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The Abilene Paradox: Does Everyone Really Agree? Or Are They Just Being Nice?

By **Christine Martin**

Do you ever wish that someone in your organization would speak up against an impossible situation or a project that is doomed to fail? Do you suspect that co-workers share your opinion? If so, your organization may be in the grip of the Abilene Paradox, a group phenomenon first identified in 1974 by management consultant Jerry Harvey. Harvey, now a professor emeritus of management science at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., writes that groups “blunder” into the paradox when “they take actions in contradiction to what they really want to do and therefore defeat the very purposes they are trying to achieve.”¹ Harvey first encountered the paradox more than thirty years ago when he, his wife and her parents agreed to take a four-hour trip though 100-degree Texas heat in an un-air-conditioned 1958 Buick just to eat dinner in Abilene. It was only after returning home to Coleman, Texas—hot, tired, and cranky — that the group discovered that no one had wanted to go. But each had assumed the others did, and so had acted against his or her better judgment.

“I just went along because the three of you were so enthusiastic about going,” Jerry's mother-in-law said after they got home. Jerry's wife told him much the same thing. “You and Daddy and Momma were the ones who wanted to go. I just went along to keep you happy.” Jerry's father-in-law said, “I never wanted to go to Abilene. I just thought you might be bored.” And Jerry himself said, “I didn't want to go. I only went to satisfy the rest of you. You're the culprits.”²

Why would four reasonable people agree to take a trip that appealed to none of them? Why do workplaces or other organizations embark on ill-advised “trips to Abilene” when group members, if polled individually, would agree that the endeavor is foolish, expensive, dangerous, illegal, or any combination of the above?

Beware of false consensus, the heart of the Abilene Paradox

The answer, Harvey says in his 1988 book, *The Abilene Paradox and Other Meditations on Management*, is that organizations, and the people who work in them, make false assumptions about consensus. In the original paradox, all four people agreed about the problem (it was hot) and the solution (stay home). But each made an incorrect assumption about the desires of the others. The result was a collective decision to do the exact opposite of what everyone wanted, followed by anger, frustration, and finger pointing. Harvey says that because his family became conscious of the paradox, they avoided the division into warring groups it sometimes causes.

According to Harvey, workers caught in the paradox avoid speaking up because they fear separation from the group. They fear loss of face, being called disloyal or even being fired. Yet it is part of the absurdity of the paradox that going along with the group almost always produces exactly the separation that workers fear. Certainly, the unfortunate individual who is fired because of a doomed project is separated from the

group. Yet even workers who hold onto their jobs may experience separation in terms of alienation, low morale or division into warring camps.

Skip the trip: Take the group where it really wants to go

The answer, it appears, is to take the group where it really wants to go, not necessarily to Abilene. How to do this? Harvey suggests using a group meeting to “own up” to any misgivings about a project or policy. Emphasize that you are speaking out of concern for the organization. For example, according to Harvey, a brave group member might say something like,

“I want to talk to you about the research project. Although I have previously said things to the contrary, I frankly don't think it will work, and I am very anxious about it. I suspect others may feel the same, but I don't know. Anyway, I am concerned that I may end up misleading you and that we may end up misleading one another, and if we aren't careful, we may continue to work on a project that none of us wants and that might even bankrupt us. That's why I need to know where the rest of you stand. I would appreciate any of your thoughts about the project. Do you think it can succeed?”³

Harvey reminds us that this inquiry may indeed reveal true conflict. The Abilene Paradox, after all, occurs only when group members privately agree on an alternative. It does not apply when false consensus merely papers over an underlying lack of agreement. For every instance in which members of an organization sigh in relief that someone has finally voiced their secret reservations, there may be many more in which additional attention to conflict is not welcome. In these instances, a worker thinking of speaking up must decide if it's worth the risk. Some apparently have found it so. For example, one interviewee told Harvey, “I said I don't think the research project can succeed and the others looked shocked and quickly agreed. The upshot of the whole deal is that I got a promotion and am now known as a ‘rising star.’ It was the high point of my career.”⁴

In other cases, Harvey writes, the individual speaking up was not rewarded and in fact was punished. But, Harvey writes, the person decided it was for the best, saying, “I was told we had enough boat rockers in the organization, and I got fired. It hurt at first, but in retrospect it was the greatest day of my life. I've got another job and I'm delighted.”⁵ In this case, apparently, clearing the air was worth a change in jobs.

Not acting against the Abilene Paradox also can be a failure

Harvey also writes that not confronting the paradox can lead to feelings of failure, especially if one's silence causes friends or co-workers to suffer. For example, he writes that one individual told him, “I didn't say anything, and we rocked along until the whole thing exploded and Joe got fired. There is still a lot of tension in the organization, and we are still in trouble, but I got a good performance review last time. I still feel lousy about the whole thing, though.”⁶

According to Harvey, “the act of confrontation apparently provides intrinsic psychological satisfaction, regardless of the technological outcomes for those who attempt it.”⁷ In other words, doing something to head off a crisis ultimately feels better than letting it happen to you, or your organization. You can always say you did your best to skip the trip to Abilene.

For more information on training materials on the Abilene Paradox, including a 27-minute training video, see www.abileneparadox.com.

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We would love to have your [feedback](#) on this article!

1. Jerry B. Harvey, *The Abilene Paradox and other meditations on management* , Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1988, p. 15.
2. Ibid., p. 14.
3. Ibid., p. 33.
4. Ibid., p. 34.
5. Ibid., p. 34.
6. Ibid., p. 35.
7. Ibid., p. 35.

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