



Social and Economic  
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## Recognizing and Overcoming False Consensus In Groups and Organizations

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There are many reasons why groups and organizations need to encourage their members to express their differences in order to be successful. If an organization overemphasizes teamwork and group loyalty and excludes the airing of differences and concerns, it can seriously damage the group. The reasons become clearer when one studies two kinds of group behavior that minimize conflict. One is known as the "Abilene Paradox" and the other is called "Group Think."

### The Abilene Paradox

"The Abilene Paradox" is named after a situation that occurred on a hot dusty day in Coleman, Texas. Four adult family members were relaxing on the front porch when someone suggested they go to Abilene for dinner. One by one, each family member indicated they wanted to go. After a hot and dusty trip, one family member said she would rather have stayed home. Gradually, each family member revealed the same sentiments. In reality, no one wanted to go. Later on, this phenomenon was observed in community organizations and private firms.

The Abilene Paradox occurs when group members take an action or "go to Abilene" when no one really wants to go. Essentially, it is the inability of a group members to handle agreement. It occurs frequently in organizations and groups.

### Symptoms of the Abilene Paradox

1. Organization members fail to communicate their real desires or beliefs to one another. They do just the opposite. The data in effect says, "It's a great idea. Let's go to Abilene."
2. With invalid and inaccurate information on the table, organization members arrive at results that are counterproductive to the organization's intent and purposes.
3. As a result of taking actions that are counterproductive, members experience frustration, anger, irritation and dissatisfaction with the group. Subgroups are likely to form that blame other subgroups or authority figures for the organization's dilemma.
4. The cycle repeats itself --- an inability to manage agreement occurs frequently. Fortunately, the Abilene group recognized the process and did not repeat their mistakes.

### There Are Several Reasons Why The Abilene Paradox Occurs:

1. Action anxiety. Thinking about acting in accordance with one's intuition can make some people extremely anxious. It easier to go along with the crowd.

2. **Negative fantasies.** Some individuals and groups conjure up negative fantasies about owning up to their beliefs and interests. Few ask if such fantasized consequences are likely.
3. **Real risk.** Individuals do not take the time to assess the real risks of saying no.
4. **Fear of separation.** Ostracism can be one of the most powerful punishments devised. The fear of separation has led White House staff members to engage in illegal activities they don't really support or research groups to fund projects they don't believe in.

### **Group Think**

Group Think is different from the Abilene Paradox. Group Think occurs when some members of the group want to take a course of action while other members will hide their questions or disagreement about the proposed action.

Irving Janis (1979) coined the term, "Group Think," after he analyzed how important governmental decisions on foreign policy were made. He found that group emphasis on team building and consensus impaired decision making, reality testing and moral judgement. He reached his conclusion after examining the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, the American decision to invade North Korea, the failure to read the warning signals about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the Vietnam War.

### **Symptoms of Group Think:**

Janis found there were up to eight major symptoms of Group Think:

1. An illusion of invulnerability which creates excessive optimism and taking extreme risks;
2. Collective efforts to rationalize and discount warnings about the inadequacies of group assumptions;
3. An unquestioned belief in the group's inherent morality;
4. Stereotyped views of enemy leaders as too evil or too dumb to warrant genuine attempts to negotiate;
5. Dissenting opinions are viewed as disloyalty to the group;
6. Self-censorship occurs. Each member of the group minimizes his/her doubts and counter arguments;
7. Shared illusion of unanimity conforming to the majority view. Silence is viewed as consent;
8. The emergence of self-appointed mind-guards who protect the group from adverse information.

In attempting to maintain consensus, only a few courses of action are considered. The group spends more time considering arguments for the plan than against and optimism about the plan causes the group to overlook setbacks or to prepare contingency plans in the event of failure.

### **Avoiding the Pitfalls of False Consensus:**

There are several steps organizations can take to avoid the false consensus of the Abilene Paradox or Group Think. These steps are not prescriptive for all groups. Each group will have to develop its own plan to minimize the pitfalls of conflict avoidance. Some steps to consider include:

1. The group should openly recognize that differences and conflict strengthen organizations;
2. Individuals should be encouraged to express their differences with each other;
3. The group should intentionally seek voices to be part of the group that may be different from the majority -- voices that can offer fresh ideas;

4. The group can systematically examine the negative and positive consequences of its proposed actions;
5. The group can make links with other groups that have other perspectives.

#### Questions For Group Discussion:

#### The Abilene Paradox:

1. Have you been in a group that went to "Abilene" when no one really wanted to go? Why do you think it happened?
2. What could a community, group or organization do to make sure that they would not relive the Abilene Paradox?

#### Group Think

3. Have you been in a group that had some or all of the symptoms of group think? How did you feel as a member of the group?
4. What should a group do to make sure that Group Think does not occur?
5. Can we avoid Group Think and still encourage group loyalty? If so, how?
6. How could you voice your differences in ways that do not destroy relationships or the group?

#### References:

Harvey, Jerry B., The Abilene Paradox and Other Meditations On Management, Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1988.

Irving, Janis, Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign Policy Decisions, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972.

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