

DEALING — WITH THE — ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

Moving from Tough Conversations
to Healthy Communication

Dr. Mike Bechtle



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Dr. Mike Bechtle, *Dealing With the Elephant in the Room*
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To Brian
Every dad's dream is to have his daughter
marry a man of character.
You fulfilled that dream,
and I'm grateful you're in her life—
and mine.

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Acknowledgments

When I wrote my first book, I realized that there are a lot of people who are involved in making it happen. Some (like editors and agents) are directly involved. Others (like a spouse) come alongside your dream and believe in you. Others are impacted by the fact that you're spending time with a manuscript you might normally be spending with them.

It's all still true.

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Then there’s God. What can I say? Eternally grateful . . .

INTRODUCTION

How the Elephant Got in the Room

When there's an elephant in the room, introduce him.

Randy Pausch¹

My daughter, Sara, asked me if I could build her a certain piece of furniture. I said, “Of course.” In fact, I gave her a certificate for it for Christmas.

Two years ago.

The problem was that I didn't know how I was going to build it. I do well with plans but not with making things up. This project didn't have plans. I would think about how to do it but couldn't figure it out. So I would set it aside for a couple of weeks, thinking it would percolate in the background and I'd know what to do.

A week or two later, nothing had changed. I wasn't any closer to a solution. So I kept putting it off week after week, month after month—because I was stumped. When I don't know how to do something, my default setting is to procrastinate instead of jumping in and tackling it.

Whenever Sara and I would talk, I would carefully avoid the subject. I didn't want to let her down or appear incompetent. Since we weren't talking about it, she didn't know what was happening. I assumed she was either irritated with or disappointed in me. But I never asked, so I never knew for sure. I think I was afraid to ask.

Eventually, I realized the situation had created an unspoken barrier between us. My daughter is one of the people I enjoy talking to the most on the planet, and I want a close, loving relationship with her. But my silence was building an unspoken wall that had been growing for two years.

Once I figured out what was happening, I went to her and told her what I was feeling. I apologized, wanting to do my part to remove the barrier I had created.

As we talked, she said, "Yeah, it was the elephant in the room."

That's a word picture we've all heard and experienced. An elephant is in the room when something obvious is going on and nobody talks about it, and we pretend it's not there.

I pictured the scenario. I'm sitting on one side of the living room, and my daughter is on the other side. We're peering through the elephant's legs, trying to make conversation. The elephant smells, and it fills the room. It's noisy. It's huge. But we don't talk about it.

Once we acknowledge it, we think, *How in the world did that huge elephant get in this room? It doesn't even fit through the door!*

Sound familiar? Is there anyone in your life with whom you share an elephant—something that everybody knows about but nobody talks about? Nobody wants to say anything, because it will be uncomfortable and people might get upset. The longer the elephant has been there, the harder it is to talk about. But it's big, and it smells. It gets in the way of genuine relationships taking place.

So how *did* that huge elephant get into the room?

It came in when it was little.

If we had talked about it when it first entered, we could simply have guided it out through the door. But when we let it stay, it grew and grew and grew. Getting rid of it became a much bigger issue. Once an elephant becomes full-grown, we might need to remove some walls and get professional help to be rid of it.

When I finally acknowledged the elephant with my daughter, she said, “You know, if you had told me you couldn’t figure it out, we could have spent a day working together on it until we knew what to do.” That would have been an awesome day with her. One of our favorite dates is to get coffee at Starbucks and cruise around a hardware store or lumberyard.

I love my daughter. And I love the fact that we got rid of the elephant. She loves the fact that I finished the furniture. And the house doesn’t smell like elephant anymore.

What’s the lesson? Watch for baby elephants in the room. If you let them stay, they’ll get really, really big.

Tough Talking

“Do you want to know what your communication will be like in your marriage?” the counselor asked.

We were young and in love. Like most couples, Diane and I knew our marriage would be different. We had seen other people fall in love, get married with high expectations, but then spiral downward over time. They started fighting or withdrawing from each other, and the marital magic disappeared in the first few years.

We knew that wouldn’t happen to us. We had something special between us, and it would carry us through to sheer bliss. Sure, we’d have struggles. But we were in l-o-v-e, and we believed that our unique passion for each other would help us calmly negotiate those issues, find quick solutions, and make us even stronger.

“Sure,” we replied to the counselor, convinced we knew the answer. We had gone through several sessions of premarital counseling with him already, and his guidance was always spot on. “What’s our communication going to be like?”

