

Taming the Elephant in the Room

Everyone knows you must be careful around elephants. If you aren't, you can end up flattened.

Still, women board leaders often face “elephants in the room”—that is, unspoken dilemmas in an organization or on a team that its people know exist but want to avoid confronting. Such dilemmas can include conflicts of interest, financial mismanagement, personality issues, poor hires, festering issues of mistrust, and more. Unnamed and unmanaged, these “elephants” can (at the least) hinder an organization from realizing its potential—and, at the worst, destroy it.

The key to “elephant management” lies knowing when and how to name the pachyderm present in a fashion that defuses conflict, moves the team forward, and tames the elephant. It's a skill set more and more women leaders need as they ascend to the C-suite and to board director roles and responsibilities. Which is how Women Corporate Directors (WCD)—Chicago and the Women's Leadership Center came together to plan and host a meaningful and innovative discussion about coping with such obstacles.

“The Elephant in the (Board)Room” event took place on June 3, 2025, in the Lincoln Road Enterprises offices in downtown Chicago. Yet foundations for the event were laid months before. It was the second such collaboration for Lincoln Road and WCD; in 2024, the Women's Leadership Center partnered with WCD as they put together their spring retreat. That gathering brought together WCD's leadership team for engaging sessions on team dynamics, leadership, and visioning. One highlight was a workshop adapted from NASA research by Northwestern University's Professor Leslie DeChurch. The retreat confirmed the Center's belief in the power of intimate, purposeful gatherings to generate new thinking and honest dialogue across a group of women leaders.

Our success creating that retreat led to our next collaborative venture. Teams from WCD and the Women's Leadership Center held planning meetings in the fall and winter, followed by logistical sessions early in 2025. Their goal: to design a deeply interactive, content-rich evening that blended

personal storytelling with structured dialogue. The format was intentionally kept small—24 participants—to make sure each voice would have a chance to be heard. Before the event, participants received a real-world case study with discussion questions to shape the conversation.

The event began with a wine reception and hors d'oeuvres. As the dialogue deepened, participants shared examples of “boardroom elephants” from their own professional lives: ethical gray areas, misaligned values, DEI resistance, CEO blind spots, and more. The case study worked as a springboard to explore systemic issues, uncomfortable truths, and ways women directors can help boards move toward greater transparency and accountability. To support the conversation, the team recruited seasoned board directors to serve as discussion catalysts. These leaders helped frame key themes such as:

- **Elephant Origins:** What are critical issues often avoided in boardrooms and why?
- **Wrangling the Elephant:** What strategies enable productive conversations about sensitive topics?
- **Elephant Species:** What categories of unspoken issues consistently surface?

The evening ended with a long list of insights that will seed a report and event summary.

The “Elephant in the (Board)Room” event is just one example of how small-format gatherings of accomplished women leaders can light the path to meaningful change. The dialogue has already begun on how to keep applying and expanding this approach, not just at the Women's Leadership Center at Williams Bay, but any place women are ready to convene and collaborate for the greater good.