

Revisiting the Abilene Paradox: A Reflection on Group Dynamics

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In 1988, George Washington University professor Jerry Harvey wrote the book *The Abilene Paradox*. Today the book and a video based on it are still being used to train employees in all types of organizations.

The strength of the message is why the book is still viable in today's business market. It provides insights into, among other issues, why people make bad decisions, why group think often pushes us in the wrong direction, why conflict often erupts in groups and between two people and why organizations struggle to be competitive.

The central theme in the Abilene Paradox is a story told by Harvey of a how he spent a hot July day with his family in Coleman Texas in the late 1950s. According to Harvey, the temperature was 104 degrees, the wind was blowing the Texas topsoil around, and their car was a non-air-conditioned 1958 Buick. As he and his wife, mother-in-law and father-in-law sat around on the back porch sipping cold lemonade, his father-in-law made the sudden announcement, "Let's get in the car and go to Abilene and have dinner at the cafeteria." Harvey's internal reaction was not a receptive one, however, his wife and ultimately his mother-in-law agreed. Not wanting to be the only dissenting voice, he also reluctantly agreed. The four-hour, 106 mile roundtrip trip was a disaster with excruciating heat and dust and poor food quality at the cafeteria.

Upon returning to the house, the group made an extraordinary discovery. No one really wanted to go to Abilene in the first place! Each had simply agreed because they thought the others in the group wanted to go. As a result, they all end up brooding and accusing the others of wanting to go.

The Abilene Paradox plays itself out in households and organizations throughout the world everyday. I believe that in many cases it is because many people are a product of their environment. They learn behavior as children and repeat it as adults. Think for a moment on the types of statements that you hear adults use with children in many situations:

- Shut up and listen to me
- Children should be seen and not heard
- If you can't say something nice; don't say anything at all

All of these statements may be said in good intention – to get children to listen and pay attention so that they get needed information or to help them build stronger interpersonal relationships; however, the long-term impact of such teachings on adult relationships and in the workplace can be negative. If people do not speak up for whatever reason when asked for an opinion or they do not offer ideas out of fear of reprisals, everyone potentially loses. This is true when interacting with a family member, friend, co-worker, or supervisor.

Just as in Harvey's story, when people set off on a journey or take a course of action that is done to please others even though they do not wholeheartedly support or believe in it, the end result will likely be failure or reduced effectiveness and efficiency. More importantly, relationships could be strained and affected long term.

One of the biggest challenges faced by managers, leaders, and parents is to effectively manage agreement within their group. Often when a leader or parent has a strong-willed type of personality, others will give in to their desires or accept suggestions as "this is the way we will do it." Even in situations where the leader or parent is more democratic in his or her approach, some people will consent simply because they think that the boss or parent wants it done that way. This could again be learned behavior based on their childhood environment or their past workplace experiences (e.g. a dominant parent or caregiver or a former autocratic boss).

The keys to overcoming the Abilene Paradox are to learn effective interpersonal communication skills, strive to better understand behavioral styles in people, and to practice giving regular positive feedback, expressing ideas freely and diplomatically challenging comments or suggestions made by other, when appropriate.

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