“Well, it’s not a foolproof technique,” he continued. “But here’s the best predictor of what your communication will be like. Imagine what it would be like if Mike’s dad was married to Diane’s mom.”

It took a few minutes for Diane to regain consciousness while I picked my jaw up off the floor. That wasn’t what we expected to hear. Our first reaction was, “But that’s not fair. We’re not our parents. We’re our own people. We’ve learned from their mistakes.”

He went on to explain. “Like I said, it’s not foolproof. But no matter what our parents tried to teach us, we learned how to communicate by watching how they did it. We subconsciously believe actions more than words, and we develop a default setting by observing them over time. Sure, we can work around it,” he said. “We can learn new ways of communicating, and we can make intentional choices to do it differently. But when we’re under pressure and emotions are high, our ‘chooser’ muscles quit working. We drop back to our default settings. We respond the way our parents did.”

Diane and I had some long conversations after that appointment. Decades later, we’ve found it to be true. I’m not my dad, and Diane’s not her mom. We’ve made a lot of choices to become our own persons. But their fingerprints are all over us.

Where It Starts

We learn by watching more than listening. We hear words, but we absorb actions. The life lessons we learn come by seeing how

the key people in our lives respond to what life brings them. No matter what they say, we see their true character when things get tough and they're under pressure and their defenses are down.

This is true not just in marital communication. I remember walking into my daughter's room when she was a toddler and watching how she was disciplining her dolls. She wasn't using the kind, logical techniques we had tried to use with her. She was using the techniques we used when we were upset.

Ouch.

We learned how to communicate with others by observing the people who raised us. It doesn't matter if we had a single parent, two parents, multiple custody situations, foster homes, or a dysfunctional setting. We learned to negotiate life by watching how people in that role interacted with others—spouses, siblings, friends, bosses, and strangers. That's how we built the communication toolbox that we use in our lives and relationships.

When relationships get challenging and conversations get tough, we use whatever default tools we have. We usually don't stop to question their effectiveness, because they're familiar. When they don't work well, we just try to use more force or pressure. It's like using a pencil eraser to get rid of something written in ink. It doesn't work well, but it's all we have—so we either rub harder or give up in frustration.

But we can get new tools and techniques. We don't have to be stuck with our default settings. We can develop new patterns of communicating that are effective in the toughest conversations.

Our kids are in their thirties now, and we see ourselves in them—both the good stuff and the bad stuff. But we also see who they've become by the choices they've made. They aren't us. They recognized the healthy patterns they saw and adapted them. They still have the tools they picked up from us, but they learned which ones are more effective than others, and they got new tools on their own to replace the ineffective ones.

The Wild Card

There are dozens, if not hundreds, of books on how to communicate effectively. Many people have been helped by these books, and they provide resources to strengthen relationships. I recommend many of them to my clients on a regular basis.

But a wild card has appeared that wasn't present when some of those classic books were written: technology.

Technology has been around for a long time, and we've used it as a tool to communicate more rapidly and effectively. But in the past few years, technology has moved from *enhancing* conversation to *replacing* conversation. People send messages back and forth, not realizing that they never have live contact with the other person. It's not unusual for people to connect electronically with someone for months or even years without having a real conversation. (I bet you can think of someone right now with whom you frequently communicate through social media but with whom you haven't had a live conversation in years.)

"That's okay, right?" one might ask. "We're still communicating. The relationship looks a little different, but we're still connecting back and forth. What's wrong with that?"

One study showed that only 7 percent of communication is the words we use. Thirty-eight percent is our tone of voice, and 55 percent is body language.²

In face-to-face conversation, we're using all three. On the phone, we've lost the body language—so we're down to two. When our communication is completely through email, texting, or social media, we're down to one—and we've lost 93 percent of the tools that help us connect.

Early one morning, I was greeted by the training director of a large entertainment company. I had worked with her a number of times in the past. As I set up for class, we chatted about her thirty-plus years with the corporation and how she rose through

the ranks to reach her current position. I started the session, and she went back to her office.

We broke for lunch, and the participants wandered out of the room. The training director walked in, and her face looked like she had seen a ghost. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I just got laid off.”

“Seriously?” I said. “And you didn’t know it was coming? Who told you?”

“Someone sent me an email.”

As it turned out, the decision to terminate her had come from someone much younger than her. Evidently, because he was so comfortable with communication through technology, he assumed there wouldn’t be anything wrong with letting her go without a face-to-face conversation.

