

Libraries and the Lessons of Abilene

Managing Agreement for the Sake of Transparency and Organizational Communication

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The Abilene Paradox demonstrates a common organizational inability to manage agreement.¹ When this occurs over issues of importance, the consequences of this engagement can be harmful to organizational performance and morale. In this article, a handful of examples of this behavior in public libraries are provided, along with suggestions on how to avoid the invisible quagmire of mismanaged agreement when the organization marches serenely and methodically deeper into the realm of unwanted decisions, negative outcomes, and silenced employees, while on the surface, apparent unanimity of purpose reigns.

Jerry Harvey, professor of management science and social psychologist, conceived of the idea of the Abilene Paradox in the late 1960s during a visit with his future wife and in-laws in the aftermath of an episode during a hot July Texas day. Four seemingly rational adults arrived at a collective decision to remove themselves from the relative comfort of a shaded porch with a cooling fan and cold lemonade for a hot, dusty, fifty mile drive to an un-air-conditioned and dusty Abilene restaurant. At the conclusion of the experience, when they were all back on the porch, recriminations began about the bad experience, and blame was cast about who was responsible for making them all go to Abilene. Harvey was annoyed, mystified, and fascinated by the emerging fact that no one had actually wanted to leave the relative comfort of the porch for the unpleasant trip but that everyone, for various reasons, had allowed the trip to unfold without vocal resistance. This core aspect of the Abilene Paradox is the inability to manage agreement.

Simply put, the paradox consists in the linking of individuals in a group or organization in a perceived union of tacit or mismanaged agreement due to individual reluctance to speak out against an idea or direction of the group or a failure or inability to effectively communicate their desires. Causes may be a simple reluctance to express contrary or outlier views, a fear of separation from the group, or other possibly real or imagined negative consequences (reprimands and so on). It is a union of misunderstanding and silence that leads to surprise and disappointment and, just possibly, disaster. In the case of Harvey, his future wife, and his in-laws, it simply meant a disrupted and uncomfortable afternoon that left all participants temporarily annoyed and frustrated. For organizations, the consequences can be more severe and

can involve wasted resources, underperformance, negative performance reviews, hostility toward management, and more.

A strong implication is that conflict, by its very nature, is easier to identify (it usually being quite obvious) and thus, manage. Good managers can “organize” conflict by identifying the friction points, and, perhaps more importantly, employees repeatedly expressing varieties of disagreement on an issue can eventually become unlocked from rigid positions through the airing of views in the multiple ways and moods and varieties of conflict. Expressing a variety of entrenched viewpoints can often stimulate, sometimes grudgingly and sometimes without actual acknowledgment, new ways of thinking, and can reduce barriers to communication on fundamental organizational issues. And the only way to get there is by *facilitating* conflict and disagreement in the strictest sense of making it easier to draw out honest conflict and differing views.

This kind of airing requires respectful and formal arenas of discussion allowing for a diversity of topics, ideas, and opinions. Skilled meeting facilitation shouldn't be assumed, as it is a distinct but readily acquired skill. Never assume that facilitation can be done by any staff member without training. These are the very types of oversights that foster organizational dysfunction such as the Abilene Paradox. Without effective facilitation, less assertive group members are easily silenced and opt out of discussions for simple reasons of frustrated attempts to be heard rather than fear of reprisal or alienation from the group.

Fortunately, not all organizational issues challenge core belief systems of its members. It would be a harder and more exasperating world if they did so. This is important because value-neutral topics allow free and comfortable expression of views, often not self-censored by political posturing or the need for group conformity.

In such situations, two things can happen. The value-neutral issue can be a spark or a damper to communication. It can be a spark if the employees perceive a non-threatening milieu to voice alternative expressions. It can dampen communication if employees don't feel invested

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enough in the topic to contribute genuinely held beliefs about an issue. Many issues don't prick the values or attention of individual staff members. Whether they become active adopters and enforcers of a particular proposed policy or procedure may depend on the weather that day. This is simply prosaic reality and shouldn't be reflexively viewed as indicative of the paradox making mischief.

