



Crestwood Recovery Resilience Solutions

## **Lori and Chris Discuss the Elephant in the Room**

by Dr. Lori Ashcraft and Chris W. Martin

**Lori** holds up the elephant she keeps on her desk and says, “I use this elephant to remind me about those external and internal elephants that get in our way; oppress us with their weight and keep us from having a clearer vision and intention. So today, Chris and I will be talking about elephant hunting. That’s right, we’re going on a safari that is not so far at all, but it can happen right here in our midst.

**Chris shares**, “You know Lori, the expression of an elephant in the room goes back to the 19th Century. There was a British author who wrote about a man who visited a museum in London and later marveled about all the tiny specimens on display. But surprisingly, the museum goer never noticed the huge elephant taxidermy standing right in the middle of the museum. And now in our 21st century, we know an elephant can enter our behavioral health facility and organization. This huge invisible mammoth can cause us to work around it, under it and over it, while we fail to recognize or acknowledge all the very visible effects this invisible giant is creating. You know, Lori, some interesting trivia about elephants is their vision is the weakest of their senses and although their skin is super thick and wrinkled, it’s very sensitive.

**Lori replies**, well that is interesting because when an elephant or a herd of them enter our organization, it blocks our vision of recovery which includes obscuring a vision of hope and potential for the people serve and ourselves. And in the process, that lack of vision creates wrinkles in all we do while we find ourselves becoming insensitive to the emotional needs of the people we serve and ourselves. Maybe that is why there is so much sensitivity training being done in our field. We develop this thick skin while harboring hurts and resentments and not pulling back the layers to address the heart matters.

**Chris adds**, Lori, you and I have visited a lot of organizations in the US and other countries to help them spot the elephants and gain a recovery vision. And often times, they didn’t know that

an elephant even existed among them. Can we talk about all the things that show up when an elephant intrudes; blocks the recovery vision; and creates all those needless work arounds, work overs and workouts? Maybe we could talk about them as evidences of the elephant or the elephant trails it leaves?

**Lori replies**, “Sure we can. This invisible creature creates colossal conflict that usually manifests itself in policies, practices, and responses that avoid, accommodate, compromise and even compete in all these work arounds, workovers, and workouts. Let’s start with the ways the elephant causes us to avoid:

Because this elephant is obscuring our vision of recovery for others and ourselves, we start to avoid the true purpose of why we are here. This avoidance causes a mission drift and we become less authentic with the people we serve and with each other. We can see this invisible giant is blocking our effectiveness, but because we keep avoiding to acknowledge it, we start to be inauthentic with each other. We start stuffing feelings in meetings and fail to share how we really feel and see things. One real consequences of this avoidance is that it causes people to harbor bitterness and resentment. It shows up in lip service, hiding out, going through the motions, and not keeping our word with the people we serve and each other. The avoidance keeps building a lot of internal pressure like the weight of an elephant pressed against us. It ends up causing burnout, quiet quitting, and turnover.

**Chris adds**, “Wow, Lori that really describes the picture with a huge “ele font!” It reminds me of how all this turmoil created from avoiding to confront the elephant, also impacts leadership. What you and I have often seen is that in an elephant-packed environment, leaders start to avoid being present; they become missing in action; and they disappear into the black hole of supervision behind closed doors. Their avoidance of being present every day in coaching, inspiring and leading leaves a vacuum. In this vacuum, staff’s eyes become veiled to the elephant and their hearts pressed down by all the weight of it. And it’s no wonder that the biggest and most important thing that gets avoided here is a recovery focus in our service to others and each other. With a void of leadership, our recovery outcomes diminish.”

**Lori replies** “Yes, and I’m afraid that accommodating the elephant, compromising our services because of it; or competing against it doesn’t help either. The only thing that seems to work is when we collaborate with each other to face the elephant head on. When we can do that, then we can actually learn from it and become wiser for it having been in our presence.

**Chris agrees**, “That’s right; and then we can send that pachyderm packing! And as I know you’ll remember, Lori, in our Peer Support Learning for the 21st Century, you and I

recommend that staff stay away from being elephant danglers, stranglers, and manglers. And instead, we encourage ourselves and everyone else to become elephant wranglers. Perhaps we can leave folks with an excerpt from our workbook on this.

“Dangling an elephant is ignoring the mammoth while it swings to and fro about the room. No one addresses it, but everyone senses the weighty whooshing sound as it dangles around.

Strangling an elephant is attacking the issue by naming it but choking out all discussion of it for the sake of saving time or keeping to the agenda.

Mangling an elephant is when we feel, somehow, we need to control all discussion about it. People feel they can’t express how they feel about the weighty issue when their feelings disagree with ours. What we have left is an unresolved heap of carnage that fills the space and keeps us apart.

Wrangling an elephant is respecting its size and importance but still having the heart and courage to take it on. Elephant wranglers know it takes a team to do the job. They respect how the experience will help them grow. They know how to take the issue by the tusks and face it head on.”