I don’t know how things turned out, because it was the last time I saw her. But I’ve thought about that situation often since then. I’m guessing he probably got in trouble for that approach, and the training director might have had some recourse. It demonstrated to me that technology has its limitations, one of which is when people use it to avoid having a difficult conversation.

Time for a Change

In general, people have gotten worse at conversation while they’ve gotten better at technology. Everybody communicates. But when people communicate electronically, they’re not communicating in person.

Is that a problem or not?

People are talking less and texting more. That works for casual conversation, but it’s difficult to have tough conversations in writing alone. Unfortunately, people do it all the time, and relationships get damaged in the process. If we think electronic

communication is just as effective as face-to-face communication, we'll assume that it's just as effective for tough conversations as for casual ones.

That's a dangerous assumption. It's like having a phone conversation in which one person loses their cellular signal and gets cut off. But the other person keeps talking, unaware that nobody is hearing what they say.

This book is designed to help us build a strategy for effective conversation in a digital world:

- We'll learn the value of face-to-face conversation.
- We'll see that being genuine is better than appearing perfect electronically.
- We'll discover the basics of effective communication, building on the principles that grow effective relationships.
- We'll identify the six tools needed to navigate tough conversations.
- We'll explore six skills for using those tools to make conversation genuine.
- We'll develop a sense for when it's time to apply those tools and skills and how to do preventative maintenance to keep our relationships healthy.
- We'll learn how to use technology instead of being used by it.

With the right tools and skills, we can learn to negotiate the toughest conversations without intimidation or frustration. We can learn to communicate with:

- the spouse who withdraws and won't engage
- the teenager who turns every conversation into a battle
- the in-laws who overstep their boundaries
- the friends who can't stop giving advice

- the neighbors who won't trim their tree that hangs over our fence and drops leaves in our yard
- the church member who expects us to perform in a certain way
- the coworker in the next cubicle who goes out of his way to be sarcastic
- the boss who criticizes everything we do

We'll also talk about the conversational issues that keep genuine communication from taking place—from the elephant in the room that nobody talks about to the emotion that keeps us from genuine connection.

Starting the Journey

Effective communication is the key to healthy relationships, both personal and professional. We're not just working on our skills so people will be impressed with our conversational abilities. We do it because we care about these relationships and the people in them.

If we want healthy relationships, we need healthy communication. With a little direction and a little intentional effort, we can move our communication to the next level. We're not stuck with our default settings. We can get new tools and learn how to use them well.

We don't mind investing time and money to improve our golf swing, develop a hobby, or work on our fitness. Isn't it time to make an investment in our communication skills?

The return on that investment will last a lifetime.

PART 1

THE PROCESS OF CONVERSATION

When I want to learn how to do something, I find a book on the topic. I read the book, gain as much knowledge as I can, and then try to do it. I am usually successful, but it can take a long time.

If I had a leaky faucet, for example, I would pick up a book on do-it-yourself plumbing. I'd read about how faucets work. Then I'd study the different types of faucets. I would read about what causes leaks and the most common ways to fix those leaks. Then I would make sure I had the right tools and start working on the faucet. With the book in one hand and a wrench in the other, I would start taking the faucet apart. After each step, I'd check the book to make sure I had done it correctly and to familiarize myself with the next step.

Then I met my father-in-law. When he wanted to fix something, he didn't read a book. He grabbed some tools and started

dismantling it. He would figure it out by looking and experimenting. In almost every case, he identified what needed to be done—and it took a lot less time than my approach.

They were a water-skiing family. So when I married his daughter, he taught me how to water-ski. “Don’t you dare go get a book on water-skiing,” he said. “I’m going to hand you a rope and push you off the back of the boat. You better hang on.” And I quickly learned how to ski.

I’ve gotten much better over the years. I still like to read about things, but I’ve learned the value of just starting on something.

Relationships require the ability to do both. They’re complicated and messy, and they don’t come with instructions. Books can help with understanding them, but we have to jump in and do the hard work of growing those relationships.

So let’s start with the book work. This section explores how relationships and communication work at the most basic level. Once we lay that foundation, we’ll get the tools we need and learn the skills of building relationships that thrive instead of just survive.

Elephant Prevention

Some people can't sleep because they have insomnia.
I can't sleep because I have internet.

Anonymous

Have you ever felt that your communication in a key relationship was strained, but you didn't know exactly what was happening? You pretend everything is okay, but it just doesn't feel right. You're not sure if the other person feels the same way, but you sense that they do. You're afraid to bring it up because the conversation might become uncomfortable.

There's an elephant in the room, and it's infecting your relationship. Like a malignant growth, you avoid talking about it for fear that it will be real. If we ignore it, we think it doesn't exist.

