How to bring out elephants with care

Conflict and tension are part of (work) life and can become toxic if ignored. If we address them with care, wisdom can emerge and we can foster safety and trust in our teams. Strong teams are capable of dealing with interpersonal issues in an open and transparent way. Here are some essential steps that can help you have these challenging conversations with each other.

Preparatory step: Clarify the tension

Core need this step aims to fulfill: Clarity

Key questions for this step:
What am I observing and how does this affect our collaboration?

Some best practices that might be helpful:
- Focus on what you can physically perceive (What do you see/hear?).
- Ask a buddy who is neutral or less affected by the situation to help you separate observation from judgements.
- Sometimes changing your setting can help you to get a fresh perspective on a situation.
- Sometimes it takes time until we can clearly express what is happening and is the effect we perceive. Take the time it takes until you get clarity.
- Make sure you have clarity on what part of the tension you experience may be related to personal events and development and what part is related to the team / organization.

Step 1: Invitation

Core need this step aims to fulfill: Safety
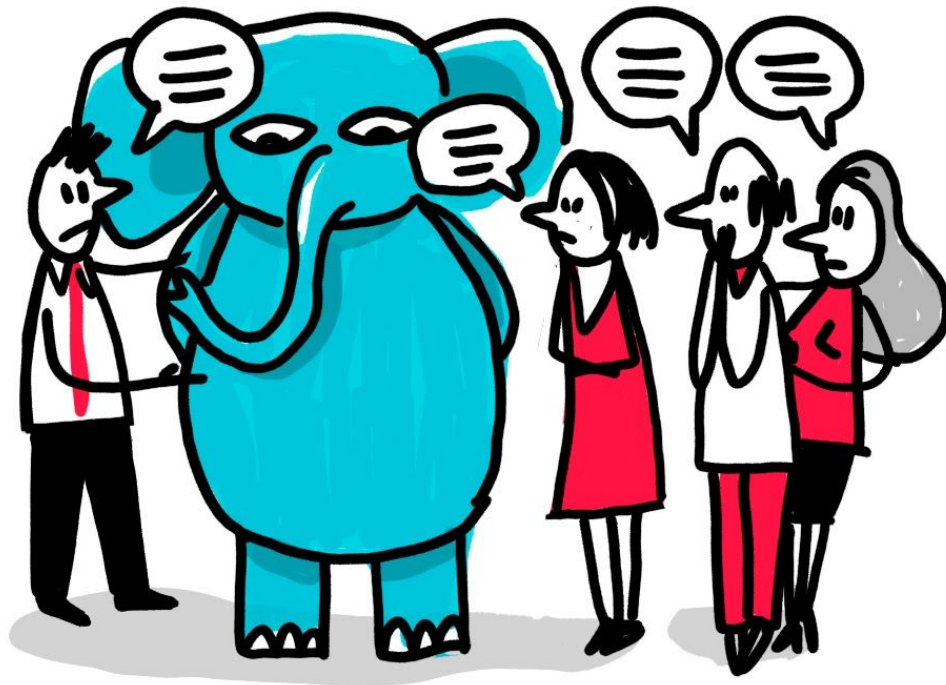
Key questions for this step:
What can support me / give me courage to make this invitation?
How can I be mindful of other people's rhythms, needs and safety levels when finding the right setting for this conversation?
Is an external facilitator or mediator needed to support this conversation?

Some best practices that might be helpful:
- Express what you are observing and how it is affecting the collaboration to the team rather than entering your personal side of the story.
- Forcing a conversation will likely backfire: Check in if people are ready for the conversation and allow participants to do what is needed until they feel ready.
- When tension levels are quite high and there is a chance that this conversation may escalate beyond manageable levels, you may want to consider inviting an external facilitator or a mediator for this session.
- Be clear on the time you feel is needed to resolve the issue and make sure there is some buffer time available for the session.

