



weLEAD Online Magazine

leadingtoday.org
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This Kind of Moose Hunting is Never Out of Season

By Jim Clemmer



I started using the *Moose-on-the-Table* metaphor in the mid to late nineties in my work helping management teams identify and address the issues that were getting in the way of higher performance. Just like dysfunctional families, many teams find it easier to avoid tough conversations. But rarely do problems get better when left unaddressed. Rather, the moose grow larger, breed, and increase the size of the herd.

A Moose-on-the-Table section of my previous book, *The Leader's Digest*, and evolving moose-hunting workshops and executive retreats accelerated The Clemmer Group's use of this metaphor and approach with our clients. I have amassed a collection of moose memorabilia in my office and T-shirts in my closet. Some have come from friends, family, and associates because I seem to have become known as the moose guy!

The strong response of this simple metaphor moved me to writing my sixth book, *Moose on the Table: A Novel Approach to Communications @ Work*. I thoroughly enjoyed using a fictional or "edutaining case study" approach to playfully illustrating how to identify and address difficult team and organizational issues.

A long time reader of my monthly newsletter sent me an e-mail that shows the power of the moose approach, "'Is there a moose-on-the-table' is a phrase we utilize regularly to break the ice and get past the initial 'too polite' stage of discussion. I have my stuffed toy moose in my office and frequently take it to both work related and volunteer related (e.g., I chair our church congregation/board) meetings to help emphasize the importance of discussing the real issues in the meeting... to help get them identified and resolved versus dealing with partial information and minimal chance for favorable resolution over the kitchen table."

Another reader from British Columbia reports, “when reminding our managers how we need to deal with an issue we talk about dealing with the salmon-on-the-table before it really starts to smell!”

Fellow Canadian Association of Professional Speakers colleague, Elaine Froese, is based in Boissevain, Manitoba where she works with family farms to help them with succession planning. We recently connected and compared similarities in our backgrounds (we both grew up on family farms) and our consulting and training businesses. Elaine coined the term “Discuss the Undiscussabull” which is the bull in the middle of the family business living room that no one wants to talk about. She uses as a “talking stick” a beanie baby bull which family members pass around at random when they want to speak. The person holding the bull gets to speak without interruption. Like my experiences with moose hunting in management teams, Elaine finds that this approach works well for drawing out quieter family members who often have deeply held and very emotional positions. She told me she used this method in working with the men and women of a Hutterite colony in their dining room. Elaine reported, “When I pulled out a roll of toilet paper to remind them to be hard on the problem but soft on the person – just like toilet paper – they got the message!”

A few years ago *The Clemmer Group* designed and trained internal trainers at Barrick Gold Corporation to deliver a two-day Courageous Leadership for Health and Safety program around the world. This was the core of a massive effort to revamp attitudes and the culture of this worldwide corporation (28,000 employees on five continents) towards health and safety. Over the three years since we began, the effort has reduced accidents and safety incidents by seventy-five percent! At the core of the program are “moose hunting” exercises to help supervisors and managers learn how to encourage members of their team to speak up when they see unsafe practices or feel pressured to sacrifice safety for production.

Barrick’s Health and Safety Director, Bruce Huber, sent me an update on how some of their mine sites are using this approach. He included a photo from an Australian site of a stuffed moose inside a small wooden case hanging to the wall. Underneath was written, “In the event of an issue....grab moose.” He says that same mine site “had great fun with hiding the moose.” The moose was found: in the microwave, in the porta-potty underground, in the cab of mobile equipment, and many other places.”

An African mine site made a one meter by one and a half meter plywood cutout of a moose. If you found the moose in your office, you knew someone was looking for you with an issue. Another site general manager declared moose season open and went moose hunting; keeping a “trophy board” (bulletin board) of moose killed. Bruce observed “the moose is not recognized or even known in many

parts of the world. However, we've maintained the moose identity in Barrick and have educated many about this animal – as well as the concept!"

How many moose are lurking in your organization? How do you know? What are you doing to reduce the moose?

About the author:

"Jim Clemmer is a Kitchener-based international speaker, workshop and retreat leader, specializing in practical leadership issues. He'll be in touring his "Breaking Through the Bull" Workshop Series in April 2008." To learn more go to www.breakingthroughthebull.com

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