



## Using Effective Leadership Strategies in the Workplace

### Are You Going to Abilene?

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How many groups are you a part of at work (or outside of work)? What do the groups do, and how are decisions made within each group? Do you always agree with the group decisions, or do you sometimes just go along because you figure it's what everybody else in the group wants? Have you ever had the feeling that the group went ahead with some course of action that no one seemed to strongly support?

According to Jerry B. Harvey, author of The Abilene Paradox (Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996), groups frequently agree to take actions that contradict what individual members really want to do or believe is right. In his book, he explores how events and decisions within organizations gather momentum once set in motion and often take on lives of their own - a concept familiar to any team-based organization.

Harvey describes the time his family was relaxing on a hot afternoon in Coleman, Texas, sipping lemonade and playing dominoes, when his father-in-law suggested that they drive 50 miles to Abilene for dinner at the cafeteria there. Harvey's wife said it sounded like a good idea, and his mother-in-law agreed. So, as not to be disagreeable, Harvey pulled the 1958 unair-conditioned Buick around and the four of them drove through the heat and dust to Abilene, where they had a not-very-good meal.

When they returned to Coleman over four hours later, hot and exhausted, and discussed the trip, it became clear that no one had really wanted to go in the first place, but that they each had "gone along" because they felt that it was something that the others had wanted to do. In fact, they had done just the opposite of what they had wanted to do. According to Harvey, "The whole situation simply didn't make sense."

Harvey calls this tendency for groups to embark on excursions that no one group member wants "the Abilene Paradox". Stated simply, when organizations blunder into the Abilene Paradox, they take actions in contradiction to what they really want to do and therefore defeat the very purposes they are trying to achieve. Business experts typically believe that managing *conflict* is one of the greatest challenges faced by any organization, but a corollary of the Abilene Paradox states that the inability to manage *agreement* may be the major source of organizational dysfunction.

There are six specific characteristics displayed by groups caught in the web of the Abilene Paradox:

**Organization members individually agree in private about the nature of the situation or problem facing the organization.** For Harvey's family, they agreed that they were enjoying themselves just sitting around.

**Organization members individually agree in private about what steps would be required to cope with the situation or problem.** In Harvey's case, "more of the same" would have been satisfactory.

**Organization members fail to accurately communicate their desires and/or beliefs to one another.** In fact, they do just the opposite, thereby leading one another into misperceiving the "collective reality". The members reached consensus based on incorrect assumptions.

**Organization members make collective decisions that lead them to take actions contrary to what they want to do (based on invalid and inaccurate information), thereby arriving at results that are counterproductive to the organization's intent and purposes.** The group went to Abilene even though it preferred to stay at home.

**Finally, if organization members do not deal with the generic issue - the inability to manage agreement - the cycle repeats itself with greater intensity.** By realizing what had happened, Harvey's family did not reach that point.

Harvey contends that the inability to cope with (manage) agreement, rather than the inability to cope with (manage) conflict, is the most pressing issue of modern organizations. The Abilene Paradox respects no individuals, organizations, or institutions. For example, companies often proceed with costly, highly questionable projects that individuals question in private, but support in public, often with disastrous consequences.

Often, individuals fail to act in accordance to what they believe to be right because of the anxiety and risk associated with "going against" what they perceive is the desire of the other members of the group. They also fear that they will be ostracized and "separated" from the group if they act in a way that they think is sensible. There's a bumper sticker I see frequently that reads, "Question Authority". I think that it is the inability of many individuals within organization to do just that - to question - that leads many groups down the path to Abilene.

There are many examples of the Abilene Paradox. For example, In the government, many of the events that led to the Watergate scandal and the resignation of the President of the United States can be analyzed in terms of the Paradox - the principals evidently feared being ostracized as disloyal non-team players if they didn't go along (and I'm sure that many of today's White House scandals are influenced by the Paradox, too!). In the workplace, it can be reflected in the hiring or promotion process, in how projects are selected and supported, and in how short- and long-term company plans and targets are established. And, it can be seen in how families make, or don't make, decisions - from getting a new puppy to going to the mall to deciding what to have for dinner.

So, the next time you're faced with a group decision, ask yourself if you're doing it because you really think it's a good idea or if you're just doing it because you think that everyone else wants to do it. Being aware of the Abilene Paradox may allow you to risk undertaking the "management of agreement", and avoid some costly trips.

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