

# Elephants and Coconuts: An Approach to Understanding Complex Topics

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This is a suggested approach to discussing complex issues, based on two famous wisdom stories, one about the Blind Men and the Elephant, the other about using coconuts to catch monkeys. For those few readers unfamiliar with these stories, I have included them as sidebars.

Our culture seems to be in love with duality. There is an old joke that there are two kinds of people in the world -- those who think there are two kinds of people and those who don't. A good deal of discussion and conflict assume issues have only two sides, but most complex problems and situations are more like the elephant in the poem by an American lawyer John Godfrey Saxe "The Blind Men and the Elephant". In this poem, based on the Panchatantra, a thousand year old Hindu book for training young Princes, we are advised that each person has a different perspective, that each of the viewpoints is wrong, or at least incomplete. The point is even more clear in the last stanza which is usually omitted.

When someone convinces everyone that the elephant is a spear, they might choose a very dysfunctional strategy like trying to hunt rabbits by throwing these spear-like elephants at them. Ignoring or leaving out perspectives is dangerous because without the blind man that knows about the snake/trunk, as the team begins to work around the elephant and walk past the front, some unknown force may smack them across the room or throw them in the air. Only by respecting, combining, and integrating **all** the perspectives can we begin to grasp the whole problem.

It might seem that the solution is for every "blind man" to come to understand in detail the perspective and take on the values of each of the others, but that is generally difficult, if not impossible, and often not worth the effort.

A more effective approach is to assemble people who can represent all aspects of the elephant. By sharing the

## THE BLIND MEN AND THE ELEPHANT

It was six men of Indostan  
To learning much inclined,  
Who went to see the Elephant  
(Though all of them were blind),  
That each by observation  
Might satisfy his mind.  
The first approached the Elephant,  
And happening to fall  
Against his broad and sturdy side,  
At once began to bawl:  
"God bless me! but the Elephant  
is very like a WALL!"  
The second, feeling of the tusk,  
Cried, "Ho! what have we here  
So very round and smooth and sharp?  
To me 'tis mighty clear  
This wonder of an Elephant  
Is very like a SPEAR."

The third approached the animal,  
And happening to take  
The squirming trunk within his hands,  
Thus boldly up and spake:  
"I see," quoth he, the Elephant  
Is very like a SNAKE.  
The fourth reached out an eager hand,  
And felt about the knee  
"What most this wonderous beast is like  
Is mighty plain," quoth He:  
"Tis clear enough the Elephant  
Is very like a TREE!"  
The fifth, who chanced to touch the ear,  
Said: "E'en the blindest man  
Can tell what this resembles most;  
Deny the fact who can,  
This marvel of an Elephant  
Is very like a FAN!"

The sixth no sooner had begun  
About the beast to grope,  
Than seizing on the swinging tail  
That fell within his scope,  
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant  
Is very like a ROPE!"  
And so these men of Indostan  
Disputed loud and long,  
Each in his own opinion  
Exceeding stiff and strong,  
Though each was partly in the right,  
and all were in the wrong!  
Moral:  
So oft in theologic wars,  
The disputants, I ween,  
Rail on in utter ignorance  
Of what each other mean,  
And prate about an Elephant  
Not one of them has seen!

John Godfrey Saxe (1816-1887)

strategic issues and perspectives in a cooperative conversation that blends rigor and acceptance, each member gets a better sense of the whole, and a rudimentary appreciation of the world that others see. It often helps to separate the complicated dynamics of causality from the conflictedness of values, goals, and intentions.

When such a group creates together, they are more likely to generate ideas and AHA's relevant to the full complexity of the problem. The group as a whole understands the problem and generates better ideas than any individual. This kind of collaboration requires well founded trust in others.

It is critical to realize that no member of such a cross-functional collaboration can base their trust of others on demonstrated competence, because they cannot evaluate it. A team of accountants can easily determine which of their colleagues is competent at accounting, by checking their detailed work and calculations. However, in a cross functional team, the engineers do not have the background to check the competence of the accountants and the accountants lack the background to evaluate engineering talent.

Thus, a cross functional team is quite different from a single-discipline team because trust can only be built socially, on issues such as character. Therefore, these collaborations need experiences and exercises to explore character and build trust in order to function fully. When I feel I know your character, I know how much to trust your assertions of competence.

## Unlearning

For the blind men to move beyond their knowledge to fuller understanding, it is critical to unlearn certain things they absolutely know are true. This is similar to the story of using coconuts to catch monkeys. Some of the things we absolutely know to be true are more like coconuts dragging us down. Of course other things we know are like vines we hold firmly to keep us from falling a long way to the ground. The trick, as they say, is the wisdom to know the difference.

In our work, we have found it useful to ask groups to brainstorm the question: "It might be a coconut that..." In an open group, this allows people to identify the issues that might be blocking progress, as well as to gently question fundamental assumptions of the organization or group. Of course, the true worth of the exercise is the discussion and evaluation that follows.

Of course, for many people in these conversations the first coconut is the idea that a person who disagrees with them may have a strong character and can be trusted. Handling

this dynamic is a key task for any facilitator, especially in conflict resolution. I have found it useful to never try to decide the right answer in a conflict, but rather to start with the assumption that all sides are absolutely right. Starting with respect for the person and presuming no stupidity or evil on the part of the other is the first step to creating together.

## Process

To summarize, a process for discussing complex issues might be to:

1. Propose, investigate, and discuss the conflicting parts of the elephant
2. Brainstorm and discuss what might be coconuts in this discussion
3. Attempt to create alternatives and action plans in the context of all the complexities and values discussed. After discussion, each person may choose a different path of action, but consensus and collaboration might emerge around some ideas.

This process obviously needs various methods to keep social energy positive. But if the issue is not one that has the capacity to trigger social conflict, it probably does not need this process.

### Catching Monkeys with Coconuts

The story is often told of the South Seas monkey trap:

- { An islander gets hungry but monkeys move fast and climb trees.
- { The islander cuts a small hole in the shell of a coconut and places inside a fragrant bit of food.
- { Smelling the food, the monkey reaches through the hole and grabs the food.
- { While the hole is large enough for the empty hand, it is too small for the closed fist holding the food.
- { Since the monkey cannot let go of the food he wants, he wanders down the beach, dragging the coconut.
- { Monkeys pulling a coconut are not quite as fast and don't climb trees very well.
- { Even the slowest islander finds a big stick and is soon enjoying roast monkey for lunch.