



Book Review: The Elephant in the Room: Engaging the Unsaid in Groups and Organizations

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ABSTRACT

What if the unspoken issues in your organization could be transformed from hidden obstacles into powerful opportunities for growth? Wondering about how the unspoken, laden stuff just sits and goes unaddressed? What are the conditions, truths and questions necessary to surface the issues and change them into fuel? This book uncovers the hidden dynamics that often undermine organizational effectiveness and lead to unresolved tensions. Unspoken issues, "baby elephants" can quietly grow into significant obstacles if left unaddressed. For Ombuds practitioners, this book is a treasure trove of theoretical insights and practical strategies that can transform how they engage with visitors and navigate organizational conflicts. By empowering visitors to become "elephant trainers," Ombuds can help individuals and organizations turn these hidden challenges into opportunities for growth and positive change—changes that foster a culture of openness, reflection, and proactive problem-solving.

KEYWORDS

Ombuds, communication, group dynamics, conflict resolution, organizational culture, leadership

"In the prison camps during the Korean War, 80% of the people survived the ordeal by being passive. That's generally the way it is in organizations. (Svalgaard, 2023, p. xiii).

This quote from Edgar Schein opens the introduction to "The Elephant in the Room: Engaging with the Unsaid in Groups and Organizations" by Dr. Lotte Svalgaard, an Organizational Psychologist. In her book, Dr. Svalgaard sheds light on the critical dynamics of unspoken issues within groups and organizations, dynamics that subtly erode effectiveness, causing individuals to lose interest, waver in commitment, or become frustrated. While Svalgaard stops short of making this connection, I've observed that these unresolved tensions often lead people to ignore issues, allowing problems to grow unchecked, and eventually, drive members of organizations to the Office of the Ombuds.

Dr. Svalgaard, who holds a Ph.D. and an MSc in Business Psychology, has published in journals such as *Management Learning*, *Action Learning: Research & Practice*, and *Socioanalysis*, and she is featured in *SAGE Research Method Cases*. Svalgaard's research explores how individuals can become more "awake and aware, show up, and engage with challenges outside their comfort zones"—a concept that resonates with Ombuds practitioners as we help our visitors navigate challenges and turn them into opportunities (Svalgaard, 2023, p. xi).

Using practical insights, relatable examples, and actionable strategies, Svalgaard guides readers on how to effectively address these hidden opportunities, shifting quiet noticings to transformative actions. This book is a valuable resource for the Ombuds community, enhancing our understanding of (1) the nuanced interactions among individuals, between individuals and organizations, and (2) the impact of these interactions on both professional and personal lives.

As an Ombuds approaching the end of my second year of practice, I recognize the practical value of the insights offered in each section of the book. One that especially resonates with me is the concept Svalgaard calls "double awareness." It serves as a reminder to attend not only to what's happening on the surface, but also to what may be simmering just beneath: unspoken dynamics that often hold the key to deeper understanding and resolution. These insights are integral to my work with visitors, my organization, and myself. As I grow in this role and with the guidance of an outstanding Ombuddy community, I've come to see myself as a listener, guide, and pointer for both the individuals I serve and the organization as a whole. In that context, the author highlights one significant barrier to individual and collective growth, success, and satisfaction: our tendency to ignore the proverbial elephant in the rooms in which we sit. This inattention nurtures the elephant, causing it to grow and spread comfortably, thereby impeding our ability—and that of the organization—to contribute, grow, and thrive.

Svalgaard has structured "The Elephant in the Room" into four distinct sections, or themes, each focusing on a critical topic and building the muscle and commitment necessary to engage with the "Unsaid" in groups and organizations. Throughout these sections, Svalgaard introduces concepts, research, and practical examples through diagrams, scripted conversations from her research, and cartoons that illustrate key concepts. Ombuds will recognize many of these instances as examples of the thought processes of a visitor, or how a potential visitor may be interacting with the party who is the subject of their concern. Each chapter concludes with a summary of key points from her research, sources, and recommendations for further reading and research. Additionally, Dr. Svalgaard provides opportunities for readers to reflect on their personal and group experiences, making this book a valuable tool for Ombuds in understanding and advancing our work.

The first section, Double Awareness, introduces foundational concepts crucial to both Svalgaard's work and the Ombuds practice. She discusses Harold Bridger's approach of the double task: the simultaneous attention paid to (1) the what, the given task, and (2) the how, the psychosocial processes that unfold as the group works toward completing the task. Svalgaard encourages readers to be mindful of opportunities for awareness and reflection—both situational and personal. As Ombuds, we often detect early signs of misalignment between what is happening operationally and how people are experiencing it emotionally. For instance, a team might appear to be working well, but subtleties, like someone consistently staying silent during meetings or avoiding collaboration, may indicate a brewing issue. Using double awareness, an Ombuds can notice these patterns and take the opportunity to explore with the visitor what's not being said, allowing us to help surface and address small concerns before they evolve into larger organizational problems.

