

THE ABILENE PARADOX

A WORKSHOP ON INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY AND GROUP DECISION-MAKING

BASED ON THE FILM THE ABILENE PARADOX


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PARTICIPANT WORKBOOK

LEADER'S GUIDE WRITTEN BY SKILLBUILDERS, INC.

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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.

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

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

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

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?

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

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

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.

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? _____

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

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?

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? _____

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

3. How did I contribute? _____

4. Did I hold back? _____

5. How do I feel about the results? _____

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!

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.

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

