

The elephant in the room!

Who am I when there is an elephant in the room?

Marjory Mair traces her journey in coaching teams to face the elephant in the room, where distrust and tension are hampering growth. In the absence of trust, connection and dialogue, productivity suffers, relationships struggle and wellbeing declines. She has moved away from facilitating team away days where everyone leaves feeling good but the agreed action is never followed through, to enabling teams to be reflective. What is hidden and limiting the team can become visible, allowing teams to work through tensions with honesty, care and courage. This has also created greater clarity about who she is as a child of God, and about the values that shape her behaviour in both the easy and the difficult times.

Ephesians 4:15

“Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head that is Christ”.

The elephant in the room

How often have we been part of a team, a group or a committee, maybe

even a family, trying to get stuff done with unspoken tension around us?

And how often does this limit the work of the team, the group or the committee in fulfilling its purpose, wasting the precious time, energy and expertise of all involved? Or, worse still, leave everyone waiting for the moment when the tension erupts?

The unspoken tension, often described as the ‘elephant in the room’, is felt by many, yet no one wants to, or feels able to name it or talk about it. It just feels awkward. Awkward to be there, awkward trying not to notice it, awkward trying to find the words to describe it – just awkward, deeply uncomfortable and sometimes even painful.



Image: Marjory Mair

What happens when the elephants are allowed to roam?

Whether meetings happen in person or online we often sense when something else is going on beneath the surface. There may be issues in the system that are discussed in the kitchen, the corridor or increasingly in WhatsApp or the Teams Channels, mounting up to days maybe even weeks of time, but they are never openly acknowledged. There may be mixed messages, hidden agendas, gaps between what is said and what is actually practised. I can't help but imagine the herds of elephants running through the Post Office and Fujitsu during the Horizon IT scandal or for example, around Mike Pilavachi at Soul Survivor Charity.¹

But they don't need to be big scandals. It's easy for unhealthy patterns in ways of working to become normalised. One person continually interrupts and talks over people in a meeting and everyone allows it and complains about it outside the meeting. Someone's absence or avoidance creates bottlenecks and blocks progress yet no one names the impact. A manager criticises the whole team when everybody knows the issue lies elsewhere but they don't have the courage to deal with it. One person's aggressive challenge or domineering presence is explained away as "that's just the way s/he is". We may say that we value openness and honesty, yet people feel foolish, dismissed or ignored when they speak candidly. These moments may seem small but when not addressed they erode trust and shape the culture of a team and often the whole organisation.

Why does this matter?

There is a trend of disconnection allowing elephants to breed. The annual Edelman Trust Barometer 2026² reveals a world retreating

into insularity, with a growing unwillingness to co-operate or spend time with people who are different. It seems increasingly clear that the rise in disinformation, alongside the growth of hybrid or remote working, in many situations is creating disconnection rather than connection; when debate dominates, dialogue dies, and 'Me PLC' plods or pushes on.

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What I have been learning through my work?

Recently I have deepened my work with teams. There are many teams who need to become more than the

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sum of their parts in order to meet challenging external pressures, as well as dysfunctional teams where conflict has been normalised and continually limits performance. From what I have seen, many teams never experience sustained high performance, but instead circle around forming and storming, seldom reaching norming and performing in Tuckman's model of team development.³

After years of facilitating team away days where everyone leaves feeling good, with a set of carefully crafted actions to implement over the short, medium and long term, I have realised time and again that the impact is often short-lived. Checking in with the leader a couple of months later, I would often hear that, yes, it was a great day and everyone enjoyed it, but then they became really busy, or a key team member went off on sick leave, or some other significant challenge arose, meaning they were unable to follow through on one, some or all of the carefully crafted actions.

This led me to ask whether I was really serving teams as well as I could as a facilitator, and that is when I discovered the art of emergent team coaching – a way of working with teams that encourages and enables reflexivity, defined as a deliberate process for teams to reflect on their work and ways of working and adapt to improve performance. A recent research report from the Oxford Review Research Briefings⁴ showed that team reflexivity is not just a 'nice to have' but actively improves performance, innovation and employee satisfaction. In other words, teams who focus on the task at hand as well as their ways of working e.g. their processes, how they challenge each other, manage conflict, solve problems, and make decisions creatively and sustainably, perform better.

