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SPEAKER PRESENTATION SUMMARY

ABILENE PARADOX:  
MANAGEMENT BY AGREEMENT

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## THE ORIGIN OF THE ABILENE PARADOX

The fundamental problem of contemporary organizations, broadly defined to include families, churches, governments, businesses and academic institutions, is the inability to cope with the fact that we agree with one another. The problem is not the inability to cope with conflict. In fact, most conflict in organizations of all kinds is phony, and is unconsciously generated in an effort to keep us from having to do anything significant.

After making the above statement, Harvey recounts the origin of the Abilene Paradox. The story, in short, is how his entire family agreed to take a rather unpleasant trip to the town of Abilene, Texas, despite the fact that no one individual wanted to go. Each person agreed to go because they thought everyone else wanted to go.

## THE ABILENE PARADOX

Organizations frequently take actions contrary to the desires of any of their members, and defeat the purposes they're designed to achieve.

The corollary to the Abilene Paradox is that the inability to cope with agreement, not conflict, is central to organization dysfunction.

According to Harvey's experiences, the Abilene Paradox can occur in the bedroom, boardroom, oval room, and the airport. He then cites several instances, illustrating each example.

**THE BEDROOM:** A young woman approached Harvey, telling him how depressed she was because she was supposed to get married at the end of the week, but she didn't love her fiance. In fact, she didn't even like him. She felt compelled to marry him because she had already accepted the engagement ring, he was a good guy, she didn't want to break his heart, all the guests were on their way, and she didn't want to back out and cause her mother to have a heart attack. Later on, her fiance approached Harvey and said he was depressed because he was to be married at the end of the week and he didn't love or even like her! But he was going through with it because he had already proposed to her, she was a good woman, he didn't want to break her heart, all the guests were on their way, and he didn't want to cause his fiance's mother to have a heart attack. The outcome was that they got married, although neither wanted to, and eventually they divorced.

**THE BOARDROOM:** A company was planning to undertake a project that would, if it failed, bankrupt the company. Although each key employee believed the project was doomed to failure, no one said anything because each thought that everyone else knew better or knew more than he did. Eventually, after the company started their "journey" to Abilene, Harvey stepped in and voiced his opinion, which was merely a representation of everyone else's opinion.

**THE OVAL ROOM:** The Watergate bugging turned out to be a trip to Abilene. When questioned as to why the bugging occurred, each participant testified that he didn't think it was a good idea and couldn't see any valid reason to do it. It was illegal, immoral and served no political purpose. Yet they did it. Each participant went along with the plan thinking that the others all wanted to and that they knew something the others didn't. This was an example of a trip to Abilene with the whole country going along for the ride!

**THE AIRPORT:** A man on a business trip begins to fantasize that, upon his return, his wife will be waiting to greet him while wearing her negligee' and holding a bottle of champagne. She'll tell him her mother is watching the kids, and that they have a reservation at a nearby hotel so they can have a romantic weekend together. Her fantasy, while waiting for him, is that he'll arrive with a dozen roses and announce to her that he has made reservations at a fancy restaurant and an expensive hotel so they can spend a romantic weekend together. But, upon actually greeting each other, they get into an argument and end up spending the weekend apart.

### CAUSES OF TRIPS TO ABILENE

When a group of employees get together and engage in masochistic tendencies, it is called teamwork and the employees are praised. When an individual engages in masochistic tendencies, it is called crazy and he is hospitalized. Unfortunately, trips to Abilene are prevalent with teamwork.

At this point in the presentation Harvey has the members get into small groups and try to remember any trips to Abilene that they might've taken in the past. The groups then share these trips. Harvey does this to bring up the issue of what causes these trips to Abilene.

**ACTION ANXIETY:** When confronted with a potential conflict, each person knows a sensible action he would like to take and he can state it. But when it comes down to taking that action, he withdraws. One reason some one may do this is because of negative fantasies. Negative fantasies are the fantasies of disaster that we conjure up about what will occur to us if we behave sensibly, ie. "I'll get fired," "I'll break his heart," "I'll look stupid." Negative fantasies have a purpose: If I, who have the fantasies, convince you, who does not have them, that they are true, I'm released from any responsibility to solve the problem. So, if a subordinate of yours approaches you with a sensible suggestion accompanied by a series of negative fantasies, what he is really doing is asking for a bus ticket to Abilene. And if you, as his superior, pay any attention to those fantasies, then you are saying, "Not only can you have a ticket to Abilene, I'll drive!"