Management and the Paradox

Organization theory presents ample evidence of lacks of staff communication in response to organizational initiatives that allow questionable decision making to gain traction and organizational support. This evidence is found in a variety of articles, such as "Organizational Commitment," by Angle and Perry, that examined relationships between locus of control and organizational commitment, where noncommunicators in organizations are likely to be employees with high external locus of control.² The psychological concept of Locus of Control was developed by Julian Rotter in the fifties, and the scale tested whether one possessed an internal or external locus of control.³ A personality type guided by high external locus involves the belief that one's behavior and results are guided by circumstances out of one's control (fate, luck, and so on). Those with a high internal locus believe their will and behavior is directed by their own internal decisions and thus feel as if they have more influence on their environment. The Rotter, or locus of control scale, consists in its entirety of twenty-nine paired questions, and references the strength of belief individuals possess about what causes good and bad in their lives and how much control they have over these outcomes.

It can be argued that individuals with high external locus are less likely to be committed to their organizations. This reluctance to commit can be a strong contributing factor to the appearance of the paradox in the organization, because being invested in the organization means caring about decisions and how they get made. Furthermore, if those non-participants truly have a high external locus of control they may feel unable to influence organizational decision making regardless of their actual feelings about the issue being discussed. They may have a strong opinion that will remain unexpressed but that could manifest itself in ways corrosive to function and morale later on. They are easily silenced by high internals who can easily try to control group dynamics.

The paradox comes into play in both small groups and larger, general staff meetings, when leaders address staff members who do not report to them and there is even less incentive for employees to express their true feelings about organizational decisions or directorial pronouncements. This organizational distance can breed both respect and contempt for the perceived authority and knowledge organizational leaders possess, as well as for the assumptions

they possess and display. It is difficult for leaders to remove dissension, dissatisfaction, and even disagreement in such settings because the fear of being an outlier or being separated from the group is potentially larger in a commensurately larger staff setting. Also, the personalities of some library employees make it very difficult for them to express opposition, or anything at all, in large groups.

It is important to emphasize that the paradox does not address the issue of taking sides. Decisions arrived at are of less importance than the circumstances of their arrival. Sometimes, there can be more than one right answer to an organizational question as long as everyone accepts the agreed upon answer and will support and champion it and inculcate it into the work flow or zeitgeist, as the case may be. This type of buy-in will attenuate the impact of unwelcome or unintended consequences of decisions.

The entire crux of the paradox is that lack of open, frank discussion leaves groups unable to identify true consensus or disagreement. Without either, no forward movement can occur, and sometimes tacit, nonconsensual decisions get made, which often impacts the organization negatively. Tacit decision making is not only *not* consensual (recognizing that consent is not always required from the governed in organizational settings) but, more ominously, it is never even fully articulated or refined, even to those that direct the decision making. Examples include assumptions of success in service implementations when actual evaluation is overlooked. The new service may be causing staff to be overworked. It may also be failing to meet stated goals and serving other needs of managers or other select personnel while compromising the broader mission and goals of the organization.

Mismanaged Agreement in Libraries

Virtual Reference has been a service embraced by many libraries in the last several years, instituted to offer a new, in many cases 24/7, access point for regular patrons, while at the same time reaching newer audiences such as teens. Naylor, Stoffel, and Van Der Laan found that chat reference has not measured up to enthusiastic expectations.⁴ Cooperative arrangements allowed libraries to buy in affordably by providing "global" hours to the cooperative answering other library patron's questions in order to offset the cost of providing the service locally to their own patrons. Some examples show evidence of the global tail wagging the local dog, whereby libraries ended up chasing more global hours to offset further costs until they eventually were almost exclusively serving patrons who were not part of their core mission. Combine this with frustrations in providing the global assistance to patrons who were not always receptive to receiving remote assistance after contacting what they thought was their local library, and it's clear that this can create high levels of staff stress and resentment. Monitoring of service queues may indicate

that not all librarians are enthusiastic about picking up global questions, and a process of “cherry-picking” can be observed. It is beyond the scope of this article to examine the disincentives built into this structure for library staff. What is important to our context is that this scenario is a humid breeding ground for mismanaged agreement.

