
The Elephant in the Boardroom

Why strong leadership does not begin with harmony, but with the capacity to bear tension.

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INTRODUCTION

Why this book

Some books you don't read as theory, but as a mirror.

The Elephant in the Boardroom by Edgar Papke is one of those books for me. Not because it tells you something entirely new, but because it puts words to something that is visible in many boardrooms every week and still rarely gets named.

The core is uncomfortably simple:

The problem in organisations is usually not conflict. The problem is what we avoid.

That touches exactly on what I so often see in practice. By far the most common thing I come across is conflict avoidance. So my advice is always the same: have the conversation right away, while it is still small.

I often compare it to home. A loose toothpaste cap is never the start of a relationship breakup, but it often ends with one. It stopped being about the cap long ago. It is about everything you have spent years not saying around it. In the boardroom it is no different.

Executives and management teams who are intelligent, experienced, who know the numbers, understand the market, and still get stuck somewhere. Not because they cannot see the issue. But because they do not engage enough with the tension around it.

Then you get tidy meetings with polite conversations, careful wording, and meanwhile the real subject stays on the table untouched. Everyone senses that something is going on, but the conversation keeps sliding a little further off. A bit more analysis. One more look at the facts. A little more careful phrasing. One more round of alignment. Until the delay itself becomes a risk.

That is the elephant in the boardroom.

This e-book sets out eight lessons that lie beneath it. Not as a book review, but as a leadership reflection. Because these lessons matter in almost every boardroom where tension builds, change is needed, and the truth does not reach the table on its own.

01

Conflict belongs to mature leadership

A boardroom without tension is rarely a healthy boardroom.

That sounds counter-intuitive. Many leaders, after all, grew up with the idea that a good team shows one face, decides efficiently, and does not dwell too long on friction. And of course: endless conflict is no sign of strength either. But the opposite is just as risky. Where real choices have to be made, differences of view ought to become visible: about strategy, risk, timing, money, people and pace.

The moment those differences vanish, a leader should not automatically feel relieved. Because it can mean three things.

- There is genuine alignment.
- There is avoidance.
- Or there is indifference.

Those last two are the dangerous ones. A team can look calm while it has in fact turned cautious. People stop bringing in their doubts. They want to spare the relationship, keep the peace, or have simply learned that pushback is not really rewarded. Then it is not calm. It is quiet. And quiet is something other than healthy.

Strong leaders therefore do not try to massage tension away. They make tension productive. They ask the questions that make differences visible. They test whether there is real alignment or only tidy progress.

That takes maturity, precisely because the reflex in many boardrooms is the opposite: move on quickly. But a decision without any felt tension on a subject that matters is not by definition a strong decision. It can just as easily be a decision where the real discussion was never held.

02

Not conflict but avoidance runs up the bigger bill

Avoidance often feels sensible in the short term. Wait a little longer, gather a few more facts, keep the subject smaller, spare the relationship, keep the peace. All understandable motives. And sometimes even right. Not every subject has to go fully on the table at once. Not every difference of view is ripe for direct confrontation. But leadership does ask you to stay honest about what you are doing. Are you being careful? Or are you putting it off?

That distinction is crucial.

Because what you do not name does not disappear. It moves. To the corridors. To subgroups. To one-on-one conversations. To defensive behaviour. To delayed decisions. To files that keep coming back because the real point was never truly touched.

False calm is expensive.

You rarely see the cost directly on a single line of the profit-and-loss account. But it is there. In people who quietly check out. In information that surfaces too late. In political behaviour. In leaking energy. In rework. In lost pace. And above all: in declining trust.

That is also the treacherous thing about avoidance. It presents itself as stability while it is really causing erosion.

The hardest form of avoidance, by the way, is not the team's but the leader's own. That is rarely cowardice; the leader has more reasons than anyone to leave something be for now. And that is exactly where mature leadership begins: at the moment you can admit that you yourself have let something sit too long.

That is the first step back towards clarity.

