

The Abilene Paradox

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Thirty-years ago, Dr. Jerry Harvey published the now classic “Abilene Paradox: The Management of Agreement.” This parable begins with four adults sitting on a front porch in Coleman, Texas some 53 miles from Abilene. While everyone appears content drinking lemonade and playing dominoes, someone suggests driving into Abilene for lunch. It is hot, the car is not air-conditioned and the road is dusty. Privately, no one really wants to go. But each one goes along because each thinks this is what the others prefer. No one speaks up and they make a long and hot drive to Abilene and back for an unsatisfying lunch. On the way home, the truth unravels as they come to realize that no one really wanted to go. In fact even the person who suggested it did not really want to go, only having made the suggestion because he thought (mistakenly) that the others were bored.

The Abilene Paradox, sometimes called the crisis of agreement, is different than Group Think as identified by Janis. Michael Harvey and colleagues (2004) clarify distinctions between the Abilene Paradox and Group Think.

Abilene Paradox	Group Think
Group Cohesiveness Not Central & Becomes Lower after Defective Decision	Members Wanting to be Accepted Most Powerful
Nonexistent, Incompetent or Ineffective Leadership	Overpowering or Laissez-Faire Leadership Styles
No Salient External Enemies	External Enemies Show Increased Group Solidarity
Committed to Private Views Bring about Pain/Suffering	Preoccupied with Shared Group Vision/Unanimity
Feeling of Being Coerced Not Responsible for the Decision	Feeling of Choice Being Made of Their Own Freewill
Dissatisfaction with the Decision	Expressed Satisfaction with the Group Decision
Blaming of Others in the Group	Protect the Leader/Others from Negative Information

The Abilene Paradox emerges when members of a group have fears of ostracism or exclusion. They may pair and discuss private views, but generally they think they are the only ones who think “this way” and that if they voice their true feelings and perceptions they will stand alone before an angry mob. Such view may be reinforced by myths and stories about ones who spoke out before.

Both the Abilene Paradox and Group Think are relevant considerations for child welfare managers. In four separate studies of child welfare agency culture, the Child Welfare Institute has found a basis for concern. For example, in one study, staff members were asked, “What are the unspoken rules around here that everyone knows, but no one really says?” What was striking was the overwhelming domination of answers indicating fear. The answers included:

- Be loyal to those above
- Be careful what you say (especially to your boss)
- Be in the “in group”
- Be cooperative
- Take on the mantra of current leadership
- Watch your back
- Don’t step into others’ silos
- Don’t say too much to the state office
- Don’t say anything in public that is controversial or challenging
- Don’t say things contrary to what management believes
- Keep your mouth shut and your head down
- Have someone else with you when you make a decision
- Don’t embarrass those above you
- Don’t ask too many questions
- Don’t rock the boat
- Know the game and how to play it
- Don’t threaten the hierarchy
- Don’t show up important people
- Take as little credit as you can
- Don’t get out of your box
- Don’t go too far on your own in making decisions

The dominant culture that has emerged in all these studies leaned toward a Passive/Defensive Culture, one in which members believe they must interact with *people* in ways that will not threaten their own *security*. The picture that emerges

is an environment where conflict is suppressed at the expense of learning and open consideration of all the information. Information that is inconstant with prevailing management values and beliefs may never see the light of day.

The risk of the Abilene Paradox is heightened by the emergence of the “value police.” Over that past two decades values have increasingly replaced theory and evidence as the basis for many child welfare practice and program strategies. I once asked a researcher associated with the evaluation of a nationally popular community based program why they had abandoned evaluation efforts after the first evaluation effort found little effect. As I put it, “How will you know whether the intervention is effective?” I was astounded by the reply. The researcher replied, “There is no intervention. This is just good practice.” What makes it good practice? Apparently, it is associated with preferred values, so by definition it is good.

Speaking out against a program with the right values is somewhat like challenging religious faith. Never mind that great harm has been done in the “name” of religious beliefs. Is it inconceivable that harm could be done in the name of the right values? History shows that the plurality is often not kind to those who question current beliefs and values. Witness the fates of Galileo, Gandhi, and M. L. King Jr. Speaking out may not receive immediate praise or acceptance. But, in the long term, it may change our view of the world and of our place within it, preventing us from acting in direct opposition to our own beliefs. As Descartes said, “I think therefore I am.” Thought without free speech can leave the world a very dark place.

Harvey, J. “The Abilene Paradox: The Management of Agreement.” *Organizational Dynamics*, Summer 1974, 63-80.

Janis, I. *Groupthink*. Houghton-Mifflin, Boston 1982.

Harvey, M., Novicevic, M., Buckley, M, Halbesleben, J. The Abilene Paradox After Thirty Years: A Global Perspective.” *Organizational Dynamics*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 215-226, 2004