

COPING WITH AGREEMENT IN ORGANIZATIONS

THE ABILENE PARADOX - 1

Excerpted from "Team Building", Chapter 12, Overcoming Unhealthy Agreement, by William Dyer, Addison-Wesley, 1987. Originally printed in an article by Jerry Harvey in the publication "Organizational Dynamics", AMACOM Press, 1974. The Abilene Paradox stated simply is: "Organizations frequently take actions in contradiction of what they really want to do and therefore defeat the very purposes of what they are trying to achieve." A major corollary of the Abilene Paradox is: "The inability to manage agreement is a major source of dysfunction in organizations."



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THE ABILENE PARADOX - 2

July Sunday afternoons in Coleman, Texas (pop 5,607) are not exactly winter holidays. This one was particularly hot - 104 degrees as measured by the Walgreen's Rexall Ex-Lax Temperature Gauge located under the tin awning that covered a rather substantial "screened-in" back porch. In addition, the wind was blowing the fine-grained West Texas topsoil through the house. The windows were closed, but dust filtered through what were apparently cavernous but invisible openings in the walls..

"How could dust blow through closed windows and solid walls?" one might ask. Such questions betray more of the provincialism of the reader than the writer. Anyone who has ever lived in West Texas wouldn't bother to ask. Just let it be said that the wind can do a lot of things with topsoil when more than thirty days have passed without rain.

But the afternoon was still tolerable - even potentially enjoyable. A water-cooled fan provided adequate relief from the heat as long as one didn't stray too far from it, and we didn't. In addition, there was cold lemonade for sipping. One might have preferred stronger stuff, but Coleman was "dry" in more ways than one; and so were my in-laws, at least until someone got sick. Then a teaspoon or two for medicinal purposes might be legitimately considered. But this particular Sunday no one was ill, and anyway, lemonade seemed to offer the necessary cooling properties we sought.

And finally there was entertainment. Dominoes. Perfect for the conditions. The game required little more physical exertion than an occasional mumbled comment, "shuffle 'em" and an unhurried movement of the arm to place the spots in the appropriate perspective on the table. It also required somebody to mark the score; but that responsibility was shifted at the conclusion of each hand so the task, though onerous, was in no way debilitating. In short, dominoes was diversion, but pleasant diversion.

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THE ABILENE PARADOX - 3

So, all in all it was an agreeable - even exciting - Sunday afternoon in Coleman, if, to quote a contemporary radio commercial, "you are easily excited." That is, it was until my father-in-law looked up from the table and said with apparent enthusiasm, "Let's get in the car and go to Abilene and have dinner at the cafeteria."

To put it mildly, his suggestion caught me unprepared. You might even say it woke me up. I began to turn it over in my mind. "Go to Abilene? Fifty-three miles? In this dust storm. We'll have to drive with the lights on even though it's the middle of the afternoon. And the heat. It's bad enough here in front of the fan, but in an un-air conditioned 1958 Buick it will be brutal. And eat at the cafeteria? Some cafeterias may be okay, but the one in Abilene conjures up dark memories of the enlisted men's field mess."

But before I could clarify and organize my thoughts even to articulate them, Beth, my wife, chimed in with, "sounds like a great idea. I would like to go. How about you Jerry?" Well since my own preferences were obviously out of step with the rest, I decided not to impede the party's progress and replied, "sounds good to me," and added, "I just hope your mother wants to go."

"Of course I want to go," my mother-in-law replied, "I haven't been to Abilene for a long time. What makes you think I wouldn't want to go?"

So into the car and to Abilene we went. My predictions were fulfilled. The heat was brutal. We were coated with a fine layer of West Texas dust, which was cemented with perspiration by the time we arrived; and the food at the cafeteria provided first-rate material for Alka-Seltzer commercials.

COPING WITH AGREEMENT IN ORGANIZATIONS

THE ABILENE PARADOX - 4

Some four hours and 106 miles later we returned to Coleman, Texas, but tired and exhausted. We sat in front of the fan for a long time in silence. Then both to be sociable and also to break the rather oppressive silence, I said, "It was a great trip, wasn't it?"

No one spoke..

Finally, my mother-in-law said, with some slight note of irritation, "Well to tell you the truth, I really didn't enjoy it much and would rather have stayed here. I just went along because the three of you were so enthusiastic about going. I would have gone if you all hadn't pressured me into it."

I couldn't believe it. "What do you mean 'you all?'", I said. "Don't put me in the 'you all' group. I was delighted to be doing what we were doing. I didn't want to go. I only went to satisfy the rest of you characters. You are the culprits."

Beth looked shocked. "Don't call me a culprit. You and Daddy and Mamma were the ones who wanted to go. I just went along to be sociable and to keep you happy. I would have had to be crazy to want to go out in heat like that, You don't think I'm that crazy do you?"

Before I had the opportunity to fall into that obvious trap, her father entered the conversation again with some abruptness. He spoke only one word, but did it in the quite simple, straightforward vernacular that a lifelong Texan and particularly a Colemanite can approximate. That word was "H-E-L-L."

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THE ABILENE PARADOX - 5

Since he seldom resorted to profanity, he immediately caught our attention. Then, he proceeded to explain on what was already an absolutely clear thought with, "listen, I never wanted to go to Abilene. I was sort of making conversation. I just thought you might have been bored, and I felt I ought to say something. I didn't want you and Jerry to have a bad time when you visit. You visit so seldom I wanted to be sure you enjoy it. And I knew Mama would be upset if you all didn't have a good time. Personally, I would have preferred to play another game of dominoes and eaten the leftovers in the ice box."

After the initial outburst of recrimination we all sat back in silence. Here we were, four reasonable sensible people who, on our own volition's, had just taken a 106-mile trip across a Godforsaken desert in furnace like temperatures through a cloud like dust storm to eat unpalatable food at a hole-in-the-wall cafeteria in Abilene, Texas, when none of us really wanted to go, In fact, to be more accurate, we'd done just the opposite of what we wanted to do. The whole situation seemed paradoxical. It simply didn't make sense.

At least it didn't make sense at that time. But since that fateful summer day in Coleman, I have observed, consulted with and been a part of more than one organization that has been caught in the same situation. As a result, it has either taken a side-trip, and occasionally, a terminal journey to Abilene when Dallas or Muleshoe or Houston or Tokyo was where it really wanted to go. And for most of those organizations, the destructive consequences of such trips, measured both in terms of human misery and economic loss, have been much greater than for the Abilene group.

Jerry Harvey, 1974

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THE ABILENE PARADOX - 6

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The Abilene Paradox

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