03

Self-knowledge comes before intervention

Many leaders are strong at reading the outside. Less strong at reading the inside.

They see patterns in the organisation. They recognise other people's behaviour. They name where it chafes. But in tense moments, at least as much happens inside as outside. Irritation. A need for control. Fear of losing authority. An urge to close things off quickly. A need to be proven right. Or, the other way round, the urge to withdraw.

And as long as that inner side stays invisible to the leader themselves, it steers along unnoticed.

Then a leader thinks he is having a conversation about the substance, while he is really mostly busy protecting his position. Or he thinks he is being rational, while his timing and tone have long been driven by emotion. That makes conversations harder than they need to be, or softer than they need to be. It makes interventions less clean.

Self-knowledge is therefore a leadership precondition.

The question before a difficult conversation is not only: what needs to be said here?

The earlier question is: what is happening in me?

Where is my irritation?

Where is my urge to be proven right?

Where do I want to rush to a solution?

Where might I be avoiding the discomfort?

Where do I turn defensive without quite noticing it?

Those questions do not make a leader smaller. They make him sharper. And that is exactly what the boardroom needs. Because the leader who cannot interrupt himself often ends up correcting the other person from the wrong place.

Many conversations do not fail on content. They fail because no one notices in time which reflex has already taken the conversation over.

04

The leader sets the norm, not the PowerPoint

Culture is a favourite topic in many organisations. But it is exactly there that people tend to talk too abstractly.

- People want more openness.
- More ownership.
- More willingness to be held to account.
- More pushback.
- More enterprise.

All fair. Only: culture rarely changes by saying those words out loud. Culture changes when people see which behaviour is actually rewarded, tolerated or punished.

That makes the leader norm-setting by definition.

Not only in speeches. Above all in the moments when tension rises. In those moments a team watches very closely, often without saying so. What happens when someone pushes back? What happens when an awkward fact lands on the table? What happens when a colleague dodges responsibility? What happens when an executive feels stung?

The organisation learns more from that than from ten culture programmes.

So a leader can say openness matters, but if he reacts defensively to real pushback, the team learns something else. A leader can preach accountability, but if he lets vague behaviour stand or keeps taking over himself, the organisation learns something else too.

So the hardest question for a leader is not: what is wrong with the culture?

The harder question is: what do people learn from me?

That takes an uncomfortable mirror. Because sometimes the leader, through his own behaviour, confirms exactly the culture he says he wants to change.

Wanting more ownership and yet taking over again and again.

Wanting more openness and putting off the hardest conversation yourself.

Wanting more pushback and shutting the conversation down the moment it gets tense.

Culture is often congealed leadership behaviour. And so real culture change rarely begins with a session, but with visibly different behaviour from the leader.

05

Intention decides whether a conversation becomes an attack or an invitation

A difficult conversation rarely fails on content. It usually fails in the opening.

Leaders go into a conversation with a judgement, an irritation or a conclusion, and call that clarity. But clarity without an explicit intention often feels like an attack. Even when the content is right.

So the question is not only: what do I need to say?

The earlier question is: what do I actually want with this relationship? And what do I want this conversation to produce?

Clarity?

Repair?

Boundaries?

A decision?

More maturity in the working relationship?

An honest diagnosis?

A better working relationship?

Once that is sharp for the leader himself, the tone of the conversation shifts. Then you transmit less and explore more. Settle scores less and invite more. React on reflex less and on intent more.

That is effective, not soft.

Because in the first minute of a difficult conversation, people usually sense without fail whether a leader has only come to take something or also wants to

build something. Whether he only wants to make his point or also takes the relationship seriously. Whether he wants to use the tension for clarity, or mainly for correction.

Intention can be made concrete, in a sentence or two. That is exactly what lowers the chance the other person goes straight on the defensive. Not because the conversation then becomes easy, but because it gains a clear anchor.

That way the relationship is taken seriously enough to carry the content.

