

# THE ABILENE PARADOX

## A WORKSHOP ON INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY AND GROUP DECISION-MAKING

BASED ON THE FILM THE ABILENE PARADOX


NARRATED BY JERRY HARVEY, PH.D.

## LEADER'S GUIDE

LEADER'S GUIDE WRITTEN BY SKILLBUILDERS, INC.

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*The inability to manage agreement, not internal conflict, is the most pressing issue facing modern organizations.*

— Jerry Harvey, Ph.D.

## INTRODUCTION

*The Abilene Paradox* is a recognized milestone in training videos. Originally based upon the article of the same name by Dr. Jerry Harvey, it examines one of the core dynamics of group decision-making, and helps managers and their work teams recognize the downside of mis-managed agreement.

This fast-paced workshop will help managers, supervisors, and staff find positive ways to come to effective agreements between individuals and groups, and avoid the trap of moving in directions that are counter-productive to the group's overall purpose.

Individuality, equal opportunity, centralized organizational structure — these have been the hallmarks of traditional American management. But times have changed. For more than three decades, managers worldwide have been engaged in fierce competition with global competitors in a rapidly expanding international marketplace.

To meet this competition, companies have modified their approach to management, with an increasing emphasis on quality, customer service, teamwork, and decentralized, participative management.

Change comes slowly to large organizations. It happens bit-by-bit, and decision-by-decision. CRM's Abilene Paradox Workshop provides the tools to help your company address a key dynamic in group decision-making and participative management, and to take a more pragmatic and honest approach to group consensus.

## HOW THIS WORKSHOP BUILDS UNDERSTANDING

*The Abilene Paradox* is a fast-paced and entertaining video that clearly demonstrates the paradox of mismanaged agreement and the way it can influence decision-making within a work unit or an organization, often to the detriment of the group's goals.

The workshop's exercises focus, first, on **the possible consequences** of passively accepting a decision without communicating our true feelings about it. Organizational psychologists believe that we hesitate to speak up to avoid being ostracized from the group or seen as a loner. Our personal fears of being seen as different, more so than actual pressure from the group, cause this response. Unfortunately, the "don't rock the boat" approach to decision management often stifles honest opinions and valid concerns. When silence contributes to poor decisions, what often results are precisely those conditions that prompted the silence in

the first place: failure and ultimate separation from the group.

Second, the activities in the workshop help participants **recognize the road signs** that can tell someone that the group has embarked on a trip to Abilene. Road signs can include ways of thinking that we notice in ourselves, or external signs such as blame, criticism of the boss, etc.

Third, the workshop activities **demonstrate general preventive measures** to turn the car around mid-route, bypass Abilene, or, even better, avoid embarking on the trip. Generating options, asking clarifying questions, and checking assumptions are strategies that bring useful information to the surface and encourage individual participants to share opinions that might seem contradictory to the group's apparent consensus.

Finally, the workshop facilitates discussion and group decisions about **specific ways for their own teams and groups** to "skip future trips" to Abilene, and make more honest decisions.

## WORKSHOP GOALS

The activities in this workshop can help build a pragmatic and open approach to decision-making.

The overall goals of the workshop are:

1. To recognize the paradox of mismanaged agreement, and understand how it contributes to poor group decisions.
2. To explore the personal and psychological dynamics that affect each person's involvement in group discussions and agreement.
3. To initiate measures to help groups avoid making counter-productive decisions.

Specific workshop learning objectives can be found on page 22 of this Leader's Guide.

## WHO SHOULD ATTEND?

CRM's Abilene Paradox Workshop is designed for managers, supervisors and line staff who, as part of their jobs, must meet in groups to make decisions.

This material should be presented in a group setting where the responses of others can be compared and shared. While independent study would have some value, it would lack the group dynamics dimension that lies at the heart of the content.

## WHEN TO USE THIS PROGRAM

As with any training activity, it is always a good idea to have a clear purpose in mind for using this program. Use this program to:

- Build a foundation for group decision-making as the organization or work unit undertakes a new project, or when the team or group is newly forming.
- Add key strategies for group decision-making to a broader training program on team building or management development.
- Improve group decision-making following a failed initiative, as part of a lessons-learned process. In this case, the discussions and suggestions related to the best ways to support individuals in decision-making take on added importance and value, as will post-session follow-through tasks.

## WORKSHOP AGENDA

Through a series of narrated vignettes, the video presents the theory and content behind the Abilene Paradox. You and the participants will provide the context and apply the theory to your everyday work situation.

### ***Time Requirements***

The workshop can be delivered as a half-day session (standard) or as a longer session, depending on the amount of time you have available and the importance of these issues to your organization.

The recommended workshop agenda runs 3.5-4 hours. We have provided three optional exercises that can be completed after Exercise 3 to extend the workshop. Use as many of these exercises as you like, depending on the time available.

### ***Class Sequence and Timing***

<b>Training Session Activity</b>	<b>Time (min)</b>	<b>Time (min)</b>
Welcome/Purpose for Workshop and Logistics	5	
Participant Introductions and Opening Exercise	20	
Workshop Objectives and Approach	5	
Exercise #1: A Look at the Past	15	
Video Presentation: Part One, Discussion	20	
Video Presentation: Part Two, Discussion	25	
Exercise #2: Fifteen Reasons	20	
<b>Break</b>	10	
Exercise #3: Current Decision-Making Case	20	
Optional Exercise A: Minimizing Risk		15
Optional Exercise B: Positive Confrontation		35
Optional Exercise C: Decision-Making at a Distance		20
Exercise #4: Ways to Skip the Trip	20	
Exercise #5: Executive Recommendations	40	
Wrap-Up and Follow-Through	20	
<b>Total Running Time</b>	3.5 - 4 hrs	4.5 - 5 hrs

## USING THIS LEADER'S GUIDE

Each time you present The Abilene Paradox Workshop, you'll become more comfortable with the content and format of the training. This Leader's Guide is organized to take you through the training step by step. We recommend that you follow the Leader's Guide structure closely your first time through. Then, as you become familiar with the flow of activities, you can make changes in your presentation to fit the outline to your unique organizational setting.

Be sure you understand the activity icons located on the left side of each page in the Leader's Guide.



**Where this icon appears, you will either:**

### **SAY**

Deliver the suggested information in a casual style. Modify the statements as needed to fit your organization's requirements and workshop focus.

### **ASK**

Ask the participants the indicated question(s), or pose questions similar to those listed. Where appropriate, possible responses are provided in this Leader's Guide.

Discuss the material with the group and encourage them to share their opinions.



### **SLIDES**

Slide icon indicates when a PowerPoint slide should be used.



### **FLIP CHART**

Write the information on a flip chart or white board.



### **VIDEO**

Show the indicated video segment.



### **NOTE**

Notes to the trainer to help conduct an activity. Typically, these statements are not repeated to the participants.



### **WORKSHEET**

Refer the participants to their Workbook to complete an exercise. The Leader's Guide directions indicate which activities should be completed individually, with partners, or as a group.

## A JERRY HARVEY GLOSSARY

The following terms are used in the video and workshop materials. Use them in your office conversation after the workshop to help manage your agreements effectively! A copy of this Glossary is also on page 11 of the Participant's Workbook.

**Abilene Paradox** - The curious tendency of groups to make decisions that individual members do not truly support.

**Action Anxiety** – An intense uneasiness created when we think about acting in accordance with what we believe needs to be done.

**Agreement Manager** - The person in a group who takes it upon themselves to stimulate discussion, encourage option identification, and move towards true consensus.

**Fear of Separation** - The unspoken fear that people have of being isolated from others in the group.

**Mismanaged Agreement** - The tendency of group members to hesitate to offer their true opinions, and to therefore agree to a decision that they don't support.

**Negative Fantasy** - the disaster scenarios that we play out in our minds when faced with a major decision.

**Real Risk** - the true negative consequences of an incorrect decision, as opposed to the disaster scenarios of our negative fantasies.

**Skipping the Trip** - Employing measures to ensure that participants in a group decision are encouraged and supported in expressing their opinions, and that decisions reached by a group accurately reflect the group's preferences.

**Trip to Abilene** - Any decision that a group makes against the unvoiced wishes of its members. Such a trip is inevitably the result of mismanaged agreement.

## PREPARING FOR A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM

CRM's Abilene Paradox Workshop can be facilitated by any trainer, supervisor, or human resources professional with experience in management or supervisory dynamics. The video, exercises and discussions are structured to allow the trainer a maximum amount of flexibility while exploring the main points of Professor Harvey's approach. Through the Workshop activities, the decision-making issues facing your organization can be brought to the surface and discussed.

### ***Review the Materials***

Begin by thoroughly reviewing all of the materials in the workshop kit. Study this Leader's Guide, watch the video, and review the worksheets in the Participant Workbook. Think about the contents of the program, keeping in mind who your audience will be and the types of decisions they typically have to make. Make notes in the Leader's Guide about situations in your organization that you can use as examples.

