

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?

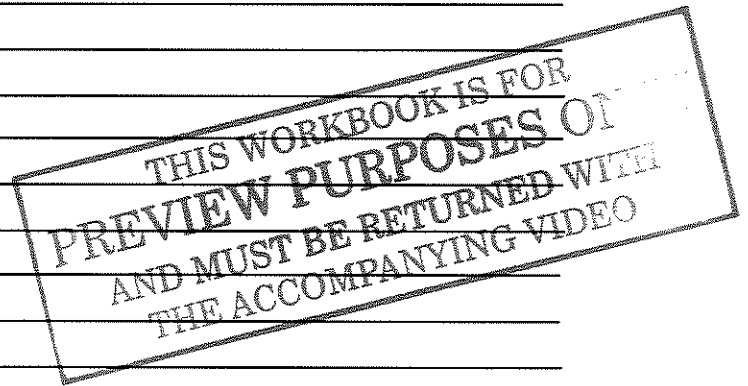
NOTES ON THE VIDEO

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.

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