

### Introduction

The Abilene paradox or effect is relevant in the management of group agreement. It is when a group of individuals collectively agree on a course of action based on of what each thinks the group's preferences are, but the decision is actually counter to most of the members opinions. Each member believes their preference is different from the group's and therefore do not raise an objection or simply follow what they believe the collective decision will be. The Abilene Paradox was coined by Jerry B. Harvey, Professor Emeritus of Management at The George Washington University and author of "The Abilene Paradox and Other Meditations on Management." The Paradox is explained using a parable of a family who ends up making an uncomfortable trip that none of them wanted.

**How often do bad decisions get go ahead on in an organization? How often to colleagues waste valuable time and effort on projects that everyone knew was doomed from the start?**

### The Abilene Paradox (Psychological Effects)

\*On a hot afternoon visiting in Coleman, Texas, the family is comfortably playing dominoes on a porch, until the father-in-law suggests that they take a trip to Abilene [53 miles north] for dinner. The wife says, "Sounds like a great idea." The husband, despite having reservations because the drive is long and hot, thinks that his preferences must be out-of-step with the group and says, "Sounds good to me. I just hope your mother wants to go." The mother-in-law then says, "Of course I want to go. I haven't been to Abilene in a long time."\*. *The drive is hot, dusty, and long. When they arrive at the cafeteria, the food is as bad as the drive. They arrive back home four hours later, exhausted.*

\*One of them dishonestly says, "It was a great trip, wasn't it?" The mother-in-law says that, actually, she would rather have stayed home, but went along since the other three were so enthusiastic. The husband says, "I wasn't delighted to be doing what we were doing. I only went to satisfy the rest of you." The wife says, "I just went along to keep you happy. I would have had to be crazy to want to go out in the heat like that." The father-in-law then says that he only suggested it because he thought the others might be bored.\*. *The group sits back, perplexed that they together decided to take a trip which none of them wanted. They each would have preferred to sit comfortably, but did not admit to it when they still had time to enjoy the afternoon.*

### The Abilene Paradox



### Elements of the Paradox

According to Harvey, the issue that leads to the Abilene Paradox is an inability to manage agreement, not conflict. The following symptoms are said to exist in organizations that tend to fall for the paradox:

- Organization members agree privately, as individuals, as to the nature of the situation or problem facing the organization.
- Organization members agree privately, as individuals, as to the steps that would be required to cope with the situation or problem they face.
- Organization members fail to accurately communicate their desires and/or beliefs to one another. In fact, they do just the opposite and thereby lead one another into misperceiving the collective reality.
- With such invalid and inaccurate information, organization members make collective decisions that lead them to take actions contrary to what they want to do, and thereby arrive at results that are counterproductive to the organization's intent and purposes.
- As a result of taking actions that are counterproductive, organization members experience frustration, anger, irritation, and dissatisfaction with their organization. Consequently, they form subgroups with trusted acquaintances and blame other subgroups for the organization's dilemma.
- Finally, if organization members do not deal with the generic issue-the inability to manage agreement-the cycle repeats itself with greater intensity.

### Symptoms of the Paradox

When your organization makes decisions, do you find the same dysfunctional activities repeated over and over? If you want to identify the paradox at work within your group, look out for:

■ **Members exhibiting different opinions in the group as opposed to one-on-one.**

It's common for bad news to have trouble flowing upstream, but if no one's telling you the plan is bad, you'll never know.

■ **Members are discouraged from dissenting, dissent is often seen as lack of commitment?**

When a team member offers constructive criticism, is it encouraged? or are they accused of failing to be a team player?

■ **Members seem frustrated or resentful towards management and other team members.**

If your organization has a habit of letting bad ideas come to fruition, then it stands to reason that someone's being blamed for each failure. There's plenty of reasons for employees to be resentful of management- some is reasonable and some isn't. In this case, you're looking for resent for being blamed- often for tasks that when assigned were already doomed to failure.

■ **Members avoid responsibility or even attempt to blame others.**

The same systemic habit of failure mentioned above often leads to a culture of blame. If no one feels the freedom to point out bad ideas, then no one wants to take responsibility for them either.

■ **Members exhibit a lack of trust.**

Eventually, all of these things erode trust. Employees distrust management that doesn't listen to their concerns and that delegates not only tasks, but also blame for failed initiatives. Corporate politics then lead to backstabbing and blame-shifting among employees under such management, as everyone does what they can to avoid being targeted.

■ **All decisions require unanimous agreement.**

Leadership by committee can breed horrible decision-making. On the one hand, it may increase buy-in. On the other hand, every member is incentivized to agree as soon as possible, or risk being stuck in committee session longer than they want, as well as risk the image of dissenter.

■ **Very little dissent from group opinion is observed.**

Again, lack of dissent is not always a good thing; in fact, if a manager isn't encountering any dissent, that should be a red flag. You have a choice- either go on believing that the failure to argue with you is because all of your decisions arise from bulletproof logic and infallible judgment, or you can probe to find out if the Abilene Paradox is alive and thriving under your leadership.