Step 2: Bringing out the elephant

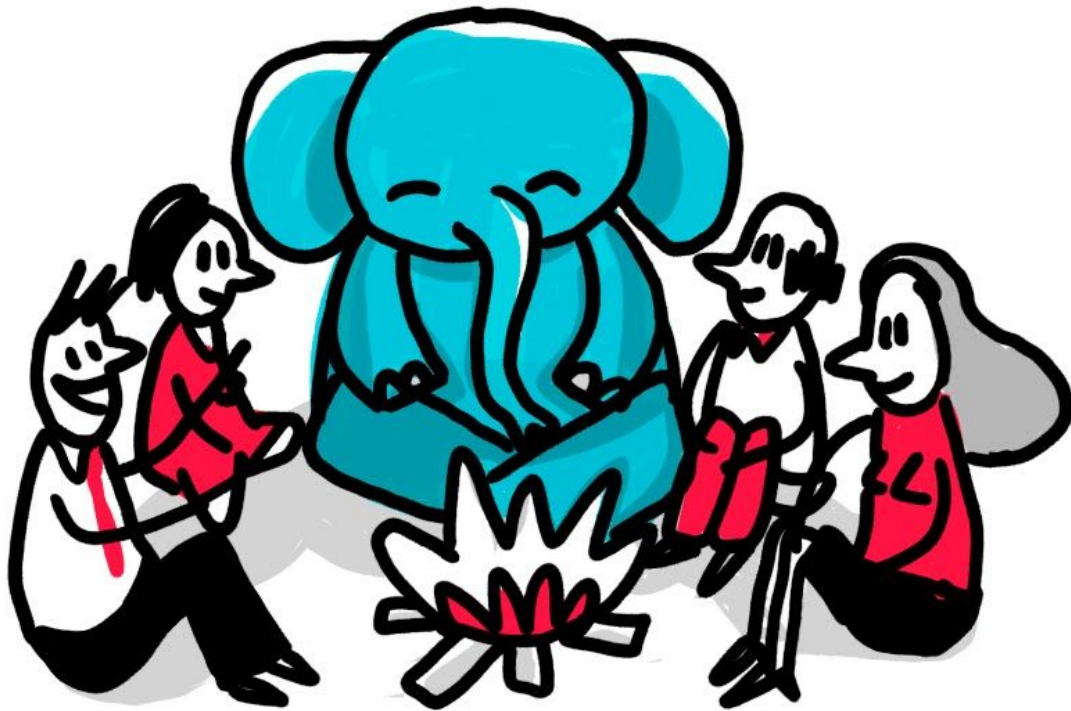**Core need this step aims to fulfill: Equivalence**

<u>Key questions for this step:</u>
What do I need to be fully present with the group?
What is alive in each person?

<u>Some best practices that might be helpful:</u>
- Timing is key, do make sure people are not in a rush or with other burning priorities in mind for such a session and schedule sufficient time, so there are no time constraints.
- Create space for a check-in before speaking about the issue to help people to be present and also check whether this is really the right moment for people to speak about this.
- Invite someone to support with the facilitation of the session and help with the framing.
- Visualize the time if you feel it adds value, so people can have a sense of the time available for the whole group to share.
- Invite people to listen with curiosity to each person's perspective and not to respond or start a dialogue at this stage.
- Speak in rounds and invite the person sensing the tension to start. There can be several rounds if needed until participants feel it is good enough to move on to the next step.

Step 3: Dialogue & sense making

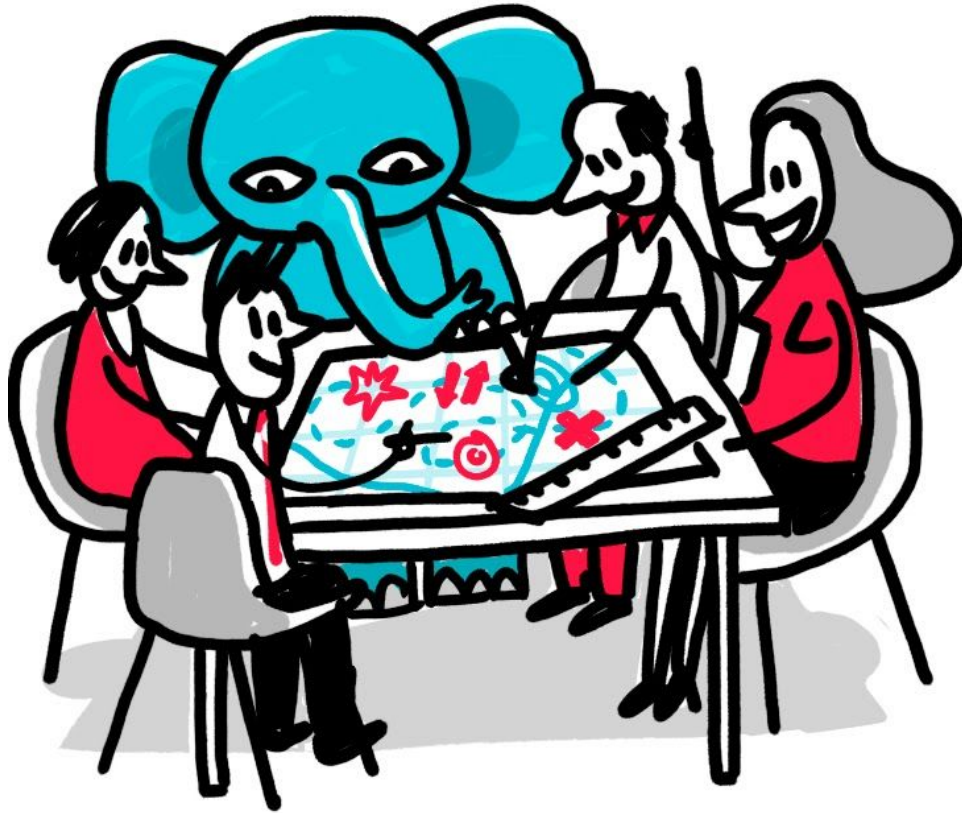### Core need this step aims to fulfill: Connection

