

# The Abilene Paradox



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# The Abilene Paradox

## The Problem of Managing Agreement

in

1974, Professor Jerry Harvey of George Washington University developed a parable from his own real-life experience. The parable describes the issues surrounding how individuals reach agreement, or, more specifically, how they *believe* they have reached agreement when they really have not. This parable applies to decisions made in the board-room, in corporate management teams, and even in families. It happens all the time, and knowing how to recognize it can help any group be more effective, and happier.

### The Parable of the Abilene Paradox

The Parable of the Abilene Paradox is presented as a short movie, set in the 1960's. Four adults are sitting on a porch in 104-degree heat in the small town of Coleman, Texas, some 53 miles from Abilene. They are engaging in as little motion as possible. In response to the heat they are drinking lemonade, watching the fan spin lazily, and playing dominoes. The characters are a married couple and the wife's parents.

In a lazy moment, the wife's father suggests they drive to Abilene to eat at a cafeteria there. The son-in-law asks some questions about the temperature and the car. To the viewer, he is clearly thinking that the idea is a bit crazy, but he doesn't see any need to upset the

apple cart. After a few moments, he goes along with it, as do the two women.

The family gets in their old Buick, without air conditioning, and drive through a dust storm to Abilene. They eat a mediocre lunch at the cafeteria and return to Coleman. They are exhausted, hot, and generally unhappy with the experience.

After they return home it becomes slowly revealed that none of them really wanted to go to Abilene—they were just going along because they thought the others were eager to go.

The story then leads into a discussion of what Professor. Harvey believes is a major symptom of organizational dysfunction: the management of agreement—as opposed to the management of disagreement or conflict. This viewpoint gives us a different way of thinking about how we communicate, and how we decide, in groups. Through the use of the paradox, we get to explore how we do or do not engage in deep inquiry and in self-disclosure when attempting to come to agreement with others.

### Recognizing the Abilene Paradox

In the video, Professor. Harvey points to six characteristics that show when a group is failing to manage agreement effectively:

1. Members individually, but privately, agree



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about their current situation. The group in Coleman knew individually that they were satisfied with just sitting on the porch.

2. Members agree, again in private, about what it would take to deal with the situation. In this case, the members privately agreed that staying on the porch was a good way to spend a hot and dusty day.
3. Members fail to communicate their desires and/or beliefs to one another. Sometimes they even communicate the very opposite of their wishes based on what they assume are the desires and opinions of others. Part of the problem is that people make incorrect assumptions about consensus. In the Abilene case, one suggestion (offered on the assumption that the people wanted to do something besides sit on the porch) began a sequence of different individuals agreeing with the idea. This was *in spite of* each person's private misgivings about the desirability and wisdom of making the trip to Abilene.
4. Based on inaccurate perceptions and assumptions, members make a collective decision that leads to action. It is in the middle of the action that it becomes quite apparent that the decision is NOT what individual members of the group desire. It is in this way that a group arrives at a destination they did not want to go to in the first place.
5. As a result of this situation, members experience frustra-

tion, anger, and dissatisfaction with the organization. Often this leads to the forming of sub-groups that take combative or blaming positions toward each other. The Abilene group begins asking themselves immediately, "Whose crazy idea was this anyway?" and thus starts the blaming cycle.

Frequently, the blame is directed towards the most senior person who is seen to be the cause of the problem, and the group reacts by becoming angrily silent towards the leader. In the video, the Father is initially blamed for putting the group into this situation. The roles of the other members are not acknowledged.

6. Importantly, because the focus of attention is often placed on disagreement and conflict, when the problem is really one of *miscommunicated agreement*, members are destined to repeat the same situation.

This is ultimately very unsatisfying and dysfunctional, and can lead to serious long-term problems in an organization.

## What Causes the Abilene Paradox?

The video provokes us to think, why on earth would intelligent and sensible people actually speak against their own desires?

What psychological reasons are there

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and in a lack of full and valid information for the group and our organizations?

The main reasons are psychological. People behave in this manner NOT because they are afraid of the unknown. Harvey's hypothesis, which is quite different from others, is that we know what we are afraid of. It generally has to do with loneliness, being left out, separation, and alienation. This makes sense.

In the not-too-distant past, to be left out of the group frequently meant death.

To avoid being ostracized or alienated we will actually act against our best interests, hoping to be "part" of something. We hope to be members of the whole.

We also tend to believe that any decision or action is better than no action at all. The problem is that there is incomplete information in individual minds. The need to act together, to be seen as cohesive, overrides the need to be explicit about group assumptions, desires, opinions, and even facts.

In Professor Harvey's parlance, this is "action anxiety". He believes it works in close conjunction with another piece of the paradox puzzle: negative fantasies. These are fantasies each individual harbors of what they think would happen if they actually spoke their minds and offered their desires or opinions to the group.

## Avoiding the Trip to Abilene

It is critically important to break the cycle that so often leads us to blaming each other for bad decisions and actions that we "knew" we did not agree with in the first place.

Breaking the cycle is critical to the health and effectiveness of any organization or work group. The health of an organization can only be accomplished by building new communication habits and getting beyond our fears.

Harvey believes that collusion motivates us to accept decisions and actions with which we fundamentally disagree or question. We are ourselves to blame, because of our failure to challenge thinking that we believe to be wrong-headed or, at the very least, headed in the wrong direction. To avoid "making a trip to Abilene" in our organizations requires courage – the courage to refuse to be a victim, the courage to not victimize others, and the courage to deeply challenge our own thinking and that of others.

## Abilene in the Board Room

Boards are particularly susceptible to the Abilene Paradox because the degree of mutual understanding and trust needed to avoid the paradox are generally not present. Trust and mutual understanding is just easier to build in groups that work closely together, than in groups that only come together a few times a year.

In many boards it is important to keep to the norm of "niceness" rather than risk confronting other members of the board with views that we fear might conflict with theirs. ●

