

Elephants, Dead Fish & Vomit

This is quite a courageous exercise to bring to a leadership team – and yes, it [can](#) be done very practically if facilitated with the right tone and structure. The “[Elephants, Dead Fish, and Vomit](#)” exercise (from Gifford Thomas / the NeuroLeadership approach) is a powerful metaphorical tool for surfacing hidden issues, unspoken tensions, and emotional “baggage” in a team. Here’s how to run it step-by-step:

Purpose

To create a psychologically safe space where leaders can name and release what’s holding the team back – unspoken concerns (“elephants”), unresolved past issues (“dead fish”), and personal frustrations (“vomit”) – so the team can move forward with greater trust, clarity, and focus.

Step-by-Step Facilitation Guide

1. Set the Scene (5–10 mins)

- Explain that this exercise is about [candour and courage](#), not blame.
- Emphasise [confidentiality](#) and [psychological safety](#) – “What’s said here stays here.”
- Share that each metaphor represents a type of blockage:
- **Elephants:** Big issues everyone knows but no one talks about.
- **Dead Fish:** Old issues from the past that still smell – resentment, unfinished business, hurt feelings.
- **Vomit:** Things people just need to get off their chest – frustrations or annoyances.

You might say:

“Today we’re doing something called [Elephants, Dead Fish, and Vomit](#). It’s a way to surface what’s unsaid so we can move forward together.”

2. Individual Reflection (10 mins)

Give each person sticky notes or index cards.

Ask them to write (one per note):

- **Elephants:** What big issues or tensions are not being talked about?
- **Dead Fish:** What past issues or hurts haven’t been resolved?
- **Vomit:** What frustrations or things do you need to get off your chest?

Encourage honesty and clarity – no naming/blaming; focus on issues and impact.

3. Group Sharing (30–45 mins)

Create three labelled spaces on the wall or whiteboard: “Elephants,” “Dead Fish,” “Vomit.” One by one, participants post their notes and explain (briefly) if they want.

You can decide whether this is:

- **Anonymous posting** (read aloud by facilitator) – safer but less direct, or
- **Open sharing** (each person reads their own) – deeper dialogue but requires more safety.

As a facilitator, [group similar themes](#) together.

4. Discussion and Processing (30–45 mins)

Lead a structured discussion:

- What themes do we see?
- Which issues need action?
- What can we let go of?
- What patterns keep showing up?

Encourage empathy: “Listen to understand, not to respond.”

For [Elephants](#), agree on how to address them going forward.

For [Dead Fish](#), decide what needs closure.

For [Vomit](#), allow catharsis and don't dwell – it's about release, not debate.

5. Action & Closure (15–20 mins)

End by moving from [venting](#) → [vision](#):

- What commitments will we make as a team?
- What conversations or follow-ups are needed?
- One word each: [How do you feel now?](#)

Optionally, [symbolically dispose](#) of the notes (rip them up, shred them, etc.) – signalling a reset.

Tips for Success

- Do not rush it. Allow silence and emotion.
- Use a [neutral facilitator](#) (internal or external) if tensions are high.
- Begin with lighter “vomit” topics before tackling “elephants” and “dead fish.”
- Follow up later – unresolved elephants tend to return.

When to Use It

- After a reorganisation, merger, or leadership turnover
- When trust feels low or communication is strained
- As part of an off-site focused on team renewal

The [success or failure](#) of “Elephants, Dead Fish, and Vomit” depends less on the metaphors themselves and more on how well you [frame the psychological contract](#) – i.e., the [rules of engagement](#).

Here's a set of [practical, field-tested ground rules](#) you can use with a leadership team to keep the session [honest but not hostile, courageous but not personal, and action-oriented but emotionally safe](#).

Purpose of the Ground Rules

To create a [shared container](#) that allows for candour and accountability [without blame or defensiveness](#). The facilitator should set these upfront, display them visibly (flipchart/slide), and re-ground the group in them when emotions rise.

Core Rules of Engagement

1. Speak from the “I”, not “You.”

- “I feel we haven't addressed...”
- “You never address...”

Encourage self-accountability. Participants should own their perspective rather than diagnosing or blaming others.

