

ADR Skill of the Month

Say Hello to the Elephant in the Room

Why do we refer to that person or subject that obviously no one wants to talk about as The Elephant in the Room? I mean, if we called it The Heaping Hot Fudge Sundae In the Room – or On the Kitchen Table – it might also capture our attention. Then again, we wouldn't be so quick to avoid it. Well, maybe we would if we're dieting... or lactose intolerant... Oh dear, I'm getting distracted and I'm digressing. You know, kind of like some I.E.P. team members we've all encountered who can find countless, imaginative ways to steer away from the topic at hand. Could it be that they are, um, avoiding The Elephant in the Room?

It's worth noting that most of us think elephants are pretty cool. They always rank high among the most attractive and likable creatures on earth. I don't know about you but I'd much rather be in the room with an elephant than with a grizzly bear or a giant python. It's just that an elephant is so darn big, it's going to take up more of the space in the room than another critter, which only means that if we pretend we don't notice it there, it's going to make us look silly or dumb, and will prevent us from taking care of business.

So let's deal with it. Walk right up and shake hands – or pat that trunk. Perhaps use those "Question Strategies" we talked about in a previous ADR Skill.

Think of an I.E.P. meeting when the advocate walks into the room and immediately the tension rises. Or the district employee who comes into the meeting frantic; not at all grounded for the discussion at hand. Perhaps The Elephant is the school principal who has another meeting to attend but is afraid of admitting the scheduling conflict. In any case, we ought to call upon those Question Strategies in order to see how we might be able to have everybody actually *present* for the current meeting. One possibility is to pull this person outside and say something like, "I was wondering if I can check in with you; I notice that you may have a lot on your plate today. How can I support you?" Rest assured that doing nothing will only assure that the meeting is very uncomfortable.

In any such scenario, it is important to take a break and "check in." Maybe you have something important to broach but it may be controversial and thus uncomfortable. Talk about it anyway. I was recently assisting a family and a school at an I.E.P. meeting at which The Elephant was a disagreement about ED eligibility. We all knew it was going to be a possible point of huge contention and so the odds were good that the issue would stay bubbling close to the surface. It would color and confound the larger conversation, keeping the participants on pins and needles until and unless it was openly addressed. So instead of "working up to it" and waiting until the end of the meeting to bring this up, I encouraged the parents to state their concern right off the bat. That allowed us all to get the inevitable "gulp" out of the way, take our breath and go through the legal steps of the I.E.P. Certainly it spared us an hour or two of unproductive tension and distraction. When you know The Elephant could step on your toes at any moment, it's highly stressful trying to dance around the room, and you're not likely to show off your best moves...

Marc Purchin, Director of ADR Services

Suggested Tip on Practicing This Skill

Get together with your colleagues and/or fellow parents and role-play to discover the words and ways that can get you more comfortable at being open to the uncomfortable.

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