Picture it: the assessment of an ongoing service is largely forgotten while the service is a wheel that would go by itself, albeit creakily and without direction. It settles in as a marginal and possibly unjustifiable service component, costing money and staff time. Worse, many participating staff members are not motivated to provide consistent quality service when the tacit message is, “No one really cares how well we do this. We aren’t serving our own patrons and the software, service standards, and procedures make it difficult to serve others effectively.” Without assessment or commitment, subversive behavior reigns. Managers, of course, duly note hours served for the cooperative and questions answered, and they see success and quiescence everywhere. The end result: mismanaged agreement and consensual neglect.

The Abilene Paradox is at work because no one wants to waste staff time doing work that doesn’t deliver anywhere close to expectations and that doesn’t serve the library’s own constituents. No one wants to waste money and endure the stress of bad software and handicapped service. At the same time, it has become an informally accepted core service component that is not officially sanctioned or challenged. Disgruntled staff members feel powerless to influence the direction of the service. Local jokes among staff about the service are bitter, but the assumption is that nothing can be done. Whatever discussion has already ensued has already been framed and hung. Positions have dried in place. Only personnel change or reassessment of the service can unlock the status quo.

Mismanaged Agreement in Working Groups

Consortia can be a rich breeding ground for mismanaged agreement, partly because the personnel may not be completely familiar with one another and enough at ease to express disagreement. This lack of familiarity can leave participants fumbling for visual cues from body language as they try to discern the intensity and meaning of expressed opinions. Investment may not be complete due to unknown directives from the parent organization of the individual consortium participant or concerns about what priority the consortium endeavor holds for all participants. The consortium may be working together to help the recipient organization administer to a grant, part of which mandates some sort of “partnering” or “collaboration” to build a digitization project focused on creating a single Web portal for a variety of digital projects using shared standards. Over the better part of a year, roadblocks appear but are not

addressed due to the unwillingness of participants to challenge the leadership of the funded organization around setting priorities, meeting deadlines, and resolving Web hosting and project sustainability issues. There may be greater suspicion about motives due to lack of information, but ultimately members fall into mismanaged agreement and mutual frustration is assured.

Coping with mismanaged agreement is commonplace in organizations for a variety of reasons, and vigilance and sometimes gentle confrontation are necessary to draw out the self-censoring participants. One danger of mismanaged agreement is that it provides a false spring of consensus. Causes are many. Lack of commitment by an individual yields an “I don’t care” attitude to decisions made for the group. This is representative of a given percentage of employees who simply cannot be sufficiently committed to group or organization endeavors to fully invest themselves in its future. These employees may be looking for an out, they may be in unsatisfying positions, or they may simply find their personal lives far more enriching than their work lives. Any of these reasons might discourage them from expressing views in opposition to new proposals and initiatives. It is easy for personality types with a high degree of external locus of control to acquiesce or appear to do so for the sake of group harmony. A sense of powerlessness—that one’s opinion doesn’t matter—fosters this in these individuals. Concern for being the outlier and being scapegoated or ostracized is another reason employees don’t wish to openly disagree when decisions are being formed. Ultimately, fear of separation from the group silences some group members.

Irving Janis didn’t coin the phrase “groupthink,” but he operationalized the concept by identifying the symptoms it contains.⁵ Several of these symptoms are common to the Abilene Paradox, particularly self-censorship of deviations from the apparent group consensus. In groupthink, this self-censorship occurs in groups who are highly cohesive and under pressure to make a quality decision. This self-censorship reflects each member’s inclination to minimize the importance of his or her own doubts and counterarguments and to indulge in a shared illusion of unanimity concerning judgments conforming to the majority view. When individuals are committed to the activities of a group, they are less inclined to deviate and honestly explore alternative ideas and decisions because the fear of separation from the group is overwhelming.

