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OVERCOMING UNHEALTHY AGREEMENT

Imagine working on a team for which you have high regard and respect for every member. In an attempt to be an agreeable and easy colleague to work with, you respond positively to the first suggestion that another team member makes. Everyone else on the team follows the same pattern or tries to be agreeable and positive. Problem solving happens quickly because everyone goes along with the first solutions that are offered. However, while the team initially may avoid conflict by following such a pattern, decisions are made that haven't been carefully scrutinized or don't really have the full support of the group.

This condition, which we call unhealthy agreement, is one of the more vexing problems facing teams and can lead to poor decision making and poor team performance. Teams achieve extraordinary performance by drawing on the complementary skills and knowledge of team members. However, this cannot happen unless team members are willing to listen, challenge, and debate each other as they jointly pursue optimal solutions to the problems they are addressing. In this chapter we explore this problem and discuss team-building activities that have been used successfully to prevent unhealthy agreement.

Unhealthy Agreement

Jerry Harvey popularized the concept of what he called the "Abilene paradox," the now-famous analysis of groups of people

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who make public decisions that seem to reflect total agreement, although few, if any, of the team members feel that the decisions are appropriate. At times teams make poor decisions not due to open conflict but because people pretend to agree when in fact they do not. We continue to use the following story in this edition of *Team Building* because it illustrates an all-too-common problem: too many teams are still taking a "trip to Abilene."[1]

The Abilene Paradox

July Sunday afternoons in Coleman, Texas, 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 fine-grained West Texas topsoil 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 a question betrays 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 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

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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 physically debilitating. In short, dominoes was diversion, but pleasant diversion.

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 suddenly 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

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out of step with the rest, I decided not to impede the party's progress and replied with, "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 in 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 testimonial material for Alka-Seltzer commercials.

Some four hours and 106 miles later, we returned to Coleman, Texas, 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 a 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 the truth, I really didn't enjoy it much and would have rather stayed here. I just went along because the three of you were so enthusiastic about going. I wouldn't have gone if you hadn't all 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 Mama were the ones who wanted to go. I just went along to be sociable and to keep you happy. I would have to be crazy to want to go out in heat like that. You don't think I'm 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 he did it in the quite simple, straightforward vernacular that only a life-long Texan and particularly a Colemanite can approximate. That word was "H-E-L-L-L."

Since he seldom resorted to profanity, he immediately caught our attention. Then he proceeded to expand 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 enjoyed it. And I knew that 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 icebox."

After the initial outburst of recrimination, we all sat back in silence. Here we were, four reasonable, sensible people who, on our own volitions, had just taken a 106-mile trip across a Godforsaken desert in furnace-like temperatures through a cloudlike 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 temporary 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.

This story illustrates the following paradox: teams (and team members) frequently take actions in contradiction to what they really want to do and therefore defeat the very purposes they are trying to achieve. It also deals with a major corollary of the paradox, which is that the inability to manage agreement can be a major source of dysfunction in organizations from the team level up to the total organization.

When a team gets lost in such a cloud of unrecognized agreement, it frequently manifests behavior that leads one to believe, mistakenly, that the team is caught in a dilemma of conflict. For that reason, it takes a different type of team building—one involving agreement management—to develop more functional behaviors.

Symptoms of the Problem

Because the surface symptoms (that is, conflict) of both agreement and disagreement are essentially similar, the first requirement is to be aware of the symptoms of an agreement-management dilemma. Harvey has identified two sets of symptoms.[2] The first set can most easily be identified by someone outside the team under scrutiny. In effect, being free of the blinding forces of action anxiety, negative fantasies, and unrealistic risk, all of which contribute to the pernicious influence of the paradox, the outsider can frequently observe symptoms hidden by the dust that is all too familiar to residents of Abilene. The second set, more subjective in character, can be more easily recognized by team members.