The Workshop kit includes all of the materials you'll need to run an effective program:

- This Leader's Guide includes directions for presenting the workshop materials, along with suggestions for preparation, timing, and follow-up activities. It provides step-by-step instructions for introducing activities, leading discussions, and making transitions between the video, group discussions, and exercises.
- The Participant Workbook contains worksheets for the Workshop exercises and hints to help participants continue their use of effective decision-making techniques. The workshop kit includes a basic set of workbooks. Additional workbooks can be ordered from CRM Learning.
- *The Abilene Paradox* videotape, narrated by Jerry Harvey, provides the theory and examples to illustrate the Workshop's topics.
- PowerPoint slides, included on a CD, can be used to highlight key discussion points and activity instructions.
- The Skip the Trip poster can be placed in the training room during the session, and in your conference or meeting room after the workshop is over.
- Skip the Trip note pads are provided to remind participants of the workshop principles during future decision-making activities.
- Reminder Cards provide hints for ways to Skip the Trip, and space for participants to write a commitment of two ways they will change their future group decision-making behavior.

## ***Know Your Participants***

It is helpful to know as much as you can about the participants and the types of decisions they make in advance of the workshop. Learn what positions they hold in the company and the frequency and style of their meetings. The Workshop's introduction activity provides an opportunity to learn more about the participants and their decision-making preferences.

## ***Get Ready***

This Leader's Guide is designed to take you through the workshop, step-by-step, with the information and guidelines you'll need to ensure a dynamic, well-organized program. Your role is to guide the workshop participants through the activities, and you will therefore be instrumental in helping them improve their decision-making skills.

We suggest that you go through each activity, plan the questions you will ask and the statements you will make, and then practice your presentation - in private - before the session.

## **CREATE AN EFFECTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

### ***Group Size***

We recommend a group size of 15-20 participants. A group in this size range is preferred because it promotes in-depth discussions and allows you to manage the logistics of the program.

### ***Invitation Memo***

Send an invitation memo to all participants about the topic and the purpose of the workshop, along with the required time and place information.

### ***Training Room***

Use a training room that is quiet, comfortable, and far enough away from the participant's offices to prevent distractions. The training room should be close to restrooms. Drinking water should be available in the room. Other refreshments (e.g. coffee, soft drinks, juice) are, of course, desirable.

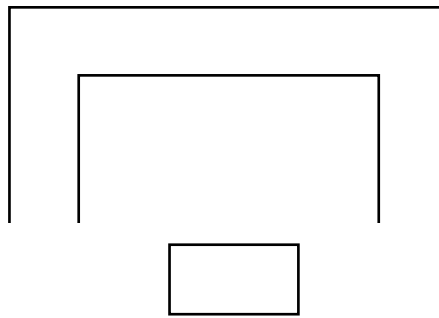
Ask participants to leave their cell phones and pagers off. Explain that they will have time during the breaks to check for messages.

If the workshop is to extend over a lunch break, plan in advance for food to be brought in, or allow enough time for participants to leave the session for lunch.

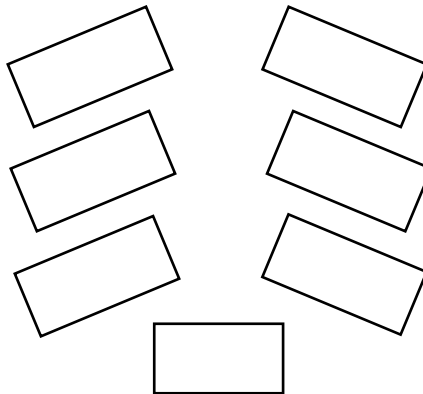
## ***Desks and Furniture***

The participants will need a surface they can write on when working on the exercises. Be sure that each participant has plenty of room to sit and work comfortably.

Tables or individual desks should be arranged so that everyone can clearly see the videotape and the front of the room. A U-shape arrangement is ideal; a chevron arrangement also works well. Avoid a standard classroom-style seating arrangement if possible.



*U-Shaped Seating*



*Chevron Seating*

# WORKSHOP CHECKLIST

Use the following checklist to make sure all pre-class setup has been completed prior to training.

## 1. Set Up A/V Equipment

- Clean the white board and make sure pens are on hand. If you prefer, substitute a flip chart for the white board.
- Check to be sure the video equipment is working properly and the video is inserted at its start position.
- If you will be using the PowerPoint presentation, have it loaded on your PC with the appropriate projector set up. Check the position and focus of the projector.
- Avoid tripping hazards by taping all electrical cords to the floor or moving them out of the way.
- Check the operation of the room's air conditioning, heating, and lighting.

## 2. Training Materials

- Participant Workbooks
- Supplemental materials (poster, reminder cards, post-it pads, etc.)
- Pens, pencils, pads

## 3. Classroom Requirements

- Table tents for names of participants
- Drinking water and water glasses
- Enough tables and/or desks, chairs
- Is the room clean?
- Is the room properly arranged?

## 4. Behind the Scenes

- We recommend prohibiting smoking in the classroom.
- Refreshments should be ordered and scheduled

## 5. Pre-Class Communication with Participants

- Several days in advance of the workshop, send a Confirming memo re: location, time, and workshop purpose. Sending a reminder to the participants' supervisors is also advised.
- Let participants know in advance that use of cell phones and pagers will not be allowed during the workshop, except during breaks.

## UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

Review this background information before the Workshop so that you'll have a thorough understanding of the Abilene Paradox.

*How many times has your organization moved in a direction that you disagreed with?*

*How many times have you observed a group, or been a member of a group, that has come to an impasse that reveals everyone's lack of enthusiasm for the original undertaking?*

*How many seemingly well-supported decisions turn out to be wrong turns and dead-ends that cost both time and money?*

Each of these instances may have been an unplanned, unwanted trip to Abilene.

*The central idea behind the Abilene Paradox is that mismanaged agreement is as dangerous to organizational effectiveness as excessive conflict. Unchecked, it can lead the organization toward inappropriate goals and result in significant costs in time, resources and lost opportunity.*

Mismanaged agreement is a paradox — an idea that opposes common sense and yet, holds true.

Participants involved in a group decision-making process often think they are serving the group's best interest by withholding their opinions, concerns and feelings. They wait to see how others are leaning, or what the group leader wants to do. They may withhold their opinion due to lack of confidence in their ideas, or because they think everyone else is in agreement and they don't want to be the "odd man out" or to appear in conflict with the group.

The paradox comes into play when everyone is making the same errors in judgment; and because no one is sharing their concerns, poor ideas are given support, bad decisions are made, and pointless "trips" are taken.

### ***The Cost of Going Along***

What's strange but true in this situation is that if each person in the group were honest, they would often make quite different decisions.

*In their desire to please the group and remain a part of it, each person is dishonest with themselves and their associates.*

The paradox is that the group often decides to do precisely the opposite of what each member wants to do. When they discover that no one really wanted to make the decision they all accepted, the group members get angry and begin to assign blame. "Whose idea was this, anyway?" they all want to know.

### ***This is Not a Case of Conflict***

It may seem as if the members of the group are in conflict, but they aren't and never were. The problem is not conflict or its management. The problem is the *mismanagement of agreement*.

Mismanaged agreement occurs when we, as participants in a group decision, passively go along without communicating our reservations or opinions to the group. There can be a variety of reasons for this behavior: the desire to be seen as a team player, reluctance to disturb the group's tranquility or relationships, insufficient preparation or information for making the decision, or anxiety about the worth of our opinions.

Frequently, others share our concerns but are reluctant to voice them, each fearing they are the only dissenter. By failing to accurately communicate our reservations, we lead one another into misperceiving the group's true consensus. Decisions based on inaccurate individual perceptions are frequently contrary to the group's true goals and objectives.

### ***Underlying Principles of the Abilene Paradox***

To understand the Abilene Paradox, we must come to grips with a number of psychological principles from which it draws its power.

1. The first principle is **action anxiety** — an intense uneasiness created when we think about acting in accordance with what we believe needs to be done. Action anxiety occurs as we anticipate the results of taking action, and the results we foresee are negative instead of positive.
2. **Negative fantasies** or **perceived risk** are visualizations of the harmful effects resulting from our actions, rather than improvements to the situation. They provide an excuse for not taking responsible action. The R&D director's negative fantasy is that he will be fired. Sue and George's negative fantasy is that her mother will die of a heart attack if Sue does not go through with the wedding.
3. One might think that the fear of the unknown contributes to the Abilene Paradox. Most likely, the real operating factor is our **fear of separation**. According to Professor Harvey, we fear the label of "non-team player" which brings with it the fear of separation, alienation, and loneliness — all things we know very well and prefer to avoid.
4. The **real risk** associated with any situation is usually not the same as our negative fantasies or perceived risk. We can never play it completely safe, because real risk is a part of life, both in business and at home. But when we are afraid to accept real risk as one of life's givens, we often take a trip to Abilene, and thereby take on a far greater risk — the risk of mismanaged agreement, misdirected effort, and missed opportunities.
5. Finally, there is the **confusion of fantasy and reality**. We have a tendency to give negative fantasies and perceived risk more weight than they deserve. What we imagine

will go wrong if we say what's in our heart seems more real to us than the more likely disaster that often results from going along with the crowd.

For example, by not voicing his true opinions about a questionable project, the R & D director in the video virtually guarantees that the company will bankrupt itself—and his negative fantasy of being demoted or fired will then be fulfilled.

