

PREVIEW GUIDE



The Abilene Paradox

2nd Edition

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The inability to manage agreement, not internal conflict, is the most pressing issue facing modern organizations.

— Jerry Harvey, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

The Abilene Paradox is a recognized milestone in training videos. Originally based upon the article of the same name by Dr. Jerry Harvey, it examines one of the core dynamics of group decision-making, and helps managers and their work teams recognize the downside of mismanaged agreement.

This fast-paced workshop will help managers, supervisors, and staff find positive ways to come to effective agreements between individuals and groups, and avoid the trap of moving in directions that are counter-productive to the group's overall purpose.

Individuality, equal opportunity, centralized organizational structure — these have been the hallmarks of traditional American management. But times have changed. For more than three decades, managers worldwide have been engaged in fierce competition with global competitors in a rapidly expanding international marketplace.

To meet this competition, companies have modified their approach to management, with an increasing emphasis on quality, customer service, teamwork, and decentralized, participative management.

Change comes slowly to large organizations. It happens bit-by-bit, and decision-by-decision. CRM's Abilene Paradox Workshop provides the tools to help your company address a key dynamic in group decision-making and participative management, and to take a more pragmatic and honest approach to group consensus.

HOW THIS WORKSHOP BUILDS UNDERSTANDING

The Abilene Paradox is a fast-paced and entertaining video that clearly demonstrates the paradox of mismanaged agreement and the way it can influence decision-making within a work unit or an organization, often to the detriment of the group's goals.

The workshop's exercises focus, first, on **the possible consequences** of passively accepting a decision without communicating our true feelings about it. Organizational psychologists believe that we hesitate to speak up to avoid being ostracized from the group or seen as a loner. Our personal fears of being seen as different, more so than actual pressure from the group, cause this response. Unfortunately, the "don't rock the boat" approach to decision management often stifles honest opinions and valid concerns. When silence contributes to poor decisions, what often results are precisely those conditions that prompted the silence in

the first place: failure and ultimate separation from the group.

Second, the activities in the workshop help participants **recognize the road signs** that can tell someone that the group has embarked on a trip to Abilene. Road signs can include ways of thinking that we notice in ourselves, or external signs such as blame, criticism of the boss, etc.

Third, the workshop activities **demonstrate general preventive measures** to turn the car around mid-route, bypass Abilene, or, even better, avoid embarking on the trip. Generating options, asking clarifying questions, and checking assumptions are strategies that bring useful information to the surface and encourage individual participants to share opinions that might seem contradictory to the group's apparent consensus.

Finally, the workshop facilitates discussion and group decisions about **specific ways for their own teams and groups** to "skip future trips" to Abilene, and make more honest decisions.

WORKSHOP GOALS

The activities in this workshop can help build a pragmatic and open approach to decision-making.

The overall goals of the workshop are:

1. To recognize the paradox of mismanaged agreement, and understand how it contributes to poor group decisions.
2. To explore the personal and psychological dynamics that affect each person's involvement in group discussions and agreement.
3. To initiate measures to help groups avoid making counter-productive decisions.

Specific workshop learning objectives can be found on page 22 of this Leader's Guide.

WHO SHOULD ATTEND?

CRM's Abilene Paradox Workshop is designed for managers, supervisors and line staff who, as part of their jobs, must meet in groups to make decisions.

This material should be presented in a group setting where the responses of others can be compared and shared. While independent study would have some value, it would lack the group dynamics dimension that lies at the heart of the content.

Time Requirements

The workshop can be delivered as a half-day session (standard) or as a longer session, depending on the amount of time you have available and the importance of these issues to your organization.

The recommended workshop agenda runs 3.5-4 hours. We have provided three optional exercises that can be completed after Exercise 3 to extend the workshop. Use as many of these exercises as you like, depending on the time available.

Class Sequence and Timing

Training Session Activity	Time (min)	Time (min)
Welcome/Purpose for Workshop and Logistics	5	
Participant Introductions and Opening Exercise	20	
Workshop Objectives and Approach	5	
Exercise #1: A Look at the Past	15	
Video Presentation: Part One, Discussion	20	
Video Presentation: Part Two, Discussion	25	
Exercise #2: Fifteen Reasons	20	
Break	10	
Exercise #3: Current Decision-Making Case	20	
Optional Exercise A: Minimizing Risk		15
Optional Exercise B: Positive Confrontation		35
Optional Exercise C: Decision-Making at a Distance		20
Exercise #4: Ways to Skip the Trip	20	
Exercise #5: Executive Recommendations	40	
Wrap-Up and Follow-Through	20	
Total Running Time	3.5 - 4 hrs	4.5 - 5 hrs

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

Review this background information before the Workshop so that you'll have a thorough understanding of the Abilene Paradox.

