



A GATHERING PLACE
FOR SHORT-TERM MISSION ARTICLES,
RESOURCES AND OPPORTUNITIES

OK, Who Packed Their Elephant? Dealing with conflict on a mission trip

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A short-term mission trip can be full of “elephant encounters.” Some people pack their dream elephant. Others pack their expectation elephant. Still others pack their idolatry elephant.

Packing elephants? What does that mean?

Have you heard of the saying, “There is an elephant in the room?” Well, those elephants are conflicts we just do not want to discuss. Often times, teams come back from mission trips disillusioned and disappointed because of unaddressed conflict they experienced.

So how do we keep our bags elephant-free when preparing for a missions trip?

DON'T PACK ELEPHANTS: DEVELOPING TRIP CLARITY

Elephants are big and hard to fit in your luggage. Try to leave them at home. In a lifetime, many people only get to go on a few mission trips. This creates conflict because after investing a lot of time and money, they want each trip to be perfect. Therefore, prior to leaving, dreaming together as a team and creating a similar vision is extremely important. Set expectations and, above all, build trust. You may need that trust later to speak into another team member’s life. Here is a list of categories that need group-clarity before embarking on a mission trip:

- Clarify the vision, mission, strategies, and goals of the trip
- Clarify relational commitments
- Clarify the ministry philosophy
- Clarify finances for the trip
- Clarify travel arrangements
- Clarify living accommodations
- Clarify cultural similarities and differences
- Clarify roles and responsibilities
- Clarify how to handle impasse
- Clarify ministry expectations
- Clarify spiritual/group devotional expectations
- Clarify work expectations
- Clarify handling the unexpected during the trip
- Clarify expectations about free time

WARNING: ELEPHANT DUNG AHEAD: IDENTIFYING COMMON CONFLICTS

When you find elephant dung, it typically means an elephant is not far away. No matter how hard you try, a few elephants will always get packed. This is not normally intentional; it is simply because we are all human and have different assumptions. Here is a list of commonly packed elephants. People won't say these things out loud; however, they can still create underlining issues or conflicts on the mission field.

The *Me* Elephant:

This trip is all about me, my comfort, and my needs.

The *My Dream* Elephant:

This is my dream mission trip, and it is going to be the best trip ever.

The *My Leadership* Elephant:

I know how this trip should be led. I would lead it much better than those who are leading it.

The *I'll Fix 'em* Elephant:

I know how we can fix these people. If only they did ministry the way "we do ministry."

The *Running Out of Time* Elephant:

I have only two weeks to get something done; why won't people work faster and harder? Most importantly, why won't they work the way I work?

The *Escape* Elephant:

I just came on this trip to get away from my parents or spouse or kids.

The *Vacay* Elephant:

This is my one and only spiritual vacation.

The *Not Enough* Elephant:

What if I do not get enough done? People's lives will not be changed.

The *Idolatry* Elephant:

My desire is what matters, and I mandate that you fulfill my desire. If you don't, I am going to blame and condemn you.

I could mention another few hundred elephants that we tend to pack into our bags. The common theme for most of these elephants is "me." My standard. My preference. My tradition. My goal. My dream. My leadership. And these elephants can show up at the least opportune time.

WRANGLING THE ELEPHANT: HANDLING SHORT-TERM CONFLICT

So what do you do if you need to handle conflict while on the mission field? First, decide if what you are experiencing is Healthy Tension or Unhealthy Tension.

Healthy Tension is an iron sharpening iron moment that brings people closer together. If it is healthy tension, leave it alone.

Unhealthy Tension is a human response that pulls people apart. If it is unhealthy tension, follow these steps.

1. **Story:** As a team, discover each other's stories and stretch your perspectives. Really listen to what each person has to say; see where they are coming from.

2. **Ascend:** Go back to your biblical core values by praying for each other and reading scripture together.
3. **Reflect:** As a team, take responsibility for the conflict each person caused.
4. **Connect:** Brainstorm and make a plan to move the team forward.

Doing these four things will allow you to tame any elephants and reestablish peace in your team.



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