

Instructions

Below are two tools to help groups and individuals address adaptive issues without burying or denying conflict and to deal with them in constructive ways. When you want to bring up a difficult issue from the past, that people have been avoiding because it's likely to cause tension or conflict, invoke the Elephant Rule. The Elephant Rule is for dealing with history, past events. The Red Flag Rule is for dealing with present, immediate events.

*Rules That Promote Constructive Communication on Past History/Events***I. THE ELEPHANT RULE**

This rule is designed to slow communication down when an issue from the past that people have been avoiding needs to be put on the table and discussed. People may have been avoiding the issue because it could cause hurt feelings, hostility or open conflict.

- Issues from the past need to be discussed if they are preventing the team from working well together, from achieving goals, getting work done or meeting deadlines.
  - A. The person who sees the elephant can say something like: "I want to put an elephant on the table." All other communication is put on hold. The person, a) describes the elephant and b) describes how it is preventing the group from achieving important goals or working effectively, etc.
  - B. The group may not:
    - 1. Deny the existence of the elephant
    - 2. Attack the person for naming it
    - 3. Debate the description of the elephant
  - C. The group can ask clarifying questions or affirm that they too see the elephant. Then the group can choose to move to problem solving or, having cleared the air, simply move on.

*Rules That Promote Constructive Communication on Tough Issues***II. THE RED FLAG RULE**

This rule is designed to slow communication down when some immediate event, action, or words have triggered such strong emotions in the **listener** that he or she is unable to listen openly or respond rationally.

- A. The person having the reaction says "Red Flag". All other communication is put on hold.
- B. The person with the red flag describes what the red flag is, e.g. "When you said/did\_\_\_\_\_. I felt\_\_\_\_\_." (Be sure to separate intent from impact.)
- C. The other party/ies may not challenge the red flag, i.e., debate whether it should exist, deny it, attack it, tell the person with the red flag they are too sensitive, or to get over it, you shouldn't feel that way, etc. The other party/ies can ask questions and seek to understand the Red Flag.
- D. If your actions or words triggered a Red Flag, explain your intent only after acknowledging the impact of your words or actions.

**Caveat: Don't use the Red Flag just because you don't like or agree with what you hear; use it when emotion makes listening difficult or impossible.**