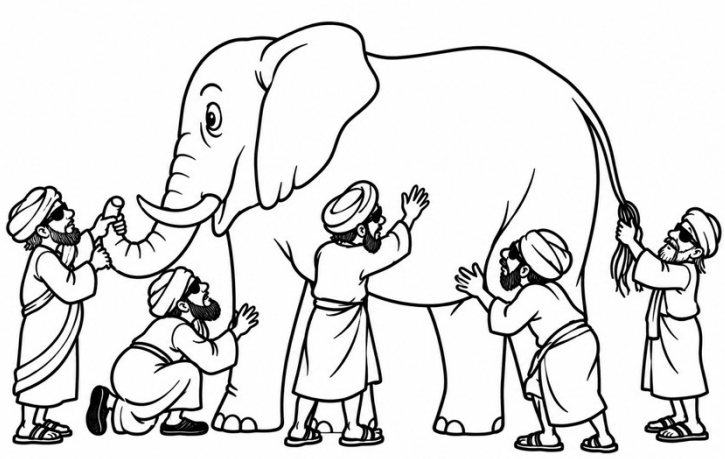
Lesson 2: The Wise Men and the Elephant

Conflict is as old as time itself. People have always tried to make sense of their world and to understand each other. At times, this is difficult because not all people see a problem in the same way. As you read this old Indian tale, see if you can discover the cause of the wise men's misunderstanding.



Once upon a time, there were six wise men who lived together in a small town. The six wise men were blind. One day an elephant was brought to the town. The six men wanted to see the elephant, but how could they? "I know," said the first man. "We will feel him!" "Good idea", said the others. "Then we'll know what an elephant is like." So the six men went to "see" the elephant. The first one touched the elephant's big, flat ear. He felt it move slowly back and forth. "The elephant is like a fan," the first man cried. The second man felt the elephant's legs. "He's like a tree," he cried. "You're both wrong," said the third man. "The elephant is like a rope." This man was feeling the elephant's tail. Just then the fourth man pricked his hand on the elephant's sharp tusk. "The elephant is like a spear," he cried. "No, no," cried the fifth man, "He's like a high wall." As he spoke he felt the elephant's side. The sixth man was holding the elephant's "You are all wrong," he said. "The elephant is like a snake." "No, no, like a rope." "Snake!" "Wall!" "You're wrong!" "I'm right!"

The six blind men shouted at each other for a long time, and never found out what an elephant was really like.

You probably laughed as you read this story. What was the problem?

You are right! Each man could "see' in his mind only what his hands could feel. As a result each man was sure that he had the truth and knew what an elephant looked like. No one wanted to listen to what the others had to say. Were the Wise Men really wise?

These men had a conflict based on differences in perception, i.e. what they thought they "saw". Fortunately, their conflict did not end in violence. Unfortunately however, they still did not know what an elephant looked like.

YOUR CHALLENGES!

1. How could the wise men have discovered what an elephant really looked like? Rewrite the ending of the story.

2. Describe a conflict that you have had which was based on seeing only.

As a peacemaker I learned

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