How many times has your organization moved in a direction that you disagreed with?

How many times have you observed a group, or been a member of a group, that has come to an impasse that reveals everyone's lack of enthusiasm for the original undertaking?

How many seemingly well-supported decisions turn out to be wrong turns and dead-ends that cost both time and money?

Each of these instances may have been an unplanned, unwanted trip to Abilene.

The central idea behind the Abilene Paradox is that mismanaged agreement is as dangerous to organizational effectiveness as excessive conflict. Unchecked, it can lead the organization toward inappropriate goals and result in significant costs in time, resources and lost opportunity.

Mismanaged agreement is a paradox — an idea that opposes common sense and yet, holds true.

Participants involved in a group decision-making process often think they are serving the group's best interest by withholding their opinions, concerns and feelings. They wait to see how others are leaning, or what the group leader wants to do. They may withhold their opinion due to lack of confidence in their ideas, or because they think everyone else is in agreement and they don't want to be the "odd man out" or to appear in conflict with the group.

The paradox comes into play when everyone is making the same errors in judgment; and because no one is sharing their concerns, poor ideas are given support, bad decisions are made, and pointless "trips" are taken.

The Cost of Going Along

What's strange but true in this situation is that if each person in the group were honest, they would often make quite different decisions.

In their desire to please the group and remain a part of it, each person is dishonest with themselves and their associates.

The paradox is that the group often decides to do precisely the opposite of what each member wants to do. When they discover that no one really wanted to make the decision they all accepted, the group members get angry and begin to assign blame. "Whose idea was this, anyway?" they all want to know.

This is Not a Case of Conflict

It may seem as if the members of the group are in conflict, but they aren't and never were. The problem is not conflict or its management. The problem is the *mismanagement of agreement*.

Mismanaged agreement occurs when we, as participants in a group decision, passively go along without communicating our reservations or opinions to the group. There can be a variety of reasons for this behavior: the desire to be seen as a team player, reluctance to disturb the group's tranquility or relationships, insufficient preparation or information for making the decision, or anxiety about the worth of our opinions.

Frequently, others share our concerns but are reluctant to voice them, each fearing they are the only dissenter. By failing to accurately communicate our reservations, we lead one another into misperceiving the group's true consensus. Decisions based on inaccurate individual perceptions are frequently contrary to the group's true goals and objectives.

Underlying Principles of the Abilene Paradox

To understand the Abilene Paradox, we must come to grips with a number of psychological principles from which it draws its power.

1. The first principle is **action anxiety**—an intense uneasiness created when we think about acting in accordance with what we believe needs to be done. Action anxiety occurs as we anticipate the results of taking action, and the results we foresee are negative instead of positive.
2. **Negative fantasies** or **perceived risk** are visualizations of the harmful effects resulting from our actions, rather than improvements to the situation. They provide an excuse for not taking responsible action. The R&D director's negative fantasy is that he will be fired. Sue and George's negative fantasy is that her mother will die of a heart attack if Sue does not go through with the wedding.
3. One might think that the fear of the unknown contributes to the Abilene Paradox. Most likely, the real operating factor is our **fear of separation**. According to Professor Harvey, we fear the label of "non-team player" which brings with it the fear of separation, alienation, and loneliness—all things we know very well and prefer to avoid.
4. The **real risk** associated with any situation is usually not the same as our negative fantasies or perceived risk. We can never play it completely safe, because real risk is a part of life, both in business and at home. But when we are afraid to accept real risk as one of life's givens, we often take a trip to Abilene, and thereby take on a far greater risk—the risk of mismanaged agreement, misdirected effort, and missed opportunities.
5. Finally, there is the **confusion of fantasy and reality**. We have a tendency to give negative fantasies and perceived risk more weight than they deserve. What we imagine

LEADER'S SCRIPT

WORKSHOP INTRODUCTION (5 MINUTES)


 SHOW SLIDE #1: Workshop Title

INTRODUCE yourself and make a brief comment about your own interest in this topic, as well as its importance to the overall success of the organization.