### ***Blame and Resentment***

Blaming and fault-finding behavior are likely signs that we've taken a trip to Abilene—that we've made a group decision that lacked true support.

When a decision goes sour and it is one that no one really believed in or was committed to, the frustration, anger and blaming behaviors that ensue resemble conflict. In this situation, the behaviors are not based on real differences. Instead, they stem from our individual and collective need to protect and defend ourselves. The danger here is that the organization will put more time and energy into trying to manage the situation as conflict, when it should be focusing on managing agreement and redirecting the group's efforts in a positive direction.

In a sense, all of the passengers on every trip to Abilene conspire with each other to bring about the harmful results of mismanaged agreement. Each person who does not speak up shares the blame.

### ***Skipping the Trip***

We can skip the trip to Abilene altogether if we honestly address each situation. Individuals must calculate the real risks, both to themselves and the organization, of action versus inaction. Because the dynamics of the Abilene Paradox are based on unvoiced agreement among group members, positive or constructive confrontation in a group setting is particularly effective.

There are a number of strategies that can be employed to prevent a trip, or turn the car around if the group suspects that Abilene lies ahead. Having agreements up front on how to agree and how to disagree will support participants in the decision-making processes.

Each person who calls a meeting or promotes a specific point of view must own up to their position without attributing beliefs or feelings to others, and then be open for feedback. What's needed is an organizational atmosphere that promotes alternative viewpoints and encourages people to express their concerns and reservations. In this type of environment, anxieties are reduced and negative fantasies run a short course.

Where the problem involves real conflict rather than mismanaged agreement, confrontation leads to public examination of the situation. Properly managed, such debates can be the basis for creative problem solving.

## SYNOPSIS OF THE VIDEO

Review this information to help make references to the video during the Workshop exercises.

The video, narrated by Professor Jerry Harvey, presents three situations where mismanaged agreement leads a group in a direction none of the members really wanted to go.

- The first scenario is a hot summer night's drive to Abilene, Texas, taken by Jerry Harvey and his family;
- The second involves a business allocating resources to a research project;
- The third scenario involves a couple getting ready for their wedding.

The video opens on a scene of backcountry tranquility. A group of adults is playing dominoes on the porch. Jerry Harvey comments that the dynamics of groups in organizations closely resemble those of groups at home.

An idea is floated across the domino table, receives lukewarm support, and is ultimately accepted. The group is off on a trip to Abilene, Texas, a 53-mile drive in 104° heat in a car without air conditioning. The goal? To eat some cafeteria food! Upon their return from Abilene, the recriminations begin. It seems that no one really wanted to go, but each one thought the others did.

Professor Harvey then points out that organizations often take similar trips. The members of a group often fail to communicate their true opinions, which ultimately leads to poor results, anger, and frustration. This **tendency of groups to do what none of the members want** has since become known as The Abilene Paradox.

The point is illustrated by observing a manufacturing company that is pouring money into Project X, a dead-end research project. No one really believes in it, but the corporate president feels that the stockholders want it continued in hopes of high return. The VP of Operations and the R&D Director are doing what they perceive the company (and the corporate president) wants, and hoping to make a little history in the process. None of the participants in this decision wants to disappoint the others, and all of them feel as if the others are the ones who are truly supporting the project. In their urge to please and their fear of rocking the boat, they all hop in the car for a trip to Abilene and possible bankruptcy.

We then see how the paradox operates in our personal lives as a young couple agonizes over their decision to marry. Neither one really wants to go through with it, but they are caught up in the momentum of the event. They are concerned about disappointing their parents and friends, and fear the ridicule and criticism of their peers if they alter their plans. They, too, are on a trip to Abilene and powerless to alter their course.

Professor Harvey points out that the paradox draws its power from several underlying psychological principles:

- Action anxiety often makes us hesitate to take any action at all.
- Negative fantasies play out in our minds, as we conjure up disastrous images of what may happen if we don't go along. These fantasies provide convenient excuses for inaction.
- We avoid one of the facts of life — there is real risk out there, and sometimes our decisions will cause us problems.
- We fear separation from our group, and the alienation and loneliness that result.
- Giving in to the fear of separation and therefore failing to act usually leads to the precise result we fear: failure and consequent separation from the group.

The film ends with a series of suggestions to help avoid trips to Abilene. Professor Harvey suggests that we pay attention to the road signs and stop the process when it begins. Positive confrontation allows an organization to avoid being victimized by the reluctance of its members. The film ends as Jerry Harvey and his family make light of their ill-advised trip to Abilene, and resume their game of dominoes.

## COORDINATING THE WORKSHOP

The major components of The Abilene Paradox Workshop are the videotapes, exercises, and discussions. Your role is to facilitate these activities, encourage participation, and manage the schedule.

### ***Time Management***

Part of your preparation for the workshop will involve a review of the suggested timing for the activities listed on page 4. Approximate time required is also listed for each activity in the Leader's Script section beginning on page 19 of this Leader's Guide.

Use these estimates as guideposts as you deliver the training. They will keep you on track and let you know if you are falling behind, or whether you have more time available for discussion and other supporting activities.

When you announce that a specific exercise is to take about X minutes, keep one eye on the clock, and the other eye on the participants' progress. They may require less time, or slightly more time than you have allotted.

### ***Asking Questions***

This Leader's Guide contains suggested discussion points and questions. Feel free to add your own. Ask open-ended questions whenever possible. Open-ended questions encourage discussion because they cannot be answered by simple "yes" or "no" responses. Examples of open-ended questions are:

- How can you use this technique in your own department?
- Tell me about a recent decision-making experience and how you felt about it.

Avoid asking closed-ended questions which can be answered by "yes" or "no," as these types of questions limit thinking and discourage discussion. Examples of closed-ended questions are:

- Were you able to relate this information to your own job?
- Are you comfortable using this technique?

Don't be concerned if you don't have the answers to all of the discussion questions in the workshop outline. Encourage the participants to share their ideas and experiences, and to answer their own questions whenever possible.

### ***Relating the Material to the Participants***

The more you can relate the course content and exercises to the participants' own work environments, the more relevant the training will become. Since you know them and what

types of decisions they make, try to build references to these job activities into your discussions.

For example, you might ask questions such as these:

- How could you have used this technique during the recent staff meeting we held to discuss the upcoming budget review?
- Why would this procedure be effective for someone who is required to present over-all group strategy?

### ***Running the Exercises***

The exercises in this workshop are designed to help the participants build their skills during and after the training. Urge them to be both honest and realistic as they complete them.

### ***Workshop Follow-Through***

We've all been to training sessions where the energy is high, the progress is tangible, and everyone leaves with new skills and enthusiasm for applying them. And we've all seen how the grind of daily activity can quickly take the edge off these new skills and return the participants to their old habits. Follow-up is the best way to prevent that from happening.

By placing the Abilene poster in your conference or training room, and by using the Skip the Trip note pads, participants can keep some of that good energy flowing. But you'll need more than that. Your managers will need to encourage honest opinions, and focus on how they manage agreement.

As you review this Leader's Guide, think about how you and your managers can follow up the training with hints, tips, and suggestions for honest and open decision-making. Exercise #5, Executive Recommendations, provides a way to develop principles, practices, and preventive measures that can be carried forward from the training room to your organization's meeting rooms.

What you as the facilitator can do to support workshop follow-through:

- Discuss the training objectives and workshop results with participants' supervisor(s).
- During the last activity (Exercise #5), ask a recorder to collect the worksheets and summarize the recommendations. Make sure this information is distributed to all participants and to their supervisors.
- Arrange and conduct a brief, 30-40 minute follow-up session two weeks after the initial session. The purpose of this meeting is to share progress and results, discuss obstacles encountered in attempting to make changes, etc.
- Replay the video as necessary to demonstrate the paradox to individuals who did not attend the training.

**What workshop participants can do to skip the trip**

- If meeting agendas are not widely used, start to use them. Add an “options” item to all group decisions on the agenda.
- Model the behaviors of positive confrontation, asking clarifying questions and generating options in meetings.
- Use Skip the Trip Post-It notes on meeting agendas and materials.
- Most important, respond honestly to questions about proposed project plans and other organizational issues.

***Time to Begin!***

Now, you're ready to begin your presentation of The Abilene Paradox Workshop. Complete your review of the materials, and enjoy the session. We're sure you'll gain some valuable insights about your own decision-making methods as you prepare for, and conduct the Workshop.

## LEADER'S SCRIPT

### WORKSHOP INTRODUCTION (5 MINUTES)


 SHOW SLIDE #1: Workshop Title

INTRODUCE yourself and make a brief comment about your own interest in this topic, as well as its importance to the overall success of the organization.

STATE the workshop's purpose to the group:

- *To better understand, through video demonstration and discussion, one form of group dynamics operating in a decision-making context.*
- *To develop personal and organizational strategies for managing agreement during group decision-making activities.*

*Usually, we think that conflict is what needs to be managed in group meetings and decision-making, and certainly it does. But as this workshop will demonstrate, sometimes we find ourselves in trouble due to mismanaged agreement.*

 SHOW SLIDE #2: Mismanaged Agreement

*Mismanaged agreement is unchecked agreement—agreement that has not been validated by an honest and open consensus of those involved.*

*Mismanaged agreement happens more often than we realize, it can have negative consequences, and with attention, it can be avoided.*

*Place the workshop in the context of other current training, ongoing management development, or a recent experience at the company that suggested a need for this program.*

## **Ground Rules**

Set ground rules for the workshop and cover them with the participants.

