naming Elephants” a key textbook in my toolkit, and recommend it for those who simply seek to sharpen their personal communication ability as well as for those actively involved in moving organizational culture.

This book was reviewed by Andrea Chilcote, founder of Morningstar Ventures. Her specialties include leadership development, performance improvement, and communication tools for teams and individuals.

