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expression “the elephant in the room,” a phrase which is used to denote an obvious problem that people are

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is simple: An elephant in a room would be impossible to miss; thus, the people in the room who are jointly and cooperatively pretending it is not there have made a collective choice to ignore it.

Morrison and Mintzen² popularized the term “organizational silence,” which refers to the collective-level phenomenon of doing or saying very little about the problems facing an organization. Organizational silence derives both from people’s fears of negative feedback and from a set of behavioral cues adopted by supervisors that lead to structures, procedures, and processes that discourage speaking up. Two common structural features of organizations that foster organizational silence are centralized decision making and a lack of formal feedback mechanisms.¹

Some organizations face an apparent dilemma in which employees know the truth about specific problems within the organization yet dare not speak that truth to their superiors. A key factor that fosters the creation of a climate of organizational silence is senior leaders’ fears of receiving criticism, especially from subordinates.¹ The unwritten message from the top is “No bad or unpleasant news.” Fearing retaliation or

speaking their minds, subordinates become silent; even if they do speak up, they may discover that their feedback is disregarded. A culture of silence becomes ingrained.

Ignoring elephants comes with a price. Maxfield and colleagues³ report on clinicians who infrequently question their colleagues even when they were aware of clinical decisions that could harm patients. Said otherwise, organizational silence impairs performance because the information that decision makers receive is distorted. When debate is absent, innovative solutions often do not emerge and groupthink becomes the norm.⁴ The organization is less likely to detect a correct error. When organizations’ leaders do not make course corrections, or when they chart the wrong course, organizational performance suffers.^{5,6}

Most studies of organizational silence have focused on the corporate world. “Elephants” have not been studied in a substantive way in academic health centers (AHCs). The purpose of the present study was to obtain the perspective of department chairs regarding elephants in their AHCs. We chose to poll surgery

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