If the session's purpose is to debrief a failed decision-making process (e.g., a recent project decision that has failed) it may be necessary to set ground rules. For example, participants should avoid mentioning names, they should offer constructive feedback rather than critical comments, etc.

A second ground rule: Participation is strongly encouraged, but comments, responses, examples and stories should be kept focused and brief.

## **Logistics**

Review any logistical information the participants may need:

- Location of restrooms
- Approximate time for breaks
- Cell phones need to be turned off
- Refreshments (if applicable)
- Check to see if anyone will need to leave the session early, and if so, approximately when.

## **PARTICIPANT INTRODUCTIONS (20 MINUTES)**



NOTE: The purpose of building a short activity around the introductions is to establish an open atmosphere among the participants.

The workshop discusses personal communication habits and behaviors. This introduction activity lets participants see that others share their reasons for behaving certain ways when making decisions as a group, and helps them learn ways to make better decisions down the road.



SHOW SLIDE #3: Introductions

## **Introduce the Activity**

Ask the participants to introduce themselves, even if the members of the group already know one another.

SAY:

*Take no more than 30 seconds to state your name, department and:*

- *One reason you enjoy participating in group decision-making discussions, processes and meetings*
- *One thing about participating in group decision-making that makes you uncomfortable*
- *Whether you prefer making decisions solo, or in a group setting. (Don't explain your choice — just indicate it.)*



NOTE: Start the activity by presenting your own introduction covering these same issues. Then, allow participants a moment to think through their responses before beginning.

It might be useful to jot a few notes for yourself about each participant as they introduce themselves.

### ***Debrief the Activity***

Briefly comment on the responses after all the introductions are made.

Point out similarities in their responses. Many of the same things tend to make people feel comfortable or uncomfortable about participating in decisions.

- *Things we tend to enjoy:* A feeling of belonging to the team, the sense of making a contribution, having an opportunity to share our knowledge or demonstrate expertise, an opportunity to make a difference, etc.
- *Things that make us feel uncomfortable:* Not enough time, not enough information, being the newest member of the group, lack of clarity on why we were asked to participate, lack of available options.

**WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES (5 MINUTES)**

SAY:

*In today's session, we'll be addressing the topic of why it's sometimes difficult to voice our honest opinions when we work with others to make decisions. We'll be discussing the Abilene Paradox, a strange but all-too-common dynamic operating within many group decision-making processes.*

*We'll use video, discussion, and exercises to see how this process occurs in our own organization, and how we can work to prevent it from negatively affecting our success.*



SHOW SLIDE #4: Workshop Objectives

Review the workshop objectives. As much as possible, relate the objectives to the participant introductions.

SAY:

*This workshop is very much a personal skills workshop, even though we are discussing organizational issues.*

*First, I'd like to go through the objectives for this workshop. After completing this workshop, you will be able to:*

- 1. Understand the concept of "mismanaged agreement."*
- 2. Identify the warning signs and consequences of mismanaged agreement.*
- 3. Describe how your perceptions of risk and benefit influence your participation.*
- 4. Develop effective personal patterns of participation in group decision-making.*
- 5. Develop communication strategies to help you and your team make more honest and open agreements.*

### Workshop Sequence



SHOW SLIDE #5: Workshop Sequence

This slide orients participants to the coming activities and describes the progression of the workshop's exercises.

SAY:

- *We will look at previous experiences in group decision-making, and note, with the benefit of hindsight, the behaviors and patterns operating at the time.*
- *We will consider a current decision-making case and have the opportunity to check our thinking and assumptions.*
- *We will anticipate future decision-making opportunities, and look at ways to avoid making decisions that are counter-productive to our common purposes.*

### EXERCISE 1: A LOOK AT THE PAST (15 MINUTES)

SAY:

*Before we discuss the paradox in detail, I'd like you to look back to a previous experience. You'll be completing a worksheet and sharing comments with a partner. You will not need to turn in the worksheet for this exercise.*



SHOW SLIDE #6: Exercise 1 Directions



WORKSHEET: DIRECT the participants to complete the worksheet for Exercise #1, A Look at the Past on page 1 of their Workbook.

EMPHASIZE that the purpose of the exercise is to recall not only their group's decision-making process, but also their own thinking and behavior as a part of that process.

ALLOW about 5 minutes for them to complete the worksheet.

### ***Debrief and Discussion***

When the participants have completed the worksheet, ask them to share their responses with a partner.

ALLOW 5 minutes for this one-on-one discussion. Then, reconvene the group.

ASK:

- 1. Did anyone have a recent experience where it seemed as if individuals in the group wanted to go in one direction, but held back from expressing their opinions?*
- 2. In meetings, what non-verbal signs let you know that members are in agreement with an idea?*
- 3. What non-verbal signs let you know that members are not agreeing with an idea?*

### ***Possible answers:***

- Agreement: Attention focused on the leader, nodding heads, and eagerness to comment or contribute are actions that suggest excitement or genuine support for a proposal.
- Disagreement: Silence may suggest confusion or disagreement. People looking down at their notes, fidgeting with paperwork, avoiding eye contact with the leader, etc. may suggest a desire to withdraw from the discussion.

SAY:

*When you find yourself in the role of the discussion leader, you need to look for these signs and act accordingly, helping the group discuss the issues honestly and without risk.*

### **Summarize the exercise**

SAY:

- *Because group dynamics can have such a strong influence on our individual behavior, they are worth understanding.*
- *The quality of a group's decision-making is only as good as the openness, thoroughness, honesty, and creativity of the individuals participating.*
- *Factors that have nothing to do with the subject at hand, or the decision, can influence the direction of the discussion and the decisions ultimately made. Examples of these factors include our comfort level in the group, issues in our personal lives, or reporting relationships with the others in the group. This is the nature of group dynamics.*



NOTE: REMEMBER that the specifics of the Abilene Paradox have not been introduced at this point. They will be explored in greater detail after the first video segment.

**VIDEO PRESENTATION, PART ONE (20 MINUTES)****Introduce the Video**

We suggest running the video in two segments. Participants can take notes during the video on page 2 of their Workbook if they choose.

SAY

*We'll view the video presentation in two parts. The first segment introduces the Abilene Paradox. A paradox is an idea that opposes common sense, and yet, holds true; in this case, the paradox concerns people's unwillingness to disagree, and how that discomfort can influence a group's decisions.*

*The film begins with a true story about author Jerry Harvey's own family on a hot Texas afternoon in the late 1950's, while they were engaged in a game of dominos. Somehow, they wound up in the car on a hot and dusty trip to the cafeteria in Abilene. It was the first time that Dr. Harvey observed the group behaviors that he would later call the Abilene Paradox.*

*You'll probably identify with one or more of the characters that you'll see—and it's safe to say that at one time or another "we've all been on the road to Abilene."*

*Even though the first part of the video portrays a relatively simple social situation, we'll see later on that many of the characters' thinking patterns and behaviors carry over to other kinds of decision-making, with outcomes ranging from minor inconveniences to significant long-term consequences.*

**Run Video**

VIDEO

Run the first segment of the video (approximately 5 minutes).

*STOP the video after the group returns from Abilene and Jerry's father-in-law says he could have had a chance to beat Jerry at dominoes—right before the scene shifts to the Acme Company conference room.*

### **Video Debrief and Discussion**

Before you debrief the first segment, make sure that everyone understands what the Abilene Paradox is.



SHOW SLIDE #7: The Abilene Paradox

When groups take action in contradiction to what the members of the group silently agree they want or need to do.

CLARIFY that the key term here is “silently agree.” Members are in agreement, but for a variety of reasons they are not speaking out when they see that the group is heading in a direction other than what they prefer or think is the better course.

ALLOW 10–12 minutes for this discussion. Ask each of the following questions and discuss the responses from the group.

ASK:

- *Do any of the experiences you described in your first worksheet exercise—the decision-making meeting or process you recalled—resemble the scenario we just viewed?*
- *Why is it so difficult to disagree with what the group seems to be thinking?*
- *ASK FOR A SHOW OF HANDS: How many of you encounter situations in your team or group meetings where it's difficult to disagree? How many of you say this happens rarely? Occasionally? Often?*
- *COMMENT: In the last scene, we saw second-guessing, blaming, defensive words and postures. Would you say that in that scene, the characters were in conflict with one another? Why or why not?*

**Summarize and make key points**

CLARIFY, if needed, the relationship between the Paradox and the concept of mismanaged agreement.

The Paradox is a personal dynamic operating in group decisions — and often leads to the result of mismanaged agreement, which is the failure of a team and its leader to effectively make decisions.

