



THE GRAY RHINO: How to Recognize and Act on the Obvious Dangers We Ignore

by Michele Wucker

Reader Discussion Guide

Why Read THE GRAY RHINO?

Why do we ignore obvious problems when the costs and consequences of failing to act are obvious? The bursting of the housing bubble in 2008, the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and other natural disasters, the digital technologies that upended the media business, and the rising vulnerability to cyber-attacks were all foreseeable. These are the “gray rhinos” of this book.

Unlike the improbable and unpredictable “black swans” that captured the imagination of the business and policy worlds, a gray rhino is a highly probable threat that, like its relative the elephant in the room, has not gotten the attention it deserves. Gray rhinos are predicted well in advance and often avoidable if we act in time. So why do leaders and decision makers keep missing clear opportunities to head off preventable crises? Why are we not better at dealing with what’s right in front of us? And how do we do better confronting the gray rhinos facing us today?

Author Michele Wucker draws on her extensive background in policy formation and crisis management, recent work in cognitive science and decision making, and in-depth interviews with leaders from around the world to explain how to recognize and strategically counter high-impact dangers. The questions she raises are provocative, and all the more powerful for being deceptively simple.

This guide provides questions to facilitate conversation in your book club, reading group, classroom, organization, or family –or as a tool for you to think about the Gray Rhinos in your life, work, and the world.

More information at www.wucker.com

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Discussion Questions

- The author relates personal and neighborhood examples to show how human nature acts on a small scale, which becomes even more complicated as problems get bigger. *ACTION: Make and keep a list of some Gray Rhinos from your life.*
- How are Gray Rhinos different from Black Swans? Why is it important to distinguish between the two concepts?
- How do Gray Rhinos relate to some of the other animals we use to describe human nature: the elephant in the room, the ostrich with its head in the sand, the see-no-evil monkeys?
- How are these smaller, personal Gray Rhinos connected to bigger community, policy, business, and planetary Gray Rhinos?
- Chapter One gives several examples of gray rhinos: climate change, cybersecurity, debt, water scarcity, slow job creation, economic inequality, disruptive technologies. How well do you think government, media, companies, civic organizations, and citizens are doing in dealing with them?
- Can you think of examples of leaders who prevented a Gray Rhino from happening, or at least kept it from turning out even worse than it did. Did they get the credit they should have? Why is it so hard to find examples of people who stood up to Gray Rhinos? Would we do better at dealing with them if we did a better job of giving credit to these leaders?
- Byron Wien, profiled in Chapter Two of *THE GRAY RHINO*, judges himself every year on the predictions he makes each January. How well would you say do you do at predicting accurately? *ACTION: Make a list of predictions for coming months and years, and create a calendar reminder to check back to see how accurate you were.*
- What Gray Rhinos converged to create the 2008 global economic meltdown? What changes could have stopped some or all of them?
- Why is denial such a powerful force in our decision making?
- Which cognitive biases discussed in Chapter Three of *THE GRAY RHINO* have you experienced, and how have they affected your ability to act quickly?

- Where do you look for warning signals and advice? How could changes in the way you (or your organization) seek information and advice make a difference in your ability to respond quickly?
- Think of the examples in Chapter Three: the Affordable Care Act website, the doomed Malaysian Air Flight 370, the escape of the Clinton Correctional Facility convicts, and the 2014 Washington mudslides. What warning signals were missed?
- What warning signals do you look for when thinking about your organization, your life, or the world?
- Does your organization's leadership recognize the Gray Rhinos facing the company and your industry?
- In your personal life, how do you respond to advice from your friends, family, doctors, financial advisors and mentors?
- Chapter Four provides examples from urban planning and financial policy to explore why we are so prone to "kicking the can" down the road. Think about these and the Gray Rhinos you identified earlier. Why are you or other decision makers not acting? What obstacles stand in the way? What would make a difference?
- THE GRAY RHINO includes examples relevant to policy, business, and personal life. What are the similarities and differences among strategies to respond to Gray Rhinos in each of these areas?
- Diagnosing the Gray Rhinos in front of you is important for prioritizing them and for making the case for acting. Thinking of any Gray Rhino, ask yourself the following:
 - How big is the potential cost if the problem gets worse?
 - How fast is the situation moving?
 - How probable is it compared to other challenges you face?
 - Has a similar crisis happened before? (What lessons can you apply?)
 - What other issues are related? Which of those does it make worse; and which ones make this problem worse?
 - How clear is/are the solution or solutions?
 - Do people agree on at least some possible solutions?
 - What opportunities might arise from the situation?
- Why is it important to think about the opportunities that Gray Rhinos create?

