



Section One

*Dump the Baggage  
and Create Clarity*

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## Chapter 1

# Drop the Pink Elephant

*'I did **not** have sexual relations with that woman,  
Ms Lewinsky.'*

US President Bill Clinton, January 1998

My friend Susan was lying in bed with the 'flu, barely able to move, but listening intently to ensure that her two-year-old next door was OK. The silence was unbearable. Susan sensed something was amiss. Finally, she had to find out.

'David,' she called out. Silence.

'David, are you being a good boy?' Silence, then a reply.

'I'm **not** eating my crayons, Mummy.'

Susan leapt out of bed and ran next door to find David, the carpet and the walls covered in half-chewed crayon.

Very young children make poor liars. They fail to recognize that an unprompted denial only prompts us to question the very thing they're denying. Once we grow up, we realize these things.

Or do we?

Let me quote Richard Nixon, President of the United States, in a televised address to the nation in April 1973: 'There can be **no**

whitewash at the White House.’ Until that point, the American people refused to believe that their president could have had any prior knowledge of the break-in at the Democratic Party HQ at the Watergate Building. That one phrase, linking the White House with a whitewash, reversed their thinking.

Surely a great communicator like President Bill Clinton would, 25 years later, avoid such a mistake. Surely a man whose every word has the power to change the world we live in ... surely a man whose every carefully-chosen utterance has been spun and re-spun by the world’s finest spin doctors ... surely he would escape being so clumsy as to be ‘caught short’? But we all remember the infamous ‘I did **not** have sexual relations with that woman, Ms Lewinsky.’ Ten months after making that televised statement, the President apologized for misleading the American people.

Try this one, then: ‘I **didn’t** stand on the radiator!’

This needs a little more explanation. I was in the kitchen of my home. A decorator was working away in my son’s bedroom, when I heard a tremendous crash. Expecting to see an upturned ladder on top of the decorator, I was surprised and relieved to find them both upright. The radiator, however, was on its side and water was gushing in all directions.

Unprompted, the decorator opened up with ‘I **didn’t** stand on the radiator!’

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I put it to you that his denial was in fact an unintentional confession. Who suggested he had stood on it? Only the decorator himself!

Put together, all these denials have a common thread:

- ‘I’m **not** eating my crayons.’
- ‘There can be **no** whitewash at the White House.’
- ‘I did **not** have sexual relations with that woman ...’
- ‘I **didn’t** stand on the radiator.’

In conclusion, m’lud:

- 1 Rather than being in direct reply to an accusation, these were all volunteered denials.
- 2 Notice how the words of denial – ‘not’, ‘no’, ‘did not’ and ‘didn’t’ – are transparent. We automatically look through them for the real meaning.
- 3 They leave behind clear images: ‘eating my crayons’, ‘whitewash at the White House’, ‘sexual relations with that woman’ and ‘stand on the radiator’.

This use of unprompted negatives is, to me, the biggest single flaw we demonstrate in our conversations. To make them easier to spot, I have given them a name. They are our Pink Elephants. Each one is highlighted in this book – along with the transparent denial – to help you spot them yourself in every conversation you ever have or hear.

If I said to you right now ‘**Don’t** think of a Pink Elephant’, the **don’t** would disappear, leaving you with a clear picture of a Pink

Elephant. Similarly, if I said ‘**Don’t** think of your boss naked’, that would be the image that first came to mind.

So a Pink Elephant is an unnecessary, and normally vivid, negative. It usually pops up unprompted because it’s part of the mental baggage we always carry around with us. If we’re worried that somebody is thinking negatively about us, we say it before they do.

Pink Elephants are a great device for guarding against sloppy and ill-advised communication. I urge my clients to remember this key principle: always tell us what you are, instead of what you’re not.

I ask them all to become Pink Elephant hunters.

The idea is to eliminate Pink Elephants altogether from your conversation, until you’re Pink Elephant free. The whole process forces people to think and talk more positively. You see, speaking in negatives tells us very little. It often stops at the problem and fails to find the solution.

Alright, it’s 9.50 p.m. You’re on a dual carriageway, still a long way from home and in great need of a cup of coffee and a comfort stop. At last, a sign: ‘Services. **Not** 24 hours.’ (**Pink Elephant!**) Will they be open? Will they be closed? So what do you have to do? Slow down to see if the lights are on! That surely makes the case for a replacement sign reading ‘Slow down to see if the lights are on.’

I was filming from a helicopter for a golf programme. The pilot was about to touch down when his colleague said on the radio

‘That’s **not** where you’ve to land.’ (**Pink Elephant!**) Now hovering just 10 metres off the ground – more difficult than it looks – the pilot, somewhat exasperated, barked back ‘Would you like to tell me where I should land, then?’

Some phrases you’ll be all too familiar with in everyday conversation:

- ‘I **don’t** mean to be nosy, but ...’ (**Pink Elephant!**)
- ‘I **don’t** want to gossip, but ...’ (**Pink Elephant!**)
- ‘I’m **not** trying to impose, but ...’ (**Pink Elephant!**)
- ‘**No** offence, but ...’ (**Pink Elephant!**)
- ‘I **don’t** mean to be rude, but ...’ (**Pink Elephant!**)

Remove the transparent denials and you’re left with:

- ‘I mean to be nosy ...’
- ‘I want to gossip ...’
- ‘I’m trying to impose ...’ And so on.