SAY:

*The interaction we have just observed is not conflict. The issue is “mismanaged agreement.” Every member of Jerry Harvey’s group was probably in agreement that they would have had a better time if they had kept on doing what they were doing, rather than taking the trip to Abilene. And yet, they all went along for the ride.*

- *If no one really wanted to go, why did they all get in the car? Remember that it is the lack of logic that characterizes a paradox.*
- *While it might look like conflict, the blaming, defensiveness, and other behaviors that result from a bad decision—like the trip to Abilene—are really the signs of mismanaged agreement.*

**VIDEO PRESENTATION, PART TWO (25 MINUTES)****Transition to Second Video Segment**

SAY:

*Let’s continue with the video. The rest of the video presents two additional scenarios having consequences more significant than a pointless 106-mile road trip and a bad meal. Watch how the same dynamics apply, however.*



## VIDEO

RUN the remaining segment of the video, approximately 20 minutes.

**Debrief the Video**

ASK:

*Let's talk about the symptoms or signposts of a trip to Abilene.  
(We'll address the causes later.)*

*Besides not sharing their honest opinions or feelings, what did each set of characters DO or FAIL TO DO that contributed to their decision to "get in the car"?*

POSSIBLE RESPONSES: (ALLOW 5-10 minutes to discuss this question.)

- The characters assumed they were the only ones who were opposed to the idea (Project X, getting married).
- The characters had exaggerated concepts of what might happen to them. Their negative fantasies about the downside of speaking out were so strong that they blocked any consideration of the benefits of taking that action. They confused their fantasies with reality.
- The characters did not compare the risks of sharing their true opinions to the risks of moving ahead. They only focused on the risk of speaking up.



SHOW SLIDES #8-9: Characteristics of Groups on the Road

SAY:

*The video demonstrated several characteristics of groups caught in the Abilene Paradox. As we move through the next few slides, see which of these you recognize from the video or from your own experience.*

- *In private, individuals agree, or would agree if asked, about the nature of the problem.*
- *In private, individuals agree, or would agree if asked, about the steps required to deal with the problem—in other words, they agree on a solution.*
- *As a group, members fail to honestly communicate their beliefs.*
- *Decisions are made based on inaccurate “data.” Results are generally counterproductive.*
- *Because results are counterproductive, members experience frustration, anger and irritation with each other. They begin to distance themselves, seek scapegoats, or assign blame.*
- *The problem intensifies until the cycle is broken.*

## **EXERCISE #2: FIFTEEN REASONS (20 MINUTES)**

### ***Introduce Exercise 2***



SHOW SLIDE #10: Exercise 2 Directions

SAY:

*Now, let's take a quick check to see where we are as a group when it comes to our tendencies to go for a ride in the car. This activity should give us a better understanding of the causes behind trips to Abilene. Then a bit later, we'll move into a discussion of preventive measures.*



DIRECT the participants to turn to page 3 in their Workbooks, Fifteen Reasons Your Mind Finds to Take the Trip.

ENCOURAGE participants to be completely honest. ASSURE them they will not need to verbally share their responses with anyone, but their anonymous responses will be tabulated as part of a group poll.

ALLOW 3-4 minutes for the participants to check their three favorite (or most frequent) reasons.

Remind the participants to select only three reasons. They should then write the numbers of their three selected reasons on a blank sheet of paper (or index card) and hand them in.

### ***Debrief the Exercise***



Write the numbers 1-15 on the flip chart or white board, and use tally marks as a volunteer reads the choices from each sheet.



NOTE: An option for this scoring activity is to take the session break while you tally the responses.

Construct the group's Top Five List:

- Collect the anonymous response sheets or cards with each participant's top three reasons.
- Ask a volunteer to read the three numbers listed on each sheet.
- Record the number of selections for Reason #1, Reason #2, etc. on the flip chart or white board.
- Circle the five most frequently noted reasons.
- Review the list, starting with #5 and working toward #1 (the most often cited). FOCUS on the top three or four reasons on the list.

ASK the group for comments about their tendencies.

REINFORCE the five personal causes supporting the Abilene Paradox (Action Anxiety, etc.) by referring participants to page 12 in their Workbooks.

Give them a few minutes to review this list, and then, for each of the top five reasons on the board, identify which of these causes are most likely behind them.

SUGGEST that participants keep these in mind while completing the next few activities, and focus on the kinds of thinking that can be employed to counter these patterns.

### **BREAK (10 - 15 MINUTES)**

### **EXERCISE #3: A CURRENT DECISION (20 MINUTES)**

SAY:

*We've been discussing typical causes behind people's reluctance, in some group decision-making situations, to share their opinions, knowledge, and true feelings. Now we'll move into the kinds of thinking and planning you can do to build your resolve when necessary.*

### ***Benefits and Risk***

INTRODUCE the idea of **benefits and risk**.

ASK the group to recall how, in the video, each character's negative fantasies seemed to cloud their judgment, and prevent their thinking clearly about possible benefits.

At what point did the benefits of expressing honest opinions seem to outweigh the risk?

## POSSIBLE RESPONSES:

- For Jerry Harvey's foursome, honest opinions were not forthcoming until a frustration level peaked following the trip.
- On Project X and for Sue and George, the situations moved to the brink of disaster before someone finally spoke up.

POINT OUT that in both scenarios, characters were on the brink of disaster before coming to their senses. In general, this is not the preferred strategy.

**Introduce Exercise 3**

SAY:

*The next activity will help us transfer what we've seen and discussed so far to a current group decision-making situation. You'll be using a checklist-matrix that will guide you through an exercise weighing risk and benefit.*

*Keep in mind that this doesn't necessarily have to be a work-related scenario, but it should be a decision that is meaningful to you. (More than, for example, "where do we go for lunch today?")*



SHOW SLIDE #11: Exercise 3 Directions

**Run the Activity**

REFER the participants to Exercise #3: A Current Decision, on page 5 of the Participant Workbook.

Check for questions on the instructions.

ALLOW 8–10 minutes for the participants to complete the worksheet.

**Debrief the Activity**

CHECK for insights achieved.

ASK:

- *Did anyone discover something they weren't expecting to see in this analysis?*
- *Did anyone, for their particular case, find that not speaking up held more risk than voicing their opinion?*
- *Did anyone find that voicing their opinion held more risk?*



SHOW SLIDES #12-13: One Way or Another and Risk

Comment on how open, honest input to decision-making is vital at any level, in any business or organization.

SAY (Make these or similar points):

- *Throughout our personal and professional lives, we constantly need to check and balance benefit and risk. The magnitude of the benefits and risks may change with each situation, but the advantages of assessing them remain.*
- *Negative fantasies or perceived risk are one of the main reasons people "go along," holding back on expressing their reservations or opinions. These perceived risks can block clear thinking and acting.*
- *Risk is a part of life. The important thing is to have a handle on which risks are real, and which ones are fed by our negative fantasies.*

- *Remaining silent and going along with the group usually has consequences too, sometimes bigger ones than any form of action might hold. One consequence of not speaking out includes lowered self-esteem — a personal risk added to the professional risk of a bad decision.*
- *Remember — you were hired for your expertise and opinions! Have confidence in yourself and faith in the value of your ideas.*



NOTE: If you are using a longer workshop schedule (see page 4), use one or more of the following optional exercises now.

If you are using the standard workshop, move on to Exercise #4.

## OPTIONAL EXERCISES

### OPTIONAL EXERCISE A: MINIMIZING RISK (15 MINUTES)

Use this discussion to help the participants deal with issues surrounding the individual risk involved in speaking out at meetings.



If you decide to use this exercise, you may want to write the exercise questions on a flip chart before the workshop begins.

Participants should use the Note pages at the back of their Workbook to answer the exercise questions.

Allow 10 – 15 minutes for this discussion.

ASK:

- *Would you agree that it is part of the organization's (or the department's) role to help individuals make the best decisions they can make?*
- *A good discussion and decision-making environment would probably reduce the chances of groups going on trips to Abilene. How much of the responsibility for creating and maintaining this type of environment rests with the project or department leader?*
- *Is it each individual's responsibility to "positively confront" a potential road trip when they become aware of it? Why or why not?*

### OPTIONAL EXERCISE B: POSITIVE CONFRONTATION (35 MINUTES)

Use this activity to help the participants practice taking responsibility for speaking out, and to practice helping others do the same.

Allow 20-25 minutes for this activity and discussion.



NOTE: The objective of this exercise is to provide the participants with an opportunity to practice positive confrontation.

Before the workshop, think of a scenario that is similar to the Project X situation in the video — a decision that has been made and that is now — once again — on the table for discussion. *This should be a situation that is possible in your organization, but not an actual one.*



Create a handout describing the scenario, or write a description of it on a flip chart before the workshop begins.

In this exercise, the participants should imagine themselves as participants in a meeting like the one at the end of the film, where the R&D director admits that he was the one who submitted the suggestion to kill Project X.

The participants will be asked to make a risky statement or ask a question that involves speaking out against the prevailing way the group is heading.

### ***Introduce Optional Exercise B***

- This activity should be run in a single, large group.
- Choose one or two participants to serve as observers. They should take brief notes as the other participants make their comments. Observers should look for good examples of positive confrontation. (It's easier to use two observers so they can take turns recording the participant's comments. This will help the group keep moving).

