

A Journey to Abilene

The Danger in Desiring Consensus

By Richard M. Biery



During hearings by Congress on the Watergate scandal, person after person on the White House staff told the

panel they privately thought the Nixon White House dirty tricks plan was a bad one, but voiced support for it because they believed everyone else on the staff supported it. The collective perception was that everyone favored it, yet few, if any, privately thought it was a good idea. What went wrong? How could they act on something virtually no one personally supported?

Several years ago, Jerry Harvey, management professor at George Washington University, wrote a little book entitled *The Abilene Paradox*. It contains a short parable about his family living in West Texas in the early 60s.

On a very hot Sunday afternoon in July, the family decides to pile into their car, which had no air conditioning, and drive 53 miles across the baking Texas plains to Abilene for dinner. After making the extremely uncomfortable trip, having an unrewarding dinner at the cafeteria and returning home hot and tired, one family member finally confessed she hadn't really wanted to go to Abilene in the first place. Then another admitted the same thing. Then another. It turned out no one in the family had really wanted to go; yet they all agreed to go because they thought everyone else was for it.

That phenomenon has come to be called the Abilene Paradox. Today, it's still a profoundly relevant topic. Why does a group agree to take an action that contradicts what they really want to do, or even feel is right?

Groups and organizations, even Christian organizations, make journeys to Abilene all the time. I've even encountered the Abilene Paradox in reverse. While researching the feasibility of a desirable public policy for a client, virtually all the civic leaders interviewed privately confided in me their genuine personal support, but at the same time, believed no one else really supported it!

Harvey warns, "Business theorists typically believe that

managing organizational conflict is one of the greatest challenges faced by any organization, but a corollary of the Abilene Paradox

states that the inability to manage agreement may be the major source of organizational dysfunction." I agree. Poor, even ultimately destructive, organizational decisions are often the result of the Abilene Paradox at work. It affects all kinds of groups, including governing boards, senior management teams, churches and families.

Warning Signs

There are six indicators, concludes Harvey, that the Abilene Paradox may be at work within a group:

1. Members unknowingly agree privately about the nature of the situation or problem facing them.
2. Members similarly agree what steps are required to cope with the situation.
3. Members fail to honestly and accurately convey their true feelings or desires to the others in the group, thereby leading each other into misperceiving the collective reality.
4. Members make a collective, counterproductive decision based on their misperception of the group's consensus.
5. Members feel anger, frustration and dissatisfaction because of the inappropriate decision, and turn on others (often those in authority), blaming them for the poor decision while being blind to their own complicity.
6. Members fail to grasp what is transpiring, putting the group in danger of repeating the cycle with greater intensity next time, and thereby exacerbating the decision-making process.

A journey to Abilene, therefore, results in an internal conflict between what members perceive to be consensus and what they privately believe. Unknowingly, they agree on what they disagree about! The strange consequence—and hence a paradox—results in the engenderment of discord where there should be none.

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A Spiritual Issue

The Abilene Paradox may be at work when you find yourself strongly motivated to say one thing to agree with others (or to remain silent) while believing something else. The internal conflict we experience in this situation, caused by the risk in nonconformity and the need for conformity, is essentially a spiritual issue.

We must not minimize the strength of our need to “go along” with the group nor should we underestimate the power of the fear of possible interpersonal separation from our fellow teammates. We commonly will sacrifice truthful dissent for what we perceive as a higher value, even a biblical value, of unity, especially when urged on by our fear of being different. We may term it “covering discord with love.”¹ This is a profound misunderstanding of Scripture and leads not only to deception but may risk the well-being of the group or organization.

These risks must be assessed and a decision made in the heart to say what we really think and be willing to face the consequences—that is, the worst-case scenario—or not to say what we think and risk living with those consequences. True connectedness between people—and the best answers deriving from them—is through truth, facing it and acting based on it.

Honesty and candor break the cycle. But telling the truth still takes courage, even when there’s a misperception of the group consensus. Your honesty will either result in discovering others’ true dissatisfaction with the apparent consensus or it will reveal true disagreements. But in either case, it facilitates finding the truth.

The odds are your comments will be a relief to others if the group has been

on a journey to Abilene and everyone privately knows it. If not, you may be perceived as being painfully honest—maybe off base, but honest. A more painful consequence is that the group—or more likely, an intimidating or autocratic leader—really resents your honesty, but do you really want to be in such an organization anyway?

The Danger of Consensus

Consensus should never be viewed a group-process value, or as an end in and of itself. Relying on consensus, or a perceived *need* for consensus, is dangerous to making quality decisions. True, people normally and naturally desire consensus, especially in small groups, but when the group sets out to arrive at consensus, it may sacrifice the truth.

We must be especially suspicious of early consensus in complex issues. Instead, permit disagreement even up to the vote. There’s nothing wrong with a rule of majority. It gives permission for gracious dissent, and permitting differences of opinion helps avoid false consensus. Consensus may ultimately also be a happy consequence and can then be welcomed when it occurs.

Truth is essential for wise action. The Abilene phenomenon prevents truth from emerging, resulting in actions leading away from truth and best judgment, and ending up in conflict anyway—that is, murmuring against the group decision and causing others to wonder why the group made such a dumb decision.

Seeking Truth

The first corrective step is explicitly agreeing on, and sanctioning, healthy truth-seeking processes. That means telling the truth (not engaging in decep-

tion) with grace (the capacity to express a different point of view while blessing and sustaining the relationship). An important part of growing in Christ is growing in truth—and “speaking the truth in love.”²

God calls us to both love truthfulness and be truth-seekers. Biblically, love and truth are not on a sliding scale where more love means less truth with “balance” being the virtue. However, that’s a common but erroneous view. Love and truth are to be reconciled or blended in wise action on our parts³—action that is both gracious and true.

How do we enhance the likelihood of a journey to Abilene? Here are some ways: 1) a strong personality in the group—or worse, the formal leader—suppresses dissent, 2) a group culture or rule of consensus, 3) unity is valued so high it suppresses the truth value, and 4) rushing decisions.

What’s the preventive? First, never sanction, or worse, articulate or insist on consensus as the group’s decision-making norm. Instead, the counter-intuitive but biblical principle is to do everything in the group’s power to enable acceptance, candor and truthfulness by encouraging diversity of opinion. Pausing for prayer, if not manipulative, can have a profound effect on a group’s interaction. But even in prayer, we need to make God’s wisdom, truth and will our primary goal. Under these conditions, the group will frequently arrive at consensus of what’s truth and therefore, the best action or decision.

Leaders should assure that the group knows it has permission for candor, and should strive to create a culture of speaking true views from hearts and minds in love. Truth and wisdom should be the objective, with truth of our own view spoken in love as the absolutely vital means. We best serve as servant leaders by having the courage to enable candor, and thereby permit truth to enter.

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¹ Ephesians 4:2

² Ephesians 4:15

³ See Proverbs 3

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