The beauty of discovering emergent team coaching is that it has given me a fuller sense of God's purpose for my working life and how my work and my faith connect deeply, whether working with a Christian or secular organisation. And it starts with who I am.

At the core of the work of an emergent team coach is the ability to create space where what is hidden and limiting the team can become visible, allowing teams to work through tensions with honesty, care and courage. This is particularly important in organisations that are moving away from hierarchical, command and control structures to more enabling, empowered and innovative cultures. Whilst my bulging tool-box of exercises, frameworks, models and research findings is valuable, these resources can often become the focus of the conversation and a distraction from the real issue. Flicking up a PowerPoint showing the Thomas Kilman Conflict Model⁵, which describes five possible positions of default in conflict, can result in a theoretical discussion on ways of understanding elephants rather than identifying, naming and dealing with the actual elephant right here in the room. Of

course, there is work to be done with the team towards creating a safe environment, building relationships and trust and often providing guidance on how to share what they think or feel in a constructive manner. This is often described as creating psychological safety, where team members feel they can speak up, ask questions, admit mistakes, or voice concerns without fear of feeling attacked or being hurt in the process, because that serves no one.

Having greater clarity on who I am and how to be strong in supporting a team to make what is invisible visible, is enabling me to guide them creatively and redemptively through dialogue rather than debate. This enables the team to grow stronger, to find more joy and ease in how they work together, and to work smarter, not just harder. Rather than ignoring or burying conflict, tension and difference, the team begins to notice it, name it and create processes to manage it well. That, without doubt, is a key characteristic of high-performing teams.

What have I been learning about myself?

All of this has given me the opportunity to create greater clarity about who I am as a child of God, and about the values that shape my behaviour in both the easy and the difficult times, particularly in helping a team past the storming stage, to stand in the heat of the moment and lovingly guide it towards norming before performing. Lovingly? Yes lovingly, because that is my core value that comes from being a child of God. And where does that love come from? "I love because he first loved me" (1 John 4:19). Practically, this means not judging the team or team members, often the ones who are taking the risk to indicate there is an elephant, nor does it mean placating them. It does mean having the

courage and belief that the team has all it needs to build itself and my role is to help make that possible. Working with a senior team recently, it became apparent that one team member was very upset with another team member. Helping the team through the situation, withholding any judgement, slowing down the conversation and checking that each person felt heard as they worked their way through the issue, resulted in the creation of a new norm in how they would work together and manage conflict rather than let it derail the work and the professional reputation of the team.

To really understand where love has a part to play in my work, I spent time with a fellow learner on the emergent team coaching programme. We asked each other three times, "Who are you?" Thinking this through out loud brought greater clarity to the connections between who I am, what I do and how I do it. Being keen not to lose the insights from these powerful questions, and wanting to capture more concretely who I am as an emergent team coach, I documented my reflections and offer a summary version here:



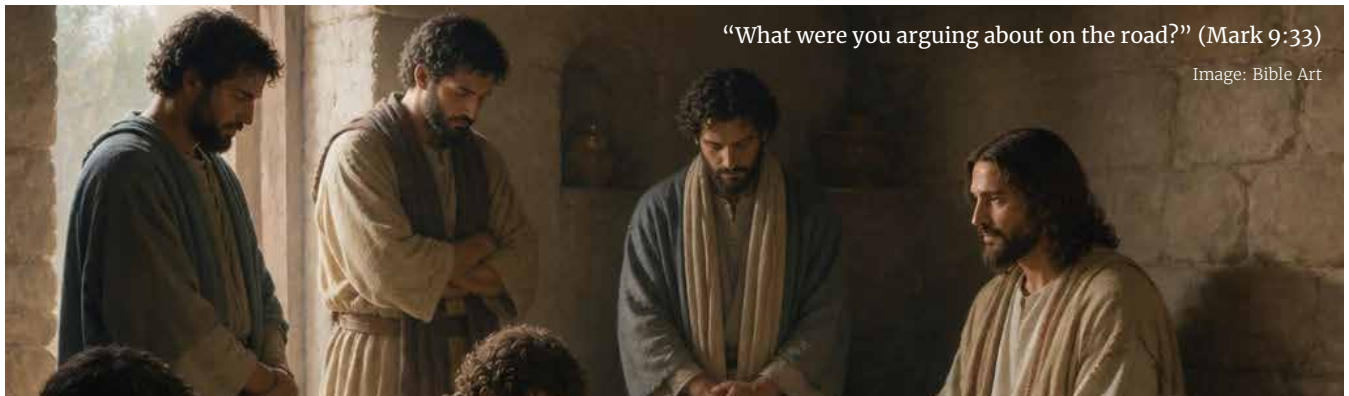
Starting with the first question, "Who are you?", I somewhat nervously shared that I am a child of God, made in the image of the creator of the heavens and the earth, and unconditionally loved. In answer to the second question, "so, who are you?", six things came to mind as practical demonstrations of love in how I aim to show up: trusting, kind, patient, courageous, persevering and forgiving. In answer to the third question, "so who are you?", my thinking became richer as I connected insights and learning from the programme on how to practically do these things. For example, I realised that for me to ignore the elephant and do nothing whilst noticing the discomfort of team members, is not kind.

