

# **The Abilene Paradox: Individual Responsibility and Group Decision-Making**

August 20 2007

WIAF

Honolulu, Hawaii

## **The Abilene Paradox**

- When groups take action collectively that contradict the individual preferences of each of the group members.
- Communication breaks down because each member of the group mistakenly believes his/her own preferences are counter to the group's preferences and does not raise objections.

## **Workshop Objectives**

- Define "mismanaged agreement."
- Identify the warning signs and consequences of mismanaged agreement.
- Describe how perceived risk and benefit affect decisions.
- Develop effective personal patterns of participation in group decisions.
- Develop communication strategies to improve group decisions ("Skip the Trip!").

## **Introductions**

- At your table, share your name, where you work, and...
  - Whether you prefer making solo or group decisions when at work, and the reason for your preference.
  - One aspect of participating in group decision-making that you find particularly challenging.

## **Workshop Sequence**

- In this Workshop we will...
  - Consider previous decision-making experiences and note our behaviors and operating patterns.
  - View and discuss a video that shows some behaviors to consider.
  - Develop strategies for more effective decision-making in the future.

## **Social Conformity**

- Individuals are often adverse to acting in a manner that is contrary to the group trend.
- The more cohesive the group, the greater the likelihood that individuals will make decisions or take actions that conform to group preferences.

## **Similar Group Dynamics**

Similar dynamics effecting group decisions:

- **GROUPTHINK**—Group members try to minimize conflict and reach consensus without critically testing, analyzing, and evaluating ideas.
- **BANDWAGON EFFECT**—Individuals often think or take action without examining the merits, because many other people think or do the same.

## **Mismanaged Agreement**

- The failure to do what is needed to ensure that people are in agreement for the correct reasons.

## **Exercise 1: A Look at the Past**

- Recall a previous decision-making process in which you participated.
- Briefly describe the situation and the decision, and respond to the worksheet questions.

## **Exercise 1 - Debrief**

- Have you experienced a group situation where the group wanted to go in one direction but held back expressing their opinion?
- What non-verbal signs indicate agreement?
- What non-verbal signs indicate disagreement?

## **First Segment of the Video**

- The Abilene Paradox (about 5 minutes)

## **Video Debrief and Discussion The Abilene Paradox**

- When groups take action that contradicts what the members of the group silently agree they want or need to do.
- A personal dynamic operating in group decisions – often leads to mismanaged agreement.

## **Last Video Segment**

- The Abilene Paradox (about 20 minutes)

## **Debrief the Video The Abilene Paradox**

- What did each set of characters DO or FAIL TO DO that contributed to their decision to “get in the car”?

## **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.

## **Groups on the Road, continued**

- 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**

- Be completely honest!
- Read the reasons and check the ones that you find yourself using to avoid the trip.
- Write down your top 3 choices and share with your group.
- Select a group member to present them to the larger group.

## **Debrief the Exercise**

General comments on the “Top Three List”.

How do these factors support the Abilene Paradox?

Underlying Principles

- Action Anxiety
- Negative Fantasy
- Perceived Risk
- Fear of Separation
- Confusion of Risk and Certainty

## **Ways to Skip the Trip**

- Before Meetings
- During Meetings
- After Making Decision

## **Signs A Group Has Arrived**

- Deteriorating project status
- Blaming and scapegoating
- Irritation with others
- Others?

## **Ways to Skip the Trip What You Can Do**

- Keep negative fantasies and perceived risk under check. Consider the benefits of speaking out.
- Diplomatically confront decisions moving in the wrong direction, based on your knowledge and experience.
- Be prepared with backup information and good questions.

## **Ways to Skip the Trip What You Can Do**

- Avoiding Groupthink
  - Assign all or someone the role of “critical evaluator” of the group process
  - Assign someone in Devil’s Advocate role
  - Examine all effective alternative solutions
  - Consider using several independent groups to work on the same problem
  - Bring in outside experts
  - Leaders/managers minimize their role at appropriate times to stimulate open discussion

## **The End**

- Questions and Comments?
- Thanks for attending!
- Contact Information:
  - Brian Estes: [Estesb@gao.gov](mailto:Estesb@gao.gov)
  - Susan Baugh: [Susan.Baugh@KingCounty.gov](mailto:Susan.Baugh@KingCounty.gov)