Symptoms More Easily Observable to Outsiders

Outsiders, whether detached laypeople or professional consultants, can be relatively sure that the team is on a trip to Abilene if they observe the following symptoms:

- Team members' nonverbal cues suggest that they are not satisfied with team functioning (they demonstrate apathy, use sarcasm, and so on). Team members may be passive-aggressive, and while they outwardly seem to support or go along with decisions, inwardly they feel frustrated and powerless.

- Members agree privately, as individuals, as to the nature of the problems facing the team.

- Members also agree, privately, as individuals, on the steps required to cope with the problems.

- Team members blame each other for the condition the team is in.

- The team breaks into subgroups of trusted friends to share rumors, complaints, fantasies, or strategies relating to the problem or its solution.

- In collective situations (group meetings, public memoranda), members fail to communicate their desires and beliefs to others accurately. In fact, they sometimes communicate just the opposite of what they really mean.

- On the basis of such invalid and inaccurate information, members make collective decisions that lead them to take actions contrary to what they personally and collectively want to do. This leads to even greater anger, frustration, irritation, and dissatisfaction with the team.

- Members behave differently outside the team. In other situations (with families, at church, in other work units), they are happier, get along better with others, and perform more effectively.

Symptoms More Easily Observable to Insiders

Some symptoms, stemming primarily from team members' subjective experiences within the team, are more easily identified

by the team members themselves who are caught up in the problem of mismanaged agreement. For example, if you experience the following feelings within your team, you may be pretty sure that you are lost in a dust storm of agreement and are on a trip to Abilene:

- You feel pained, frustrated, powerless, and basically unable to cope when trying to solve a particular problem.
- You frequently meet with trusted associates over coffee, clandestine lunches, or in the privacy of your home or office to discuss the problem, commiserate, and plan fantasized solutions that you would attempt "if only the conditions were right." (Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on your point of view, they seldom are.)
- You blame others—the boss, other divisions, or those "unperceptive people in unit X"—for the dilemma. The boss, in particular, frequently gets an unequal share of the blame and is described with such statements as "He's out of touch," "She's lost control of the unit," or "He sure isn't as good as Ms. Watson in dealing with problems like this."
- In collective meetings at which the problem is discussed, you are frequently cautious, less than candid, and vague when discussing your ideas regarding the problem and its solution. Stated differently, you frequently try to determine what others' positions on the issues are without clearly revealing your own.
- You repeatedly find that the problem-solving actions you take, both individually and collectively, not only fail to solve the problem but also tend to make it worse.
- You frequently hold fantasized conversations with yourself on what you might have done—or should have done: "When he said . . . , I wish I had said . . ."

- You frequently look for ways to escape by taking sick leave or vacation time, traveling, or scheduling other, "more important" meetings on days when the problem is going to be discussed.

Only when someone on the team becomes aware of either or both sets of symptoms does it become possible to design a problem-solving process to break out of what is ultimately a self-defeating process.

Team Building Around the Crisis of Agreement

Because an essential cause of unhealthy agreement is that team members are afraid to own up to their basic concerns, coping with hidden disagreement in teams is especially difficult.[3] That difficulty stems from three essential dilemmas: (1) it involves risk and takes skill for an individual to own up to his or her true feelings and beliefs about an issue when other members of the team have publicly taken different or contrary positions—people want to be seen as team players; (2) it involves risk and takes skill for others to own up to their similar private feelings and beliefs because of their negative fantasies of the consequences that might occur if they reveal them in an unequivocal manner; and (3) it is very difficult to learn the individual and collective skills required, even if one is willing to accept the risks.[4]

In summary, the possibility that a team could exhibit public equanimity and private turmoil and could perform ineffectively is one compelling reason for teams to hold periodic team reviews and development sessions when symptoms of the Abilene paradox are present. Another reason is that the team might be able to do something constructive about the problem, even though the skills required for success in such a session may not be easy or comfortable to learn.

Format Possibilities for Agreement-Management Team-Building Sessions

A number of possible formats exist for taking action to solve the Abilene paradox. Generally they are gathering data, sharing theory, and taking action. Data gathering may be conducted by insiders or outside consultants.