[Facilitator line](#): “We're not here to label each other's behaviour, we're here to share our experience of the system we're all part of.”

2. Focus on Patterns, Not People.

Keep comments at the [systemic or behavioural level](#), not about individuals.

- “We tend to avoid tough feedback as a team.”
- “Tom avoids giving feedback.”

This keeps the discussion constructive and forward-looking.

3. Assume Positive Intent.

Remind the group that everyone in the room is trying to do the right thing – even when it lands poorly.

“We assume everyone here is operating from a good place, even if impact and intent don't always align.”

4. No Triangulation.

If you name an issue that involves someone not in the room, frame it as *your experience*, not a third-party accusation.

"I've noticed tension between teams," not "They're always the problem."

5. No Fixing or Defending in the Moment.

When someone shares, others *listen* – not explain, defend, or debate.

"Thank you for naming that," rather than "That's not what happened."
You can process or respond later when the group reflects together.

6. Confidentiality with Integrity.

"What's said here stays here."

But also: "What's learned here leaves here."

This allows openness in the moment, while ensuring insights are used responsibly outside the room.

7. Courage Over Comfort.

Encourage people to say what needs to be said, not what's easy.

"If it feels slightly uncomfortable, you're probably in the right zone."

8. Name the Behaviour, Not the Person.

■ "When deadlines slip without warning, it creates distrust."

■ "John doesn't deliver on time."

If someone crosses into personal territory, the facilitator gently redirects:

"Can you restate that as a behaviour or pattern, not a person?"

9. Everyone Has Equal Airtime.

Use structured rounds or time limits to prevent dominance or silence.

"We want all voices heard – especially the quieter ones."

10. Respect Emotional Expression – But Don't Weaponise It.

It's okay to be frustrated or even tearful – that shows investment.
But emotions are not tools to guilt or shame others.

Optional Add-On Rules (for mature teams)

- “Impact over Intent” – we talk about the effect of actions, not motives.
- “No Surprises” – if you raise something major, you're open to follow-up dialogue later.
- “We Own the Elephants Together” – if it's in the room, it's [our](#) issue, not [someone's](#) issue.

How to Introduce the Rules (Facilitator Script Example)

“To make this work, we need to agree on how we'll show up. These rules aren't about restricting conversation – they're about protecting it. They help us stay courageous without being careless.

Let's review them together and see if there's anything you'd add or change – because you'll be the ones holding each other to them.”

Having the group [co-create](#) or [confirm](#) the rules increases ownership and self-regulation.

Pro Tip

Before starting the sharing, ask:

“Who's willing to call it out if we drift from these rules?”

Nominate one or two [process guardians](#) (participants, not facilitator) who can gently pause and reset the group if it becomes personal or unproductive.

“Rules of Engagement” For “Elephants, Dead Fish & Vomit” – Leadership Team Exercise

Purpose

To create a safe, courageous space where we surface what’s unsaid – without blame, defensiveness, or personal attack – so we can move forward together with trust and clarity.

Our Agreed Rules

1	Speak from the “I”	Share your own experience, not others’. “I feel...” instead of “You always...”
2	Focus on Patterns, Not People	Talk about behaviours or team dynamics, not individuals. “We tend to...” not “Tom does...”
3	Assume Positive Intent	Everyone here wants the team to succeed – we might just have different perspectives.
4	No Fixing or Defending in the moment	When someone shares, we listen to understand – not to justify or debate.
5	Confidentiality with Integrity	What’s said here stays here. What’s learned here leaves here.
6	Courage Over Comfort	Say what needs to be said, even if it’s uncomfortable – that’s where growth happens.
7	Name the Behaviour, Not the Person	Address the action or impact, not who did it.
8	Equal Air Time	Every voice matters. Speak once before you speak twice.
9	Respect Emotion, Don’t Weaponise It	It’s okay to express feeling – not to use it to blame or shame.
10	We Own the Elephants Together	If it’s in the room, it’s our issue – not someone’s issue.

Team Commitment

“We agree to hold ourselves and each other accountable to these rules – to speak truth with respect, listen with curiosity, and focus on what will move us forward.”