SAY:

*I'm glad you could all attend this critical project meeting. The decisions made here will have significant consequences for our department and the organization.*

*Here's our situation:*

- *(Describe your scenario to the participants.)*
- *Take a minute or two to consider how you will intervene, raise concerns, or attempt to re-direct our group decision. You can pose a question to the group, make a statement of your belief, or otherwise try to influence the discussion. Each of your statements should take only a minute.*
- *You don't need to stand; you can intervene from your seats. Just do whatever it takes to make your confrontation most effective.*
- *As each person speaks, the rest of you can respond to them with eye contact, body language and expressions as appropriate to the statement. You do not need to verbally respond—awkward silence is both permissible and realistic.*

*Here are some examples of positive confrontation statements that someone could ask or say in a typical meeting like this one:*

- *Have we looked at how interest rates are going to affect this decision?*
- *Do we know enough about what our competitors are doing?*
- *Can we stick with this long enough to make it work?*
- *I've looked at the literature, and I have yet to see an article that supports the way we are doing this.*

*Here's what we'll do:*

- *I will look for volunteers or call upon some of you to “confront” the group with your question or opinion.*
- *As you make your statements or ask your questions, the observers will write down the effective confrontations they see.*

### **Debrief the Activity**

- ASK for participant comments. How did they feel as the confronter? How did they feel being confronted?
- ASK the observers to review their notes. Which comments or statements did the observers feel were most effective? What made them effective? Was it the words, the body language, the emotion behind the words?

SAY:

*GOOD JOB! It's not easy to stand up in front of your peers and disagree, but I hope you've seen that if your opinion is presented in a positive manner, it will receive the attention and respect it deserves!*

**OPTIONAL EXERCISE C: DECISION-MAKING AT A DISTANCE (20 MINUTES)**

Distance decision-making is becoming more and more common as organizations try to reduce costs and maximize employee efficiency. However, these new approaches, supported by high-speed Internet and telecommunications capability, add new factors to the decision-making process.

- What happens when we can all think in private and then make our opinions known?
- What happens when we can see decisions evolving as each long distance participant weighs in with their opinions?

Use this discussion to help participants develop methods to make honest and open decisions in teleconference, email, or groupware environments.

Allow 15-20 minutes for this discussion, depending on the nature of the group's work and how much time they spend working virtually with colleagues in other locations.

ASK:

- *What signs (non-verbal as well verbal) do you notice in face-to-face meetings that suggest whether members are in agreement or not in agreement with a proposal?*
- *What special challenges does this form of communication and group decision-making pose?*
- *What are some of the key differences that you've experienced between face-to-face meetings and distance discussions when decision-making?*
- *Are trips to Abilene more or less likely in this decision-making mode? Why?*
- *Does this form of decision-making offer potential advantages? What might they be and how can they be optimized?*
- *How can we as a group do a better job of "virtual" decision-making?*

## POSSIBLE RESPONSES:

- In on-line discussions and decisions, the influence of non-verbal behaviors, gestures, facial expressions, etc. is completely absent.
- Depending on the media, vocal qualities and cues (tone of voice) are also more difficult to detect.
- On-line discussions (e-mail and chat formats) “level” the discussion; it’s more difficult for certain personalities to dominate, and at the same time, easier for participants who might otherwise hold back to express their honest opinions.
- Teleconferences are tricky and require careful facilitation to allow everyone a turn. Depending on how well the participants know one another, constructive confrontation might be easier or more difficult.
- On-line written comments or serial document annotation may offer effective methods to solicit alternate opinions (like the suggestion box in the video).

**EXERCISE #4: SKIP THE TRIP*****Introduce Exercise 4***

SHOW SLIDE #14: Preventive Measures



SAY:

*While it’s always possible to turn the car around and head home, it’s much easier to avoid taking the trip in the first place!*

*One way to think about and develop remedies or preventive actions is to view them by their timing. What can we do at each stage of the decision-making process?*

- *Before meetings /while preparing for discussions*
- *During meetings or discussions*
- *After decisions have been made (before you arrive in Abilene)*

*You’ll have a chance to answer these questions in this exercise.*



SHOW SLIDE #15: Exercise 4 Directions

### **Run the Activity: Exercise #4**



- The participants should complete the worksheet for Exercise #4 on page 7 of the Workbook.
- Participants should work with a partner, but should write their mutual ideas in their own workbook.

Prompt the participants to quickly list several ideas under each cell, and to not worry about them being completely realistic, implementable, etc.

ALLOW 8-10 minutes for this activity.

IMPORTANT: After the participants appear to be finished, give this additional instruction.

SAY:

*Take just another two minutes or so to circle or otherwise indicate, on the worksheet, the ideas that:*

- *Appear to be the highest risk*
- *Appear to hold the greatest potential benefit*

### **Debrief the Activity**



FLIP CHART: Draw three columns and label them “High Risk,” “High Benefit/High Risk,” and “High Benefit.”

Ask each participant to share one high benefit or one high risk idea from their Exercise #4 worksheet. If ideas are both high risk and high benefit, list these in the middle column. Involve as many of the participants as possible.

Leave these notes visible for the group to refer to during Exercise #5.

### **Debrief the Activity**

SLIDES 16-21 provide suggestions for what we can do to Skip the Trip Before, During and After a decision is made. These ideas supplement those generated in Exercise #4, and should not be taken as “the right or best ways.”



SHOW SLIDE #16: Ways to Skip the Trip – Before Meetings

- COMMENT that some of the measures need to be applied by the entire group, while individuals can initiate others.
- Ask the group if they see difficulties in implementing any of these actions.



SHOW SLIDE #17-19: Ways to Skip the Trip – During Meetings

- Ask the group if they see difficulties in implementing any of these actions.



SHOW SLIDE #20-21: Ways to Skip the Trip – After a Decision Has Been Made and What You Can Do

- Ask the group if they see difficulties in implementing any of these actions.

DISTRIBUTE the Reminder Cards. Ask the participants to read through the Skip the Trip side of the card.

### **EXERCISE #5: EXECUTIVE RECOMMENDATIONS (40 MINUTES)**

In this activity, the participants will prepare a memo on Executive Recommendations for Improved Group Decision-Making to the organization's president, based on the results of this training session.



NOTE: If you have 12 or more participants, break them into two groups for this activity. If the full group is less than 12, complete this exercise as a single group.

Exercise #5 is an important activity. The objective of this exercise is to develop recommendations they can implement, while at the same time providing an opportunity to practice their new meeting and discussion skills.

Allow 20-30 minutes for this exercise and discussion.

### **Introduce Exercise 5**

EXPLAIN that this final exercise gives participants a chance to apply what they've learned, and to make a real difference for their team, workgroup, or organization in future group decision-making.

DIRECT participants to form groups of 5-7 people, with a minimum group size of 5. Try not to exceed three groups, even if the groups have to go larger.



SHOW SLIDE #22: Exercise 5 Directions

REVIEW the instructions on the slide.

- Each group should **select a leader**. The leader will report their group's recommendations to the larger group using the Executive Recommendations form (page 8 of the Workbook) at the end of the activity.
- Each group should assign an observer. Observers will avoid participating in the group discussion, but will note their key observations on the Observation Record form (page 9 of the Workbook) and report on the group's process during the activity debrief.

### **Run the Activity**



REFER the participants to the worksheets provided on Workbook pages 8 - 10. ALLOW them a minute or two to review the worksheets.

CHECK for any questions before beginning the exercise.

Allow 15-20 minutes for the groups to discuss the issues and record their recommendations on page 8 of the workbook.

Observers should use page 9 to record their reactions.



NOTE: Participants should leave page 10 blank at this time.

### **Debrief the Activity**

The first portion of the debrief focuses on the participant's personal reaction to the process.



- ASK the participants to immediately and individually record their impressions of the meeting on the Personal Process Record form on page 10 of the Workbook.
- Allow just a few minutes for them to complete page 10. These opinions should not be shared with their group.

The next stage of the debrief should involve the full group, and may lead to important follow-through activities to be completed after the session. This portion of the debrief should examine both the content and process of the group discussions.



#### **FLIP CHART**

##### **Content Issues**

- ASK each group leader to report their best suggestion for individuals and their top three ideas for the organization. They should briefly describe why these recommendations would make a lasting difference in how the organization makes decisions.
- Allow several minutes for the group leaders to report their recommendations and write them on the white board or flip chart.
- Ask the full group for comments on the posted recommendations.

##### **Process Issues**

ASK the observers to give short, 1-2 minute reports on the process characteristics of their meeting by covering the questions on their observation forms.



NOTE: You may want to ask for a volunteer to copy the full group's decision-making recommendations and compile them for distribution (after the workshop) to each member of the group and to upper management. If workshop participants are from different organizations, these summaries can be sent by mail or email.

**WRAP-UP AND FOLLOW-THROUGH (20 MINUTES)**

Summarize the main points in the Workshop.

DISPLAY the *Skip the Trip* poster: point out the road signs on the way to Abilene, and the signs that you're heading towards an honest and thoroughly discussed decision. The participants have a copy of this poster in the back of their Workbooks.



SHOW SLIDE #23: What's Behind the Paradox?

Make the following points to the participants. Ask them to add their own major findings from the workshop.