This mirrors the Ombuds' initial intake and conversation process, where we focus not only on the visitor's explicit concerns (the what) but also on the underlying emotional and social dynamics at play (the how). It's through this double awareness that we begin to identify the baby elephants, those small, emerging issues that, if left unattended, will become much larger problems. (At times, they've already matured.)

In Theme 2, Mindful Avoidance, Svalgaard delves into why individuals and organizations engage in avoidance behaviors. She emphasizes the importance of using emotions and not knowing as a tool rather than a flashpoint or crutch. This is particularly relevant to the Ombuds role, as many visitors come to us after they have spent considerable time avoiding a complicated issue often out of fear, uncertainty, or a lack of trust in the organizational processes. Consider a case where a visitor is silently struggling with feeling undermined by members of their team and has avoided raising the concern out of fear of damaging relationships. By acknowledging the discomfort and inviting the visitor to question and explore the emotion without demanding certainty or immediate answers, an Ombuds helps them reflect on their experience without judgment. Embracing that space of "not knowing" allows them to consider new possibilities and next steps, moving from avoidance toward clarity.

The third section, Mindful Action, builds on this by exploring how to move from avoidance to proactive engagement. Svalgaard introduces the 3T model, Truth, Trust, and Transparency, as key elements in that shift. As Ombuds, we guide visitors through this transition from avoidance to proactive engagement, helping them surface their concerns and explore options for resolution. In my view, this work begins with the individual. By helping visitors recognize and voice their own truth, we create space for transparency and foster trust among people within the organization. This is how we help individuals confront the "baby elephants" before they grow out of control, using mindful action to turn quiet tension into meaningful change.

For example, an Ombuds might work with a visitor who feels excluded from decision-making but hasn't raised the concern. Rather than allowing assumptions to fill the silence, the Ombuds helps the visitor name their truth: what they've experienced and how it's affecting them. This clarity empowers the visitor to speak from a place of authenticity rather than frustration. Together, they identify what information can be shared to reduce what Svalgaard calls the "projective space," where assumptions and speculation take up more room than facts. Transparency, in this sense, becomes a tool to ground the conversation and reduce distortion. At the same time, the Ombuds reinforces that trust grows not only from certainty, but from the willingness to share thoughts and feelings in ways that invite understanding and connection. In doing so, the visitor becomes more confident and better equipped to engage in a constructive dialogue—one that creates the possibility for meaningful resolution.

The closing section, From Avoidance to Commitment, outlines practical methods for initiating action and fostering engagement, skillfully weaving together insights from the previous sections. Svalgaard emphasizes the importance of asking questions, examining our assumptions and emotions, considering our meaning and purpose, and engaging in reflection—at personal, group, and process levels.

This is where the Ombuds role becomes particularly vital. When visitors come to us, they often do so because the elephants—those unresolved issues—have become overwhelming. It is our job to help them not only recognize these elephants but also to train them, so to speak. Instead of allowing these issues to continue growing unchecked, we work with visitors to surface their concerns, explore options, and take mindful action toward resolution.

While Dr. Svalgaard provides an illustration of what it means to tackle these issues—like eating an elephant, one bite at a time—I offer a slightly different visual: Train the elephant and make it work for us. This analogy is especially beneficial to our work as Ombuds.

In any organization, disagreements and unspoken issues are inevitable. These are the "baby elephants"—the small but growing problems that, when ignored, can become significant obstacles. But what if, instead of turning a blind eye, we chose to notice these elephants and take action?

Just like in the wild, where elephants can be trained to work with humans, we can learn to harness the power of these challenges to benefit both the individual and the organization. By acknowledging and addressing these issues early on, we can prevent them from growing into larger, more disruptive problems. Dr. Svalgaard's book offers a way for Ombuds to engage visitors as elephant trainers, empowering them to take control of these issues and positively impact their organizations. By training the baby elephant, addressing challenges head-on rather than avoiding them, we turn potential threats into opportunities for growth. The organization becomes more adaptive, and team members learn to navigate conflicts and disagreements in constructive ways.

Dr. Svalgaard's approach complements the work of Ombuds and serves as a valuable resource for addressing the unspoken dynamics that often stall progress within organizations. For Ombuds seeking to deepen their understanding of organizational behavior and enhance their ability to surface and resolve hidden conflicts, *The Elephant in the Room* is both insightful and practical. It offers more than theory—it provides tools, language, and strategies we can use to engage visitors and organizational leaders as active participants in resolution, transforming them into skilled "elephant trainers." By applying Svalgaard's concepts, Ombuds can help individuals and systems address challenges early, build trust, and foster a culture grounded in openness, reflection, and mindful action.



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Maleika holds an Education Specialist degree in Leadership from Grand Valley State University, a Master in the Art of Teaching from Marygrove College, and a Bachelor of Science in Secondary Education from Louisiana State University. She is a member of both the International and United States Ombuds Associations. In addition to her role at GRPS, she serves on several community organization boards and is an adjunct instructor in the Department of Educational Foundations at Grand Valley State University. (brownm@grps.org)