040 The Gorilla in the Dining Room

Perspective Book · https://kb.jeffreysummers.com/docs/040-the-gorilla-in-the-dining-room/

In one of the most replicated experiments in psychology, volunteers were asked to watch a video of people passing a basketball and count the number of passes. While they were counting, someone in a gorilla suit walked directly through the middle of the scene, stopped, beat their chest, and walked off. Most volunteers never saw it. Not because it was hard to see — because their attention was locked on something else.

The researchers who ran the experiment assumed this was a novice effect. Untrained observers, counting a task they had no experience with, easily fooled by divided attention. They wanted to know what would happen with experts.

They took the same experiment to experienced radiologists — some of the most trained observers in medicine — and asked them to scan CT images of lung tissue for white nodules, the markers they had spent careers learning to identify. In one of the scans they inserted an image of a gorilla, roughly fifty times the size of a nodule, in plain sight. Twenty out of twenty-four radiologists missed it. Not because it was hidden. Eye-tracking data confirmed they looked directly at it. Their trained brains filtered it out because it didn't match what they were looking for.

That is inattentional blindness. When you pay close attention to one thing, you systematically fail to notice other things — including things that are obvious, large, and directly in your line of sight.

Now consider the operator who came up through the kitchen. They see food problems. The operator who came up through front of house sees service problems. The operator who came up through the numbers sees cost problems. All of them are trained observers. All of them have gorillas walking through their dining room that their expertise has taught them not to see.

The fifteen-year operator hasn't just built knowledge. They've built filters. And expertise doesn't just sharpen perception — it narrows it. The more specialized the training, the more precisely it screens out everything that doesn't match the pattern the operator learned to look for. The cast member who is about to quit. The Guest who hasn't been back in three months. The slow Tuesday erosion that's been compounding for six weeks while the Saturday numbers look fine. The competitive entry two blocks over that hasn't opened yet but already has a waitlist.

Those are the gorillas. Expertise built the filter that hides them.

Your cast has a name for it.

They have a name for the moment your attention shifts when you don't like an idea. For the topic that shuts the conversation down. For the look that tells them this feedback isn't going to land. They have not told you because you have not asked — and because the last time someone got close to the truth, it had a cost.

Ken Chenault, former CEO of American Express, discovered his team had privately named the moment he zoned out during presentations he didn't like. They called it "The Ken Zone." It was a specific, observable leadership behavior that was invisible to him and visible to everyone else. He only learned about it because he asked — directly, persistently, and in a way that made the truth safe to say.

Every operator has a version of the Ken Zone. The cast has catalogued it, named it, and worked around it. The question is whether you want to know what it is. Because the blind spot your cast is navigating around is shaping every interaction they have on the floor — and you are the last person in the building to see it.

The diagnostic question every operator has to answer honestly: what are you counting passes on right now — and what is walking through your dining room that you're not seeing?

What Changes Tomorrow

Tomorrow, ask one cast member directly what they've noticed about your blind spots that they've never told you. Expertise narrows what you see; the longer you've run this building, the more likely there's a gorilla in the room you've stopped noticing. Someone on your floor has already named it. Ask them.