Identifying the Paradox in the Workplace

Reducing the influence of the paradox is an important task for library managers. One factor working against success at alleviating the problem of mismanaged agreement is that the status quo is always preferable to change. Restating the Abilene Paradox as follows is helpful: “organizations frequently take actions in contradiction to what they really

want to do and therefore defeat the very purposes they are trying to achieve.” Actions are taken primarily because many stakeholders do not fully recognize themselves as such and are unwilling to express opposition to managerial or directorial initiatives, even if they know the possible negative outcomes (and they often do). Risk-taking through individual expression does not come easily in libraries. This is partly due to the fact that there is often no reward component to risk engagement.

Compounding the problem is that in many organizations silence is often, if not always, interpreted as consent. Not communicating desires and beliefs is not opting out. It is not even voting “present.” It is, in essence, voting in agreement with the organizational initiative. This is not only a failure of commitment to the library’s well-being and success, but subsequent actions can indicate an ethical failure as well. People who participate in the paradox will often privately ridicule decisions rendered despite their reluctance to “go on record” in group discussions over the merit of the initiative. It is hard to argue that this contributes to the future failure of the initiative (it was likely doomed to failure by the original mismanaged agreement), but such behavior does contribute to distrust, fear, and yet more mismanaged agreement as those unwilling to engage in what may be perceived as “management bashing” go underground.

Examples of the Abilene Paradox in Libraries

Example One. At the Boise Public Library, downloadable audio and video now competes for book and database funding. What began as a small collection has required considerable customer support. Providing technical support for downloadable audio has been challenging and time-consuming, requiring staff resources seemingly out of proportion for the size of the collection. An initial customer support procedure was created in-house by a library staffer with little input from the majority of the adult services unit. The procedures made the assumption that staff would function as technical support staff and appeared to underemphasize the role of the vendor in technical support. Several librarians were asked to volunteer to provide key support to patrons. This created a frustrating scenario in which most staff simply immediately passed the buck to these targeted staff members. It was eventually agreed that all adult services staff who answered e-mail reference would prepare themselves to respond to questions pertaining to downloadable audio. However, the quality of service languished, and confusion reigned over who was responding to and following up on questions. There is silent agreement but not necessarily compliance.

In hindsight, it seems clear that staff were generally in solid agreement that providing technical troubleshooting was ill-defined and confused. There were “too many

cooks in the kitchen” and not enough incentive to follow up. There was clearly some unspoken consensus that the vendor already had a procedure in place to handle technical support if the question made the leap from a circulation or library card problem to a genuinely technical one. Separation anxiety was certainly a factor in the majority of staff providing tacit and false buy-in for the support plan as conceived. Consequently, support was haphazard and confused because actual commitment to vaguely agreed upon procedures was clearly lacking. The paradox was clearly at work for staff members. Although privately questioning the procedures to themselves or in small groups, they would not voice dissent through official channels for fear of being seen as lacking commitment to the customer or colleagues.

Example Two. Again at Boise Public Library, during a reference services staff meeting, a discussion is facilitated about expectations for patron technology competencies. Several staff members who are classroom trainers for e-mail, Internet searching, and Microsoft Word are articulate and enthusiastic about providing hands-on assistance to patrons for those and a variety of other programs and tools, up to and including uploading images from digital cameras as attachments in e-mail messages and troubleshooting every type of technology problem a patron may encounter on a library computer. Several staff members are terse or silent participants in the discussion. Their views may include or be influenced by philosophies of what reference service should consist of (versus what it actually is), limiting access to certain technologies that other staff members are currently advocating to patrons, to sequestering all of the Internet recreational users to a separate location in the building, away from the reference desk.

The conversation is not, however, enriched by any of these alternative viewpoints because they are not expressed. Perhaps staff members do not want to sound unhelpful at a time when justifying our services has never been more essential. In addition, advocates for staff intervention may have already been perceived to have won the day with the library administration and are far more visible in other areas of library activities and have many supporters. Thus, the discussion dissolves into placid unanimity and eventually concludes with the appearance of satisfaction and consensus. Henceforth, staff members are all technology interventionists now. But are they?