Key questions for this step:
What is alive in me after having listened to each perspective?
What underlying needs can we identify?

Some best practices that might be helpful:
- Make sure it is clear who is facilitating this part of the conversation.
- A talking piece may be helpful to ensure that everyone listens to each other
- Visualize the time if you feel it adds value, so people can have a sense of the time available for the whole group to share.
- Invite people to look for patterns, insights and meaning that emerges after the sharing round(s).
- Invite people to elaborate on their perspective by suggesting possible feelings and needs.
- Make visible if some misunderstandings have been resolved.
- Check in with the group to see whether the level of group connection could be improved.

Step 4: Resolving the tension
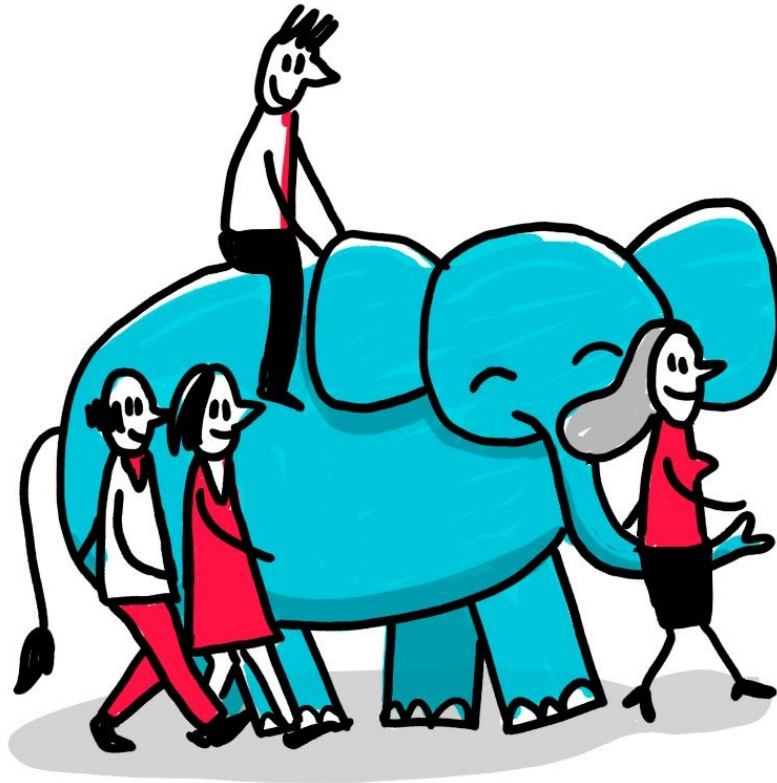
Core need this step aims to fulfill: Integration

<u>Key questions for this step:</u>
Are any further steps necessary or did this sharing already resolve the tension?
What agreements / further actions are needed?

<u>Some best practices that might be helpful:</u>
- If there is a need for further action, do not go for the first idea, taking a moment to reflect and see what other options are there may open up new possibilities
- Keep an open mind and feel free to brainstorm different ideas/options rather than going for the first and most obvious solution.
- Ensure proposals are clear to the group and check for objections with those affected before adopting any.
- Make sure agreements have a review date and that someone feels responsible for the follow up.
- Agree on evaluation criteria for agreements.
- Make sure you document any agreements you make.

Step 5: Creating a healthy team culture

Core need this step aims to fulfill: Learning & Evolving

Key questions for this step:
What learning does this experience bring us as a group/team?
What agreements could help us to prevent tensions from affecting our collaboration in the future?

Some best practices that might be helpful:
- Harvest key insights and learnings in a way that can serve the team in the future.
- Make sure you document any agreements you make.
- Agree on a review date and evaluation criteria for agreements.
- Safe words could be a great way to bring awareness into the team that tension levels are rising.
- A way to prevent tension to rise is to create regular spaces for informal conversations, retrospectives and peer reviews, that allow tensions to be resolved before they escalate.