***What's Behind the Paradox?***

SAY:

- *Action Anxiety is a common occurrence when we are asked to place our thoughts and opinions at risk in front of a group of our peers or supervisors.*
- *Negative Fantasy or perceived risk happens to all of us—we tend to see the potential downsides—because they entail risk—more so than the potential benefits of speaking out.*
- *Risk must always be weighed—both the risk of action and the risk of inaction. Our unwillingness to take risks may well bring about the negative consequences we so fear.*
- *Fear of Separation is constant for all people. We enjoy groups, and worry about being excluded from them.*
- *Confusion of Fantasy and Reality is difficult to avoid—What we imagine will go wrong if we say what's in our heart becomes more real to us than the far more likely disaster that will result from going along with the crowd.*

**Signs that a Group has arrived in Abilene**

SHOW SLIDE #24: Signs a Group has Arrived

SAY:

*Some of the signs of mismanaged agreement include:*

- *Deteriorating project status or failure to meet objectives.*
- *Individuals or sub-groups of the larger group suspect that the proposed or decided direction is a mistake.*
- *Blaming and scapegoating of other team participants, the company, and outside factors seemingly beyond the group's control—or your personal control.*

**Skip the Trip!**

DISTRIBUTE and discuss handouts:

- Hand out *Skip-the-Trip* note pads and suggest that participants use them when commenting on memos, planning documents, and other group materials.
- Ask the participants to look at the front side of their *Reminder Card* and review the suggestions for how to Skip the Trip on future projects.
- Have them look at the back of the *Reminder Card*. Ask them to identify two things they will do over the next two weeks to prevent unnecessary trips, and write these actions in the space provided on the back of the card. Below each of these, have them write the benefit of taking this action, and then sign at the bottom of the card.

ASK for volunteers to share their agreements. Allow a few minutes for this

activity before you end the workshop.

***Check for final thoughts, impressions, concerns***

CONFIRM with the volunteer selected earlier that the Executive Recommendations worksheets from Exercise 5 will be summarized and distributed to the participants and their supervisors.

THANK EVERYONE for their participation. Wish them good luck in all their future decision-making activities, and many fun-filled evenings of dominoes on the porch.

## **PARTICIPANT MATERIALS**

## EXERCISE 1: A LOOK AT THE PAST

**MISMANAGED AGREEMENT:** *The failure to do what's needed to ensure that people are in agreement for the right reasons.*

Think of a previous group decision-making process in which you participated, one that you recall in some detail. Describe it briefly.

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1. Were you one of the first to speak up and voice your opinion? If so, how did you do it?

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2. What special skill, authority, or perspective did you bring to the table? Did you share that expertise during the meeting?

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3. Did others express their opinions? Did your opinion change while you listened to other opinions?

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4. Did you feel the level and amount of discussion was adequate or proportional to the importance of the decision? If not, how could this have been improved?

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5. Did the group's decision turn out to be a good one? Why?

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6. Looking back, what, if anything, would you have done differently?

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## NOTES ON THE VIDEO

### THE ABILENE PARADOX

*When groups take action that contradicts what the members of the group silently agree they want or need to do.*

This anecdotal video explores the paradox of mismanaged agreement, and how it relates to decision-making within the organization. It is based on a trip taken by a family to Abilene, Texas—a trip that no one in the group really wants to take.

How many times has your organization moved in a direction that you disagreed with? How many times have project teams come to an impasse that reveals everyone's lack of enthusiasm for the original undertaking? How many seemingly solid decisions in fact turn out to be wrong turns and dead ends that cost both time and money? Each of these may represent an unwanted trip to Abilene—a trip that no one really wanted to take, but for some reason, the group chose to take anyway.

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### CHARACTERISTICS OF GROUPS ON THE ROAD

- Individuals agree, in private, about the nature of the problem.
- Individuals agree, in private, about suitable steps to a solution.
- Once in a group, individuals fail to communicate their concerns, opinions, and reservations.
- Decisions are made based on inaccurate “data.”
- Members experience frustration, anger, and irritation with each other.
- The problem intensifies until the cycle is broken.

## EXERCISE #2: FIFTEEN REASONS YOUR MIND FINDS TO TAKE THE TRIP

The reasons listed below are excuses we all use for not speaking out when we have concerns about a decision—concerns that can range from slight uncertainty to strong objection.

Pick your three favorites from the list—the most likely or most frequent reasons that move through your mind when you are making decisions. Circle the numbers of your three choices.

On a blank sheet of paper, write the numbers of your three choices and give this page to the workshop leader.

1. I'm the newest member of the group. I haven't earned my voice at the table yet.
2. I don't care enough about the issue under discussion to risk offending anyone. It's more important to me to avoid making waves.
3. I care a lot about this issue, but I care more about keeping my job. I'm going to keep my mouth shut!
4. If I express my real opinions on this issue, someone will give me an extra assignment, or put me in charge of finding alternatives. I can't handle one more thing on my desk right now.
5. I'm not the expert. Why would I know more about this than the rest of those sitting at the table?
6. I shouldn't be at this meeting in the first place. Who put me on the distribution list, anyway?
7. We've been through this a dozen times. I'm tired of it. Let's decide something—anything—and just move on!
8. The project sponsor has put so much effort into this proposal, I don't want to hurt her feelings.
9. If this decision moves ahead as is, there's a good chance my budget will increase. I might be able to add those two part-time assistants I need.
10. Everyone at this table remembers the last time I disagreed. It created a delay in the implementation schedule, and after all that, it turned out to be a non-issue.

11. It's really up to my boss. That's what they pay him the big bucks for.
12. Am I the only one awake at this meeting? I wish the others would learn to participate and be more accountable for decisions that impact their departments.
13. Whatever. (as in, what-EH-ver).
14. Sure, it would be great to have more data. I know we're missing some. But we can say that about any decision. Hopefully, next time, we'll remember to collect the rest of it before this point in the schedule.
15. I'm good with the details. But no one in this group wants to hear about MY problems or concerns with the details at this point. I'll wait until later.

## EXERCISE #3: A CURRENT DECISION

- Briefly describe a current decision in which you are a participant or that you are in a position to influence: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What would you really like to say about the pros and cons of this issue? If the decision were solely up to you, what would you do? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What might keep you from speaking up? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Write a brief response in each of the cells below related to the decision and what will happen if you speak up or withhold your honest opinion.

	If you choose to SPEAK UP	If you choose NOT TO SPEAK UP
What is the BEST thing that could happen?		
What is the WORST thing that could happen?		
Is the BEST OR WORST THING MOST LIKELY to happen?		
What is the RISK?		
Can you AFFORD the risk?		

5. What help would you need from others to say what you want to say? \_\_\_\_\_

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6. How could you support others in making their opinions known to the group as a whole?

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## EXERCISE #4: WAYS TO SKIP THE TRIP

Working with a partner and using brief notes, list several ways to “skip the trip” at each phase of the decision-making timeline: before, during, and after decisions have been reached. Use ideas from the video, from this training session’s discussions, or brainstorm new ones.

Be sure to think about good questions to ask of your decision-making group at each point in the process. Enter these in the matrix.

	Things that individuals can do or ask	Things that organizations, departments or work units can do or ask
BEFORE meetings or while preparing for discussions		
DURING meetings and discussions		
AFTER decisions are made		

### ***As the group leader...***

If I am serving in the position of “leader” for this process, what other methods and strategies should I be employing to ensure that my group skips the trip?

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## EXERCISE #5: EXECUTIVE RECOMMENDATIONS

**Directions:** As a group, fill in the blanks in this memorandum prepared for the head of your organization. Following your meeting, your group leader will report your ideas to the full group.

**To:** President Smith and the Executive Management Team

**FROM:** The Task Force for Better Decision-Making

Thank you for the opportunity to prepare our recommendations for improved group decision-making. We have carefully examined typical causes and characteristics behind instances of mismanaged agreement. We have determined that if a number of steps are implemented, both on the organizational and individual employee level, progress will be assured.

Here are our recommendations. Our committee feels these recommendations are realistic, achievable within a two-month time frame, and can be accomplished with minimal impact on the current year's budget.

### At the organization level:

The highest priority action our company/department can make would be to: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

The second most important action our company/department can take would be to: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

As a third action, we recommend: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### At the individual level...

Along with these organizational changes, individuals will be encouraged to take the following actions: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

As incentives or rewards for individuals, we recommend: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Respectfully submitted,**

*The Task Force for Better Decision-Making*

## EXERCISE #5: OBSERVER'S RECORD

**Directions:** If you are the observer for your group, fill in this form as you watch the discussion. After the groups present their findings, you will be asked to present your observations to the full group.

How would you describe the decision-making approach taken in the discussion: random, highly structured, or somewhere between? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What kinds of things did the leader say to encourage participation? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

How did participants interject their ideas? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### ***Notes about the Participants***

Did you observe any risk-taking? For example, did you note people "going the extra mile" to ensure that others understood what they were saying? Or perhaps, challenging assumptions the group was making? Describe several of these risks. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Were options generated? Describe a few. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Were impacts or consequences discussed? Describe a few. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What methods were ultimately used to make decisions about the priorities? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## EXERCISE #5: PERSONAL PROCESS RECORD

**Directions:** Answer the questions on this form honestly and accurately. These answers will not be shared with the group.