It is imperative to emphasize that agreement is not always essential in public organizations. Without agreement, it is still possible to provide consistent, high-quality service as long as disagreements are verbalized and managed. Consensus should be the target—all employees accepting the decisions rendered and working to achieve the agreed-upon goals. As managers steer toward agreement, they must evaluate how far they can accommodate disagreement and remain functional. It may be one of the key reasons why mismanaged agreement is not more vigorously challenged and addressed and why it is often allowed

to flourish. This is unfortunate because disagreement should never be seen as a failure or negativity. Citizens in the polis disagree about policy issues all the time, and the United States has not had a revolution in 230 years, one Civil War notwithstanding.

Fear of separation is a real phenomenon. It has been for everyone since leaving the womb. Most individuals have a need to be connected and engaged in an organization or group. Constantly challenging management's authority and its decisions puts individuals at risk of being separated from the relevant business of the organization. At best they are placed in the category of troublemaker from which there is no escape, short of a change in management. Thus, addressing the problem of mismanaged agreement can include managers asking questions of their staff members all the time and comparing the responses they receive. This includes listening to the things they do not hear when they might expect to. Find out what peer managers are hearing. Outcomes and reality are not always in the numbers of a service. Library managers must get out from behind their own two eyes.

It is a challenge to find boundaries for a conscientious manager trying to reduce mismanaged agreement among library staff. Managers are not often comfortable confronting staff members who refrain from participating. This is understandable because there are times when an individual's lack of comment marks a genuine lack of insight or ideas on a given issue and not necessarily mismanaged agreement. In which case, the manager may recognize that their organization has grown habitually unresponsive to staff input.

The collusion inherent in the Abilene Paradox noted by Deiss is often collusion with decisions made by management with which we disagree but have no safe recourse by which to challenge.⁶ Organizations victimized by thin-skinned and insecure leaders tend to suffer most from the paradox as new ideas that disturb conventional management wisdom are generally unwelcome and staff members learn to recognize this and end up submitting to the collective, silent, and wrong-headed will of the organization as defined by its feckless leadership, which is unresponsive to change or criticism. Lacking individual courage, everyone is at fault for chaining the organization to the silent agreement that disagrees with our own values and philosophies of service. Ideas and subgroups inevitably form to gripe about the organization's folly, in private.

One approach, if it is a service or process being discussed, is to have an evaluation process in place from the start. It is necessary to look at what the service is doing versus what it was intended to do—are the things it is accomplishing a net good, even if not what was intended? And can agreement be arrived at on this? Anecdotal evidence from staff involved in the process is as valuable as any numbers crunched. In many cases numbers can be assigned and valuations applied by coding anecdotal responses into categories. Ultimately, a manager needs to

get out front on issues and solicit roadblock opinions from department or organizational opinion leaders. Different settings should be created for dialogue and feedback for those participants who cannot address themselves frankly to large groups or groups with certain adversarial members. Managing mismanaged agreement is often to a great extent the management of personalities.

Summary

The Abilene Paradox describes a quirk of human behavior that reflects our need to remain part of the group. It may be unusually prevalent in personality types exhibiting external locus of control and low organizational commitment. Organizations need to be aware of how the various and sundry unique personalities choose to participate in decision making and consensus building and when it is absolutely essential to draw out their views on policies and procedures. Employee personality testing has enjoyed a bit of a resurgence even as a hiring and recruitment tool in some private organizations. Administering the Myers-Briggs or any other personality type indicator tool may help managers acquire a better sense of who those employees are who are guilty of withholding their contrary views about organizational endeavors. The Myers-Briggs is a questionnaire that attempts to measure how people perceive the world and make decisions. Applying the test to staff and engaging in discussions about findings from willing staff members can be a tremendous self-learning tool for both the organization and individual participants. Organizations strive to create consensus and while doing so need to be reminded of the fact that consensus doesn't have to mean agreement on the issues, but merely acceptance of what the organization decides to do. Participatory disagreement can foster such consensus. Mismanaged agreement cannot.

References

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