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Gleanings

 by Gerald R. Chester, Ph.D.

Elephants and Sacred Cows



Over the years, I have worked with dozens of organizations as a consultant and have made several observations. For example, I have yet to see an organization that does not have a significant number of people out of place or that has a management team functioning on all eight cylinders. And I have yet to see an organization that does not have “elephants and sacred cows.”

Invariably, organizations have topics that are “off limits.” That is, issues that everyone is aware of, but the senior leader or leaders will not allow them to be discussed. Such a situation is tantamount to having an elephant in the room, but no one is allowed to acknowledge its presence. As a result, everyone walks and talks around the elephant, feeling considerable distress and discomfort. The question is: Why can’t the issue be addressed honestly and openly?

Elephants are serious impediments to the growth of an organization. The newspaper business is in such a state. With the advances in technology, paper is becoming obsolete as a medium for disseminating information. While it may never become totally obsolete, its role is waning. Is the newspaper industry willing to face this elephant? I watched a local newspaper jump through hoops to regain lost subscribers, including overstating its circulation. As a result, \$23 million in overcharges had to be returned to advertisers (AP, 10 September 2004).

Sacred cows is a metaphor for man-made idols. In the context of an organization, it refers to poorly or marginally performing people whom management is unwilling to hold accountable. These people have gained some standing with management that allows them to remain dysfunctional without consequences. Others in the organization—who don’t have the standing and are held accountable for performance—resent the double standard.

In a conversation with a VP of a major corporation, I was told there were a number of longtime employees in the organization who were no longer able to do their jobs. The proposed solution was to reassign the people to lesser roles where their poor performance would have minimal impact. My question was: “Has anyone talked with these people?” The answer was no. The longtime employees were older people who could not keep up with the pace of work. The company viewed them as sacred cows; hence, they were not held to the same standards of performance as everyone else.

The tragedy of sacred cows is that what appears to be magnanimous behavior is just the opposite. Great organizations understand that people want to feel good about their work. Ann McCallum, former CEO of the Lend Lease Foundation, stated: “Happy, healthy, challenged employees are better employees” (Polly LaBarre, “Foundation for Growth,” *FastCompany*, Issue 27, September 1999, p. 170).

When an organization puts a worker “out to pasture”, the employee knows it. Who wants to be discarded or put into a position of irrelevance? While the desire to be kind to people is noble, the best way to bless people is to face the truth and help them find the most effective way to use their God-given gifts and talents. For example, experienced employees could provide a wonderful source of wisdom for training new hires.

Elephants and sacred cows are performance impediments to every organization. Their existence seems to be ubiquitous. They do not have to exist, if management teams find the courage to face truth and respond appropriately.

James Ryle, an outstanding teacher and friend, says that a mark of a great team is that any topic can be discussed and any question can be asked. I concur. The ability to have communication transparency is a key to building equally yoked management teams. Two of the great impairments to achieving such teams are elephants and sacred cows.

May I suggest the following as a New Year’s resolution? No more elephants and sacred cows!

Happy New Year!

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