

Abilene Paradox

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

This subject is really old news, but it bears repeating because the condition runs rampant in any organization, even today, and we often fail to see it happening right under our noses. The title is so old, there are probably many readers who have not even heard of it. The lesson revealed is as applicable today as it was when management expert Jerry B. Harvey first wrote about it way back in 1974.

Jerry told a story of a family sweltering in the heat in Coleman, Texas, on a Sunday afternoon http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Abilene_Paradox. The group of four were sweating out the afternoon by playing dominos on the front porch and drinking lemonade. The father made idle conversation, asking if anyone wanted to take a 50 mile drive to Abilene to eat at the cafeteria there. The mother indicated it would be a nice idea, and the two adult children went along with it because they each thought the parents wanted to go.

It turned out that none of the individuals truly wanted to go, but they each agreed to the idea for the sake of the others. The trip was miserable, with 108 degree heat and no air conditioning. When the family returned, someone said it would have been better to skip the whole thing. All of a sudden all four people realized that nobody had really wanted to go, but none of them had the courage to challenge the idea. Bingo, you have the Abilene Paradox, where a group of people actually do something that not a single person in the group really wants to do.

In his blog this week, Charlie Green <http://trustedadvisor.com/trustmatters/selling-to-mr-spock> recalled that Mr. Spock, the half-man, half-Vulcan in the *Star Trek* Series once uttered, "it is curious how often you humans manage to obtain that which you do not want." - Mr. Spock in "Errand of Mercy."

You are probably saying, We would never get caught with that kind of logic today with our rapid communication and constant texting. Don't be so sure. Actually the mentality to "go along to get along" is alive and well in any group of people today. The irony is that one prime reason the Abilene Paradox flourishes has to do with teamwork. People

do not like to go against what they believe is the will of the majority, so they clam up. By not objecting themselves, they become part of the silent majority of people who would rather stay home but are too shy to speak their mind until it is too late.

Lest you think the situation is not common today, keep your eyes open and you will see The Abilene Paradox in full operation nearly every day. Here are some examples.

A scout troop is on a canoe trip, and someone suggests they go to the next lake before quitting for the night. Everyone is exhausted from paddling all day, but nobody wants to admit to being tired, so they all portage over to the next lake and paddle another 3 hours before breaking for the night. None of the scouts seem to be in a good mood when they reach their campsite.

A husband and wife are seen at a car dealer discussing what color car to purchase. In reality, neither of them wants the model they are considering, but both believe the other person does, so they argue over the color hoping that argument will cause them not to get the car they think the other person wants.

A supervisor is convinced a project is going nowhere, but believes the boss is enamored of the project, so the supervisor keeps plugging along in a desperate struggle to make the project a success. In meetings, everyone expresses optimism that the project is turning a corner, when there is a ton of evidence that the project is never going to make it.

Someone on a design team suggests they put the volume control on the side rather than the front. Most people realize it will be awkward for customers to deal with the volume because the carrying case covers up the control, but nobody has the courage to tell the head designer of the conflict. Since the design team is not complaining, the head designer believes they all want the volume control on the side and allows it go out as a flawed product.

A young couple decides to get married because each of them believes the other's parents are sold on the idea of them as a married couple and it would "break their hearts" if they split up. The couple actually is not even in love, but they go along with the entire wedding preparation because neither of them has the gumption to ask if they really should get married.

The list of examples goes on in hundreds of small and large charades every day in organizations of all types and sizes. How would it be possible to break the pattern so that people will not spend time and money in ways the individuals involved do not want?

The secret lies in having a culture where it is not only OK to challenge the conventional wisdom, it is encouraged. If everyone knew there would be no penalty for sharing his or

her preference openly, then the stigma of the Abilene Paradox would be broken. It often takes only one challenge to bring down the entire house of cards.

For example, if the mother had decided she would rather not drive to Abilene and back for three hours in a hot car just to have a poorly-cooked meal, the other three people would have backed out in a heartbeat, because nobody really wanted to go.

Next time your team is in tepid agreement over some issue, simply say, "Let's get real. Does everyone really want to go to Abilene on this issue?" If one person has the courage to express his or her true feelings, then at least a democratic vote rather than peer pressure can govern the course of action.

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