- Thinking of the Grey's Anatomy example in Chapter Six, what are the dangers in creating panic to accelerate the course of events?
- The author includes examples from pop culture and television (Grey's Anatomy), literature (Eugene Ionesco, Hans Brinker), movies (Batman, Mars Attacks), aphorisms (a stitch in time saves nine), and history (Herodotus, Joan of Arc) as well as policy and economic examples. How do these cultural references help to explain why we ignore the obvious? Why did the author include them?
- What processes can you create ahead of time to make it easier to decide what to do in the event of panic?
- How much power do you have to keep a crisis from happening or to limit the damage? How does that affect how likely you are to act?
- What goal(s) will action achieve?
 - Profit from the collapse
 - Profit by solving the problem
 - Get you out of the way
- Who can help you to solve the Gray Rhino in front of you? Who stands in the way of dealing with your Gray Rhino(s)?
- How can you use emotions after a crisis happens, when eagerness to prevent the next one is high, to put in place measures to prevent the damage if it happens again?
- How will your organization, your life, and the world be different one year from now? In five years? Ten years? Fifty years? How much energy have you devoted to reaching these goals and preparing for threats?
- How much of your budget involves long-term spending (ie capital budget for an organization; retirement or college or rainy-day fund for an individual)
- What is the mission or purpose of your organization? If your core product all of a sudden became obsolete, how would you pursue that core purpose?
- Chapter Ten talks about the difference between our perception of the rhinoceros and humans' role in the dramatic decline of the rhino population. Is the threat of rhino extinction a gray rhino?

Additional Materials

Additional reading, discussion questions, and interviews are available at the following sites:

“Into the Wild,” by Parker Richards, NY Observer, April 2, 2016

<http://observer.com/2016/04/michele-wucker-thinks-we-know-what-are-problems-are-and-ignore-them/>

“Q&A with Michele Wucker” Deborah Kalb Books

<http://deborahkalbbooks.blogspot.com/2016/05/q-with-michele-wucker.html>

“Forget the Elephant: It’s the Gray Rhino that Can Make or Break You.” Marketing Thought Leadership, March 25, 2016

<https://marketingthoughtleadership.wordpress.com/2016/03/25/forget-the-elephant-its-the-gray-rhino-in-the-room-that-can-make-or-break-you/>

“3 Questions to Make Sure Your Startup Can Thrive With Change,” Inc., May 23, 2016. <http://www.inc.com/michele-wucker/3-questions-to-make-sure-your-startup-can-thrive-with-change.html>

“What’s Your Gray Rhino?” LinkedIn Pulse, May 17, 2016

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/whats-your-gray-rhino-michele-wucker>

CSPAN2 BookTV “Book Discussion on THE GRAY RHINO,” recording of April 13, 2016 presentation at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies Foreign Policy Institute <http://www.c-span.org/video/?408000-1/book-discussion-gray-rhino>

“Why Do We Choose to Ignore Pending Doom?” WGN Radio The Download, March 31, 2016 <http://wgnradio.com/2016/04/01/why-do-we-choose-to-ignore-pending-doom/>

“Move Over Black Swan: Here Comes the Gray Rhino” Carnegie Council for Ethics in Global Affairs podcast and transcript, June 14, 2016.

<http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/studio/multimedia/20160614/index.html>