Speaking the truth in love

Kindness comes from speaking the truth in love; taking the time to slow down, finding the courage to share what I'm noticing in a non-judgemental way and see what lands with the team; then coach them through dealing with it in a respectful way that creates a solution so that nobody is humiliated or embarrassed. All the time, I'm holding on to my belief

that a team is not a problem to be fixed, but rather a group of people made in God's image – creative, resourceful, whole and unconditionally loved – who, when given the right opportunity and conditions, can fulfil their individual and collective potential and truly become more than the sum of their parts. That is a thing of beauty.

Often, in our role as leaders, we feel the need to have all the answers – to focus on the task and keep ticking the boxes.



But what if we spent more time in our teams, groups or committees asking great questions that encourage fresh and open thinking? Jesus shows us the power of this in Matthew 16:15–16, when he asks his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” and then a more personal question: “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” A pause, and genuine listening, create the space for Simon Peter to answer, and then for Jesus to explain more. In Mark 9: 33–35 Jesus is on the way to Capernaum. His disciples were arguing on the way and once they arrive at the house of their destination, Jesus asks, “What were you arguing about on the road?” Jesus would have known what they were arguing about and when no one was willing to name the elephant, “Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve ... ” (v.35). Jesus brings the issue out into the open (makes the invisible visible), gets their attention and takes the time to explain the criteria that will answer the question ‘... Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.’

I wonder what transformation might be possible with more conversations of this quality in our teams.

This raises an important challenge, especially in organisations which identify themselves as having a Christian ethos. I have often worked in this environment where multiple issues remain unspoken because people are afraid of upsetting one another. A limiting assumption that being a Christian means being nice leads to avoidance of challenge and fear of conflict. Yet nowhere in the Bible are we encouraged to be nice, rather we are told to love one another as we have been loved (John 13:34). So how does love really show up? 1 Corinthians 13:4–8 tells us that “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

That’s why Ephesians 4:15 feels so important here: “Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.” Truth without love can wound. Love without truth can show up as avoidance. To truly serve others needs truth and love – that is kindness.

So who am I when there is an elephant in the room?

Always a work in progress but with a fuller sense of who I am, what I am here for and continuing to learn how to do that in a way where my faith and my work are inextricably linked. I am a child of God who is unconditionally loved and learning to trust, to show kindness, patience, courage, perseverance and forgiveness in a deeper way. When teams slow down, take time for reflexivity to notice what limits them and collaborate to solve problems, healthier and productive teams can flourish.

So what is invisible that needs to be visible in your teams and who are you when there is an elephant in the room? 

1. For readers unfamiliar with the Mike Pilavachi case see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/crl808nxjw5o>.

2. <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2026/trust-barometer>

3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuckman%27s_stages_of_group_development

4. <https://oxford-review.com/> The Impact of Team Reflexivity on Team and Organisational Performance - A comprehensive meta-analysis of 13,568 teams across 171 studies examined the impact on performance of team reflexivity (teams openly discussing their work, thinking, behaviour, processes and effectiveness).

5. <https://www.themyersbriggs.com/en-us/explore-solutions/tki>



Marjory Mair is a Team and Leadership Coach. Since 2002 she has been running Marjory Mair Associates enabling leaders and teams to flourish across not-for-profit organisations and SMEs. Based in Oxfordshire, she hosts the monthly Oxford Christian Business Leaders breakfast. More locally she is a trustee for a local charity, is an Adviser to the Head Teacher of a Christian Boarding School and enjoys a great night out on the town each month as a Street Pastor.