Data Collection by a Consultant

To bring hidden unhealthy agreements to light, it may be useful to have an outside consultant interview people in the team. (An outside consultant is someone who is not a part of the blinding, collusive anxiety system that facilitates the hidden-agreement syndrome and knows the theory and practice of agreement management; he or she may be a competent professional, friend, or colleague.) Such a consultant might ask the following questions, based on the theory of agreement management:

1. *What problem does this team have that you have a hard time accepting, facing, or discussing?* The question assumes that the respondent knows the nature of the problem and can state it.

2. *What decisions have been made or actions taken recently that you have not really agreed with?* The question helps determine whether there are consistent discrepancies between private beliefs and public actions, a key symptom of an agreement-management dilemma.

3. *What actions or decisions do you feel would produce the best results for the team over the long term?* The question assumes that the respondent knows an effective solution to the problem.

4. *What will happen if you don't discuss your concerns, feelings, beliefs, and suggestions with all members of the team who are involved with the problem? What will happen if you do?* The questions assume that fantasized consequences will either help or hinder the individual's making a decision to discuss the issue with others in such a way that the problem might be solved.

Having gathered the data through interviews, the outside consultant then presents a summary of team members' responses to the team in a group problem-solving session, designed and "contracted" for, essentially, in the manner described by Dick Beckhard, Warner Burke, and Ed Schein.[5]

Data Collection by Members of the Team

It is also possible that within the team, people who are part of the problem could share data and, by exhibiting such behavior, encourage others to do so as well. In this case, an outside interviewer would not be needed. Again, such data are most effectively shared in a group meeting involving all people key to the problem. In such a meeting, the person who called the meeting explains his or her desire to own up and expresses a wish to know others' beliefs and feelings about the issue—for example: "I have some data I want to share with you. I'm anxious about doing it because I may find I'm the only one who sees the problem this way, and I don't like to feel alone. But here it is. I really don't think we are going to succeed on project X. It's important for me to know how others feel about it, though. I would appreciate your letting me know what you think." Despite the competence and good intentions of the person making such a statement, the fear element might still be so strong that other members of the team would be unwilling to reveal their true beliefs and feelings. It is also possible

that at least one person would own up to his or her con-
cerns and the logjam would be broken. In the absence of such
owning statements, the probability of the problem being solved
is reduced.

Sharing the Theory and Taking Action

In addition to collecting and sharing data, another important
element of problem-solving sessions is for all members of the
team to know the theory of agreement management. To accom-
plish the goal of communicating theory, the story of the Abilene
paradox could be a reading assignment for each team member,
or the team could watch a half-hour video, *The Abilene Paradox*.[6]
Each person could then discuss whether he or she had ever
experienced or observed any situation in which the team was,
or might be, in danger of taking a trip to Abilene, that is,
doing something that no one really wants to do or not doing
something organization members really want to do. At the
problem-solving meeting, each person could be asked to discuss
the Abilene paradox and his or her observations of its relevance
to the team.

 Because the reactions of authority figures set the parameters
for other responses in any type of confrontation meeting, it is
helpful if the team leader can begin the process and own up to
personal concerns about any trips to Abilene that he or she has
observed, participated in, led, or may foresee leading. Once the
team has discussed the theory of unhealthy agreements and has
shared information about any potential agreements that they
may be incorrectly treating as conflicts, it is important to come
to valid public agreement about the nature of the true condi-
tions, make action plans based on the reality of such truths,
and then take steps to reduce the probability of future trips to
Abilene.

In Summary

Unhealthy agreement can put a team on the road to Abilene—a place where no team member wants to go. In this chapter we have described some of the symptoms of this condition (e.g., team members blaming each other for the team's failures or team members' feeling powerless) and have outlined how team building can be used to overcome this crisis of agreement. To the extent that the team leader and team members are aware of the Abilene paradox and its negative consequences, they are more likely to diagnose the problem and take corrective action to avoid an unhappy detour to Abilene.