Part of the problem is that we get used to having the elephant around. We don't talk about it, and it becomes easier to ignore over time. We don't notice that it's growing, because it happens slowly. It's like when someone hasn't seen our kids for six months, and they're amazed at how much the kids have grown. We don't

notice the growth because it has been so gradual. But to anyone else, it's obvious.

Toxic communication patterns in our relationships also start slowly, and we don't want to talk about them. They're uncomfortable. After a while, we get used to those patterns and they seem normal. It's like mold growing behind our walls. If we don't do the hard work of dealing with the patterns, our relationship could be in jeopardy.

Nobody likes tough conversations. They're not nearly as much fun as easy conversations. But they're the key to keeping the elephants out of the room. If the elephants are already big, it's going to take significantly more work to remove them, and the conversations could be painful.

The best approach is to have the tough conversations when the elephant is little. Someone has to have the courage to identify the elephant and start talking about it.

Too often, people see the elephant and start blaming each other for letting it in the room. They work against each other instead of working together to solve the problem. Meanwhile, the elephant wanders around the room fluffing the pillows and deciding where to sleep.

We get in trouble when we see each other as the problem instead of the elephant.

Handcrafted Relationships

My father-in-law is a master woodworker. Each of his three daughters' homes contains pieces of furniture, cabinetry, and design elements that express his love and creativity. When our kids were growing up and needed something for their room, their first thought was always, "Grandpa could build that for me." He usually did, and they loved it.

His specialty has become turned segmented wooden bowls. In what seems like a geometric impossibility, he cuts hundreds of small pieces of exotic hardwoods at precise angles, glues them together, and makes museum-quality bowls in which every seam of the intricate design matches perfectly.

A few months ago, I was leading a seminar in Honolulu. One evening, I saw turned segmented bowls in a gallery in a high-end shopping center. They looked great but didn't match the quality my father-in-law produces.

I've done some woodworking and might be able to make a simple bowl. To the average person, it might look like any other bowl. But to someone who knows quality, it wouldn't compare to the ones my father-in-law makes. He's spent his life paying his dues to perfect his skills. I haven't. True quality takes time. When things are mass-produced, they cost a lot less than things that are handcrafted, but they aren't as good.

Relationships are the same way. Good ones take time and work. When we get a new boss or coworker, make a new friend or move into a new neighborhood, we form new relationships. They might feel strong at the beginning, and the connections are energizing. But the longer those relationships continue, the more challenges they face. For some relationships, those challenges pull them apart and the relationship ends. But for others, the challenges draw them together, becoming the building blocks for relationships that endure.

Relationships take work. If there's tension with a cubicle partner, it drains our energy at work. An unreasonable teacher or classmate can make a semester seem like an eternity. A strained relationship with a landlord or tenant is like a black cloud that hangs over the relationship.

The more important a relationship is to us, the more work it takes. That work takes place through communication. The longer a relationship continues, the more challenging the communication

becomes, and it's easy to find an elephant in the living room and wonder when it arrived. Knowing the stages a relationship goes through can provide clues to elephant prevention.

There are eight stages that relationships go through as they mature. These stages look different in different types of relationships, so they need to be adapted to each situation. But the basic process is the same.

Let's see how this applies to a typical couple. Their relationship might progress like this:

1. *Attraction*. Two people catch each other's attention. Something about the way the other looks, talks, or acts produces the first spark of interest. (These first impressions take place in every connection, from a dating relationship to a job interview.)
2. *Approach*. That interest leads them to connect with each other, usually in some type of conversation. They find something they experience together to talk about, whether it's the event they're attending, the environment, or some other common ground.
3. *Admiration*. During the conversation, they use that common ground to explore other possibilities of mutual interest. The more they discover about each other, the more they want to keep discovering. So they set up future times to connect.
4. *Attention*. The couple enjoys being together, so they look for opportunities to be together more often. Each is on their best behavior, trying to impress the other person. Eventually, they commit to a relationship.
5. *Accommodation*. The relationship grows, and they focus on making each other happy. Most of their conversations have been about the things they have in common. But over time,

their uniqueness comes out, and they have to explore their differences. That can lead to some uncomfortable conversations, but their commitment to each other drives them to find solutions.