1. What did I do differently during this meeting that represents a change from the way I usually participate in group decisions? \_\_\_\_\_

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2. Did I feel a sense of responsibility for the outcome of this discussion? \_\_\_\_\_

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3. How did I contribute? \_\_\_\_\_

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4. Did I hold back? \_\_\_\_\_

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5. How do I feel about the results? \_\_\_\_\_

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## BACKGROUND FOR THE WORKSHOP

**Mismanaged agreement** occurs when we, as participants in a group decision, passively go along without communicating our reservations or opinions to the group. There can be a variety of reasons for this behavior: the desire to be seen as a team player, reluctance to disturb the group's tranquility or relationships, insufficient preparation or information for making the decision, or anxiety about the validity of our opinions.

Frequently, others share our concerns but are reluctant to voice them, each fearing they are the only dissenter. By failing to accurately communicate our reservations, we lead one another into misperceiving the group's true consensus. Group decisions based on inaccurate individual perceptions are frequently contrary to the group's true goals and objectives.

We can **skip the trip** to Abilene altogether if we address the reality of each situation. Individuals must calculate the real risks, both to themselves and to the organization, of action versus inaction. Because the dynamics of the Abilene Paradox are based on agreement among group members, positive or constructive confrontation in a group setting is particularly effective.

There are a number of **strategies** that can be employed to forestall a trip, or to turn the car around, if the group suspects that Abilene lies ahead. Having agreements up-front on how to agree will support participants in the decision-making processes. Each person who "calls" a meeting or promotes a specific point of view must own up to their position without attributing beliefs or feelings to others, and then be open for feedback. What's needed is an organizational atmosphere that promotes alternative viewpoints and encourages people to express their concerns and reservations. In this type of environment, anxieties are reduced and negative fantasies run a short course.

Where the problem involves real conflict rather than mismanaged agreement, confrontation leads to public examination of the situation. Properly managed, such debates can be the basis for creative problem solving.

## THINGS TO CONSIDER

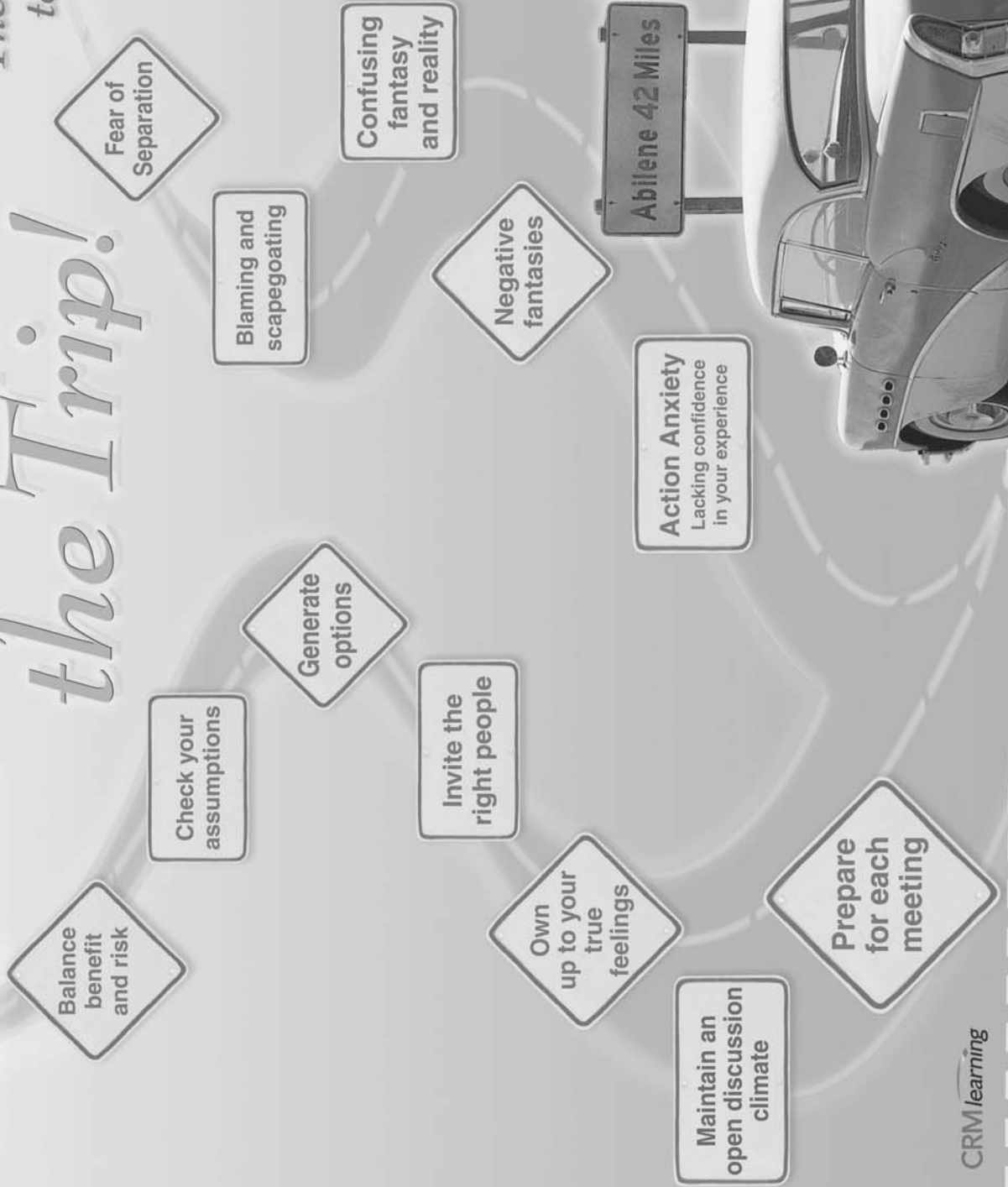
To understand the Abilene Paradox, we must come to grips with a number of psychological principles from which it draws its power.

1. The first principle is **action anxiety**—an intense uneasiness created when we think about acting in accordance with what we believe needs to be done. Action anxiety occurs as we anticipate the results of taking action, and the results we foresee are negative instead of positive.
2. **Negative fantasies** or **perceived risk** are visualizations of harmful effects resulting from our actions, rather than improvements to the situation. They provide an excuse for not taking responsible action. The R&D director's negative fantasy is that he will be fired. Sue and George's negative fantasy is that her mother will die of a heart attack if Sue does not go through with the wedding.
3. One might think that the fear of the unknown contributes to the Abilene Paradox. Most likely, the real operating factor is our **fear of separation**. According to Professor Harvey, we fear the label of “non-team player” which brings with it the fear of separation, alienation, and loneliness—all things we know very well and prefer to avoid.
4. The **real risk** associated with any situation is usually not the same as our negative fantasies or perceived risk. We can never play it completely safe, because real risk is a part of life, both in business and at home. But when we are afraid to accept real risk as one of life's givens, we often take a trip to Abilene, and thereby take on a far greater risk—the risk of mismanaged agreement, misdirected effort, and missed opportunities.
5. Finally, there is the **confusion of fantasy and reality**. We have a tendency to give negative fantasies and perceived risk more weight than they deserve. What we imagine will go wrong if we say what's in our heart seems more real to us than the more likely disaster that often results from going along with the crowd.

★ **Project Success**  
Goals Achieved

# Skip the Trip!

*The Road* ●  
*to Abilene*



## COMPANION VIDEOS FROM CRM LEARNING

### EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

*Emotional Intelligence* (EI) shows how forward-looking organizations such as Kaiser Permanente, State Street Bank, and Nichols Aluminum are accessing the power of emotions to create more productive teams and team leaders. Viewers will come away with specific areas of improvement on which to focus and a step-by-step approach to developing the required emotional competencies to bring more creativity, energy and intuition to their work, whatever the industry or field.

### TEAMBUILDING: WHAT MAKES A GOOD TEAM PLAYER

This video offers the key to building teams that your organization can depend on. To thrive in today's business climate, organizations depend on teams to develop new products and techniques, achieve cost reductions, improve quality, increase productivity and solve problems. This requires that *teams*, and the members of teams, achieve quality outcomes faster and more effectively than ever before. That's the goal of this insightful video program, which focuses on the team player as the cornerstone of a productive and successful team — and how team players can complement, challenge and inspire one another to new performance heights.

### GROUPTHINK

This program uses real-life examples, such as the space shuttle Challenger disaster, to provide a thought-provoking look at group decision-making, particularly the importance of soliciting input from all team members and helping individuals speak their true feelings in group situations.

### LEADERSHIP AND SELF-DECEPTION

Would you be surprised to learn that self-deception is the #1 obstacle to organizational effectiveness? It's true. This revolutionary training program from CRM Learning, based on the best-selling book by The Arbinger Institute, teaches us that self-deception is the problem of not being able to see the role you play in the problems that you face. Through the re-enacted true story of a 19<sup>th</sup> Century physician who was willing to consider his contribution to a high mortality rate among his patients, participants in this workshop will come to understand how self-deception prevents us from seeing the obvious solution to some of our biggest workplace issues, and gain the skills needed to analyze and solve problems, *at their core*.

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