STATE the workshop's purpose to the group:

- *To better understand, through video demonstration and discussion, one form of group dynamics operating in a decision-making context.*
- *To develop personal and organizational strategies for managing agreement during group decision-making activities.*

Usually, we think that conflict is what needs to be managed in group meetings and decision-making, and certainly it does. But as this workshop will demonstrate, sometimes we find ourselves in trouble due to mismanaged agreement.

 SHOW SLIDE #2: Mismanaged Agreement

Mismanaged agreement is unchecked agreement—agreement that has not been validated by an honest and open consensus of those involved.

Mismanaged agreement happens more often than we realize, it can have negative consequences, and with attention, it can be avoided.

Place the workshop in the context of other current training, ongoing management development, or a recent experience at the company that suggested a need for this program.

WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES (5 MINUTES)

SAY:

In today's session, we'll be addressing the topic of why it's sometimes difficult to voice our honest opinions when we work with others to make decisions. We'll be discussing the Abilene Paradox, a strange but all-too-common dynamic operating within many group decision-making processes.

We'll use video, discussion, and exercises to see how this process occurs in our own organization, and how we can work to prevent it from negatively affecting our success.



SHOW SLIDE #4: Workshop Objectives

Review the workshop objectives. As much as possible, relate the objectives to the participant introductions.

SAY:

This workshop is very much a personal skills workshop, even though we are discussing organizational issues.

First, I'd like to go through the objectives for this workshop. After completing this workshop, you will be able to:

- 1. Understand the concept of "mismanaged agreement."*
- 2. Identify the warning signs and consequences of mismanaged agreement.*
- 3. Describe how your perceptions of risk and benefit influence your participation.*
- 4. Develop effective personal patterns of participation in group decision-making.*
- 5. Develop communication strategies to help you and your team make more honest and open agreements.*

EXERCISE #3: A CURRENT DECISION

- Briefly describe a current decision in which you are a participant or that you are in a position to influence: _____

- What would you really like to say about the pros and cons of this issue? If the decision were solely up to you, what would you do? _____

- What might keep you from speaking up? _____

- Write a brief response in each of the cells below related to the decision and what will happen if you speak up or withhold your honest opinion.

	If you choose to SPEAK UP	If you choose NOT TO SPEAK UP
What is the BEST thing that could happen?		
What is the WORST thing that could happen?		
Is the BEST OR WORST THING MOST LIKELY to happen?		
What is the RISK?		
Can you AFFORD the risk?		

EXERCISE #4: WAYS TO SKIP THE TRIP

Working with a partner and using brief notes, list several ways to “skip the trip” at each phase of the decision-making timeline: before, during, and after decisions have been reached. Use ideas from the video, from this training session’s discussions, or brainstorm new ones.

Be sure to think about good questions to ask of your decision-making group at each point in the process. Enter these in the matrix.

	Things that individuals can do or ask	Things that organizations, departments or work units can do or ask
BEFORE meetings or while preparing for discussions		
DURING meetings and discussions		
AFTER decisions are made		

As the group leader...

If I am serving in the position of “leader” for this process, what other methods and strategies should I be employing to ensure that my group skips the trip?

EXERCISE #5: PERSONAL PROCESS RECORD

Directions: Answer the questions on this form honestly and accurately. These answers will not be shared with the group.

1. What did I do differently during this meeting that represents a change from the way I usually participate in group decisions? _____

2. Did I feel a sense of responsibility for the outcome of this discussion? _____

3. How did I contribute? _____

4. Did I hold back? _____

5. How do I feel about the results? _____

Materials Included with *The Abilene Paradox, 2nd Edition*

The workshop designed to accompany the video-based program is a flexible, yet comprehensive half-day training design. The workshop kit includes all the materials you'll need to run the program:

- ◆ The **DVD** of *The Abilene Paradox, 2nd Edition*, narrated by Dr. Jerry Harvey, provides the theory and examples to illustrate the workshop topics and further discussion on how false consensus can undermine organizational progress. Also, we've included *The Abilene Paradox, 1st Edition* on your DVD, as an added bonus. The DVD is closed-captioned.
- ◆ The **Leader's Guide** provides step-by-step instructions for introducing activities, leading discussions, and making transitions between the video, group discussions, and exercises. It includes directions for presenting the workshop materials, along with suggestions for preparation, timing, and follow-up activities.
- ◆ **PowerPoint® slides**. The PowerPoint® presentation can be used to highlight key discussion points and activity instructions during the training session.
- ◆ The **Participant Workbook** contains the worksheets for the suggested exercises in the Leader's Guide. Also, it includes a glossary of terms used in the video program, and hints to help participants continue their use of effective decision-making techniques.