Pink Elephants only draw attention to the very thing you want to avoid.

This first came to my attention when reading an article about my appointment as BBC Scotland’s sports reporter in 1986. The piece quoted me as saying my range of sporting interests would

ensure that BBC Scotland was ‘**not** falling into the hole of only covering football’. (**Pink Elephant!**)

Was this some evil, twisted reporter in some scurrilous scandal sheet setting out to misquote me and make me look bad? No, this was an accurate piece, with an accurate quote in the BBC’s own publication, the *Radio Times*. I had painted the very picture – ‘falling into the hole of only covering football’ – that I wanted to avoid. I had meant to say that I had covered 17 different sports that year alone.

Three conclusions struck me from what I had said that apply to us all:

- 1 We must take responsibility for the words we choose, whoever we’re talking to.
- 2 We must put considerably more thought into our spoken words.
- 3 We must learn to DROP THE PINK ELEPHANT.

The thing was, I had been writing professionally since the age of 18 as a trainee newspaper reporter. By then in my late 20s, I had written for four newspapers, a radio station, Scottish Television and BBC TV news in Glasgow and London. I presented news and sport daily on the BBC. So was I really getting it wrong all the time?

The answer had to be a resounding ‘yes’. It was masked by the fact that almost all my broadcast work was pre-written. It may have been spoken on air, but I had crafted it carefully before-



hand and was reading from a script. And that's the situation we all face in comparing what we write in letters and reports with what we say on the phone and in face-to-face conversation. (I'll deal with lightning-fast and highly dangerous emails later.)

Most of us would check a letter for accuracy. We would possibly re-word a phrase that's woolly, tone down an inflammatory remark, show it to somebody else, chew it over and then send it. And what do we do in conversation? We speak, then we think, then we regret. And even that's only if we know what we've done wrong. But we're generally careless in conversation.

Most of us would benefit from spending less time worrying about what we guess others are thinking of us and more time telling them what we do believe in, what we have done, what we do stand for.

And, when an accusation is put to us, why repeat the allegation in the answer? If your partner asks if you're 'bored' with their news, why on earth would you want to tell them 'I'm **not** bored with your news'? (**Pink Elephant!**) That would only put the focus on 'bored'. Tell them instead you're keen to hear their news (providing you are, of course).

If your boss puts it to you that you 'lack ambition', tell him or her that you're 'highly ambitious' (provided you are). Every single Pink Elephant can be replaced with a positive.

It's all a question of agendas. Do you want to debate theirs or yours? If theirs is untrue, why waste your breath defending it? Tell them the truth instead. That applies equally whether you're

speaking to a friend, relative, colleague or even a television reporter.

In one media training session I ran, a client unwittingly came out with 12 Pink Elephants in one three-minute interview. On analysing the interview, they divided roughly down the middle between negative words I had put into his mouth and negative words he had put into his own.

Start looking at your newspaper today and spot the Pink Elephant to find out what's really on someone's mind. Here's a selection to get you going. And remember to ignore the denial in bold letters to reveal the clear picture created. Because that's what your mind does.

Paul Burrell, former butler to Princess Diana, told us 'Telling my story was **never** about the money.' (**Pink Elephant!**) He went on to say the £300,000 deal with the *Daily Mirror* would pay off his debts. That strikes me as being about money.

A former Scotland captain's international football career came to an abrupt halt when he was banned after elbowing a San Marino player in the face. But instead of apologizing, Colin Hendry in one newspaper article told us, 'I **don't** do drugs. (**Pink Elephant!**) I **don't** drink and drive (**Pink Elephant!**) and I **don't** have five kids to three different women. (**Pink Elephant!**)'

In an attempt to pour cold water on newspaper stories that Stella McCartney was unhappy about the marriage of her dad,

Sir Paul, to former model Heather Mills, Stella's agent went public. But she only made matters worse: 'I'm **not** pretending that she's **never** exaggerated stories,' said Anya Noakes. **(Pink Elephant!)** 'But I **don't** think it's ... been done with malicious intent.' **(Pink Elephant!)**

It can be highly amusing spotting other people's Pink Elephants, aware of what they really mean while they themselves are skirting round the issue. I witnessed one such incident at Faro airport in Portugal. A man in his early 20s was highly agitated as he joined a check-in queue. He needed to get back to Gatwick, but, as the conversation on his mobile unfolded, his frustration became obvious.

'Hi Ronnie, it's Jim. I'm stranded at Faro with precisely £15 in my pocket. I've been to the cash machine and the account's empty. How the \*\*\*\* am I meant to get back to Gatwick?' There was a short pause, followed by a classic Pink Elephant.

'Ronnie, I'm **not** blaming you!' **(Pink Elephant!)**

Another short pause, then:

'Well actually, Ronnie... I *am* blaming you!'

And that's what he had meant all along.

So, in order to improve your communication skills, you need to become a Pink Elephant hunter. This applies to your own communications as well as those of others. With a bit of application, you will take the first important steps to making Pink Elephants an endangered species.

## *Summary*

- 1 Begin with some self-analysis. Are you using Pink Elephants?*
- 2 Describe what is happening, rather than deny what you believe is someone else's perception of events. Stick to the positive point.*
- 3 Hunt down the Pink Elephants in your conversations and those of others.*