**EXISTENTIAL RISK:** Fear of the unknown. This fear affects everyone in all cultures. The ultimate unknown is death. Death is the ultimate negative fantasy. We are not, naturally, really afraid of the unknown. We are afraid of what we know. You can see this in children. Children are curious and fascinated by the unknown. What they are afraid of, however, is separation.

**ANACLITIC DEPRESSION:** Fear of separation. Anaclitic depression is a form of depression which occurs in all normal people when someone they lean on for emotional support is taken away. It doesn't necessarily have to be a person that is removed. An idea can be taken away and cause someone to suffer from anaclitic depression. This depression can lead to marasmus. Marasmus means to waste away. If you suffer from anaclitic depression, you can become marasmic.

Connection with others is a requirement for survival. Any act which threatens us with disconnection creates anaclitic depression in all normal people in the same way that withdrawing oxygen will create life-threatening problems. In other words, the broken heart is not a figment of the poet's imagination. When a large company lets go of 60,000 people, you know in advance that one-third of them will suffer anaclitic depression and will require medical intervention. It will follow a particular format. It takes 18 months to run its course, and it occurs in stages.

1. **Anger:** This anger is directed toward the company.
2. **Depression:** This is anger reversed and focused inward.
3. **Apathy:** This is anger spread about.
4. **Detachment:** At this point, the company could rehire the individuals, but they would never be the same. Just as a heart is never as strong after a heart attack, the employees' spirits, as well as their dedication to the company will never be the same.

All trips to Abilene come out fear of anaclitic depression. All of us have experienced it. A divorce, a death, or even moving from one town to another creates anaclitic depression. Unfortunately, the probability of anaclitic depression increases as soon as we decide not to say anything, because saying something may create a situation which would cause separation. A young married couple having problems and afraid of divorce may not bring up their problems, in an attempt to solve them, for fear that the mention of the problems will lead to an argument which could lead to divorce.

### HOW TO DETERMINE WHEN YOU'RE ABOUT TO TAKE A TRIP TO ABILENE

1. When people say one thing in public and another thing in private, you can be sure the bus to Abilene is on its way.
2. Agreement is a problem. This is true because once you agree with others, you have to share in their existential risk. If a subordinate can maintain conflict with a superior, then the subordinate can share in the rewards of the effort, but not share the risks of failure.
3. Collusion. It takes collusion to take a trip to Abilene. Everyone has to be in agreement.
4. There is real and phony conflict. Real conflict involves concrete differences, ie. "I love you" or "I don't love you." Phony conflict is the scapegoating behavior that occurs after an agreement has been mismanaged.
5. Responsibility and choice. Everyone has an equal responsibility and an equal choice to break the trip to Abilene. The power to break the paradox comes not from one's position in the hierarchy or job description, but from one's willingness to take the risk. But that involves confrontation. Confrontation, generally, is defined as negative fantasy.

Harvey defines confrontation as the search for reality and truth. You may find love or hate or profit or loss or agreement or disagreement. The most powerful form of confrontation is confirmation. Confirmation is the process of affirming in other people what they already know to be true. It is the most underused management skill available. The most powerful thing that any manager or president can do is to tell someone something they already know.

**GROUP TYRANNY:** There is a belief in our culture that groups are tyrannical; that individuals act in conflict with groups. There is a belief that there is an inherent conflict between individuality and groupness, and in order to deal rationally, you have to be divorced from the group. Group pressure is a culturally sanctioned negative fantasy designed by psychologists to give individuals reason to be irresponsible. Group pressure seldom occurs, but as long as we believe it occurs, we don't have to run any risk. The tyranny of groups comes not from the reality of group tyranny, but from a belief in the culturally sanctioned negative fantasy of group tyranny.

### CIRCUMVENTING TRIPS TO ABILENE

The following are all policies that reduce anaclitic depression.

1. Job security and reciprocal obligation.
2. Daywork. You can work at several places simultaneously and receive financial and emotional support from different sources.
3. The right to participate. The right to veto any decision that will negatively affect your employment.
4. The willingness to explore the ethical, moral and spiritual issues of management.

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Dr. Jerry Harvey, a professor of management science at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., has served as a consultant to a wide variety of industrial, governmental, religious and voluntary organizations. Dr. Harvey is involved in research dealing with ethical, moral and spiritual issues of organizations.

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