06

Listening is not a soft skill, it is an instrument of power

Most people do not listen to understand. They listen to respond.

In the boardroom you see it constantly. People wait until it is their turn again. Listening to find gaps. Listening to hit back sharper in a moment. Or looking present while, in their heads, they are already on the decision they wanted all along.

That is positioning.

Which is exactly why listening is a strategic skill. Whoever listens well gets the real information on the table sooner. Not only arguments, but also doubt, emotion, worry, resistance, fear and nuance. And that is often where the material sits that is needed to reach a better decision.

Good listeners are not by definition the softest people in the room. Often they are the sharpest. Because they can hold their judgement long enough to first understand what the other person really means. Because they can summarise before they rebut. Because they dare to ask one deepening question where others are already lunging into a rebuttal. Because they can let a silence fall without instantly filling it.

That seems small. But in the boardroom it makes a world of difference.

Listening under pressure takes discipline. Because just as the pressure rises, the quality of listening is usually the first thing to slip. Then timing matters more than understanding. Whereas the leader who keeps listening well at that moment often gets the truth on the table sooner than the leader who reacts fast.

Whoever listens to understand grows their influence.

Whoever listens to respond mostly grows their volume.

07

Understanding comes before commitment

Many management teams want to reach the solution too quickly.

There is tension. There is a difference of view. There is a decision on the table. And still people often want to jump straight to: right, what do we agree? That is understandable. Executives love progress. But progress that comes too fast is often false progress.

Because without shared understanding you do get agreements, but no real movement.

People can agree to the same decision and still mean something different by it. They can say yes from a different analysis, a different interest or a different feeling. Then it looks as if there is alignment, while in reality there are only several interpretations that happen to point the same way for now.

You often notice that only later. When it turns out actions are not happening as expected. Or that one person expected something quite different from the other than the other way round. Or that the air in the meeting seemed cleared, while in practice the noise has actually grown.

Understanding is the foundation beneath commitment.

That asks leaders not to test too quickly for agreement, but for understanding. Not: do we agree? But: what do you hear as the core of this problem? What do you think is being asked of you here now? Where is there still doubt or difference for you?

That is what makes it visible whether people are really on the same page, or only politely going along.

Speed without shared understanding is often rework in the making.

08

Commitment is more than compliance

Nodding yes is not yet commitment.

That is perhaps one of the most underrated boardroom lessons. In many boardrooms, agreement is read too quickly as ownership. A decision is made, no one objects, the meeting moves on, and later it turns out too little happens. Then the frustration often sounds like this: “but didn’t we agree on this?”

Yes. Perhaps we did. But compliance is something other than commitment.

Compliance is: I go along.

Commitment is: I commit myself.

You do not see that difference in the moment of agreement, but only later. In behaviour. In follow-through. In initiative. In the willingness to keep standing behind what was agreed, even under pressure.

That is why leaders should not only formulate agreements, but test them.

Is this clear enough?

Is this genuinely supported?

Who does what?

What makes this hard?

What is needed to hold this even against a headwind?

Those are not control questions. Those are commitment questions.

So strong leaders do not only build decisions. They build clarity, realism and ownership. They make it visible whether someone is truly an owner, or mostly going along politely. They have people put their commitment into their own

words. Because that is exactly where you hear the difference between complying and carrying.

No coincidence that Papke, in his book, arrives at commitments. In the end, leadership becomes tangible in what people actually promise and then do.

Your word as a leader is not without obligation. It builds or breaks trust. And ultimately your legacy too.

IN CLOSING

Where the truth leaves the conversation, the boardroom risk begins

Beneath these eight lessons lies one single movement. Strong leadership is not about avoiding tension. It is about the capacity to recognise tension, to understand yourself within it, to have the real conversation, to listen well, to build understanding, and to turn difference into commitment.

Conflict is not the problem.

Emotion is not the problem.

Difference is not the problem.

The risk begins where the truth leaves the conversation. And that is exactly where the elephant in the boardroom begins.