

The Abilene paradox

When not rocking the boat may sink the boat

by Dr. Hannah Rose

Have you ever found yourself in a brainstorming session at work, where everyone ends up agreeing on a less-than-ideal course of action? The Abilene paradox describes this unfortunately common situation where a group of people agree to an idea, despite most of them not fully believing that it is the best decision.

Although it may seem surprising that several people might pursue something that few of them truly have faith in, the phenomenon has a simple explanation: it's mainly caused by a fear of challenging the status quo. Learning to identify and manage the Abilene paradox is essential to avoid costly group decisions.

A family trip gone wrong

The Abilene paradox was first described by Jerry B. Harvey in his 1974 article *The Abilene Paradox: The Management of Agreement*. Harvey, a professor of management science at the George Washington University, D.C., was spending time with his in-laws during a heatwave in Texas. When his father-in-law suggested going for dinner in Abilene, 53 miles away, Harvey went along with the plan as his wife and mother-in-law also both agreed to making the trip.

Later, all four returned home hot and irritated, with Harvey's mother-in-law admitting that she always thought Abilene was a terrible idea and would rather have stayed at home. Harvey and his wife then declared that they had not wanted to go either, but had agreed to it to avoid rocking the boat when everyone else had seemed keen. Even Harvey's father-in-law said he had not really wanted to travel in the unairconditioned car. He explained that he had only suggested the trip as he was worried his guests were getting bored.

Harvey went on to coin this occurrence the Abilene paradox, in which there is a failure to effectively manage agreement. At the time, most managerial advice was focused on how to better manage conflict. Instead, Harvey argued that in modern organizations, learning how to deal with agreement was more pressing than the management of conflict.

The Abilene paradox can have terrible consequences. The 1986 NASA shuttle tragedy, in which all seven crew members lost their lives, is such an example. After several delays and launch cancellations, managers were desperate to launch the shuttle. As a result, the group collectively disregarded warnings from engineers about the risks associated with a launch in cold weather. With millions of viewers watching live on TV, the shuttle broke apart within 73 seconds of launching.

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The Abilene paradox is an important topic of research in social psychology. The power of social conformity can persuade us to agree to the perceived general consensus and can lead to extremely poor group decisions.

The Abilene paradox at work

While numerous studies have examined the management of conflict and disagreement in organizations, far less is understood about managing agreement. In business, multiple decisions need to be made each day, and failure to agree can lead to delays or increasing costs.

However, Vincent Bagire of Makerere University Business School stressed that "a serious gap arises in the agreed decision when team members individually do not agree with the group decision." Bagire also explored that when decisions are not truly backed or agreed to, individuals and organizations

are at risk of making “wasteful, costly and at times disastrous” decisions.

The Abilene paradox can lead you to believe that the “rule by committee” is superior to your own opinion on a matter. If all of your colleagues appear to have an opposing view to yours, you might assume that they must all be correct. This can make it difficult to object.

Failure to speak up will be even more common if team members feel that they have been disenfranchised. Employees may feel disempowered from speaking up or have concerns that disagreeing will put their position at risk.

This can lead to the conviction that they must agree with the group despite the decision going against what they believe to be correct. When individuals feel they cannot put forward an argument, the company is less likely to explore alternative options, which can lead to less creativity.

Group mentality can also make people feel absolved of responsibility for a decision. Going along with what the group has voted on may lead some members of a team to feel that the decision had little to do with them. As you can imagine, this lack of accountability can have negative effects on the business.

Managing the Abilene paradox

The Abilene paradox may occur in your professional or personal life. It’s an insidious phenomenon that can be hard to spot, precisely because it arises from a fear of speaking up. The following strategies may be helpful in both recognizing the paradox and limiting its potential for damage:

Foster a safe environment. Psychological safety is paramount to avoiding the Abilene paradox.

Without it, team members may remain quiet and nominally agree with the rest of the group rather than risk looking like an outsider. However, when people live or work in a setting that is psychologically safe, they will feel more comfortable about speaking up or expressing an opinion that differs from the status quo. Asking team members to create a personal manual is a simple way to foster a safe environment that is conducive to open communication.

Make space for honest discussions. Instead of waiting for those conversations to happen, make sure there is a time for these to be held, which will ensure that the final decision is based on a review of diverse perspectives. Simply booking half an hour for an open forum where all thoughts are fair play can help mitigate the Abilene paradox.

Be transparent in addressing feedback. As a manager, there will be times when opinions are voiced that you disagree with. It is helpful to offer feedback to team members whose suggestions or views are not taken on board, to explain the rationale behind the final decision. This should provide confidence that their opinion was still considered, so that they feel able to share their views again in future.

As you can see, the Abilene paradox can lead to costly decisions. To promote a culture where people feel able to raise concerns or opinions that differ from those of others, it is crucial to foster a psychologically safe environment, promote honest discussions, and give clear feedback. And don’t forget to lead by example: if you feel safe to do so, speak up next time you disagree with a group decision!