6. *Anticipation*. After the wedding, they ride their high emotions as they begin their life together. They're excited, and they're happy. Sure, they have lots of little disagreements, but they're so much in love that they find ways to work through them. The energy of the relationship carries them through the tough times. (This is often when the baby elephant sneaks in. "Love is blind" means that our attention is on the excitement of the relationship, so we're not paying attention to the little stuff that happens around us.)
7. *Apathy*. The relationship grows, but life gets busy. The initial excitement wears off, and daily pressures of work and other commitments begin to grow. Those little disagreements still come up, but there is less romantic energy to work on them. Tackling the tough issues becomes more challenging, and resources are more limited. The little elephant has found his place in the house and settled in.
8. *Arrangement*. At this point, couples begin to form patterns of communicating. Generally, those patterns fall into one of two categories:
 1. dealing with the tough issues by talking about them
 2. avoiding the tough issues because they're uncomfortable

The first category takes a lot of work. Neither person is an expert, so they're probably at a loss for solutions. But they hang in there and work on the problems, going through the initial discomfort to avoid a lot of pain later. When the pressure comes, they keep it on the outside of their relationship, using it to push

them together. They acknowledge the elephant and take steps to send it on its way.

The second category is the path of least resistance. The couple becomes irritated with each other because the problem isn't being dealt with. That irritation grows under the surface, building layer after layer of protection—like an onion growing from the inside out. When the pressure comes, they let that pressure come between them, pushing them apart. Those layers protect them from each other. But they've also protected themselves from seeing the elephant.

The Decision Point

When couples reach this fork in the road, they don't have a road map to figure things out. Sometimes they choose the path of connecting, recognizing the need to work through the tough stuff. But too often they choose the path of disconnecting, because it's an easier path. The elephant doesn't go away; the couple just doesn't talk about it. That's dangerous. If the issues aren't dealt with, they grow. The couple pretends everything is good, but there's a toxic issue growing under the surface.

My nephew and his family live in Minot, North Dakota. The house they were renting was growing mold. They didn't notice it when they first moved in, but over time their health was compromised. They began to develop symptoms of asthma and other issues. The problem was toxic, and it was growing, and they finally had to move out. They had to make the tough choices to deal with the problem so it didn't ruin their lives.

That's what happens in relationships when little issues are ignored; they become big issues. It doesn't matter if it's a work setting or a personal setting. If those issues are not addressed, they can compromise the health of the relationship.

Why We Don't Ask for Help

We might feel like our relationship is perfect. So when the elephant gets bigger and smellier, we don't want to spoil that image. That's exhausting, because it takes a lot of energy to pretend that we're okay when we're not. We're not being honest about the elephant, which means we don't deal with it. We're embarrassed to admit that we need help because we feel shame.

That's why we don't want to make a doctor's appointment until we've lost weight and started exercising regularly. We feel shame and want to solve the problem ourselves to show we're in control. But hiding the problem from others makes it almost impossible for us to get help. We don't talk about it. We sequester the elephant in the bedroom when people visit, trying to convince them that we're okay. But it doesn't work. They can smell that something's not right.

Is There Hope?

A few years ago, I weighed about twenty pounds more than I do now. When my granddaughter, Elena, was just starting to talk, she toddled up to me, poked me in the belly, and said, "Baby?" She knew what pregnant moms looked like and made the association. Not exactly what I wanted to hear, but it was honest.

Maybe we need to be as honest as our kids. They're the ones who will say, "Hey! Did you know there's an elephant in the middle of the room? Wow! It stinks! You should get rid of it."

Here's the thing: It's possible to deal with the elephant. There are some basic principles of communication that help us to do the heavy lifting. But they require action. We can't just hope the situation will get better. We have to make choices and do the work for change to take place.

Healthy relationships will face increasingly greater challenges as they grow. But that's okay, because we will have the resources

to handle those tough times. It's like working out with weights. If we're out of shape, we don't start with heavy weight lifting. We start by getting off the couch. We use light weights at first, because that's all our muscles can handle. But as we get stronger, we're able to lift heavier weights. If we tried to lift those weights at the beginning, we'd be sore and risk injury. Little steps begin the journey toward health and fitness.

The One Place We Have Control

We can't force another person to change. We can influence them, but we can't force them. The only person we have control over is ourselves.

As our relationships grow, we can discover how to take responsibility for our actions and our choices, and in the process, we may influence others to change. There are no guarantees, but there are basic principles we can follow to take those first steps toward healthier relationships.

We need to focus on expectancy rather than expectations. Rather than trying to squeeze a relationship into a picture we have in our minds, we need to anticipate the creative masterpiece that can emerge as we paint together. With small, consistent steps, we can start to deal with the issues that divide growing relationships.

There's hope for getting the elephant out of the room.