



Volume 6, Issue 2 – February 25, 2014

## The Abilene Paradox

- **In the Abilene Paradox, groups collectively take actions contrary to what they really want to do.**
- **Passive agreement with the status quo sends us on our own unique roads to Abilene.**
- **To avoid unwanted “trips,” confront uncomfortable situations openly and directly.**

One hot summer day, social psychologist Jerry B. Harvey and his entire family took a sweltering, dusty and long 106 mile trip to Abilene, Texas for a mediocre dinner. Upon returning home, it became clear that no one had really wanted to go, but they all agreed because each person believed everyone else wanted to go. According to Dr. Harvey, groups of people often collectively decide on a course of action different than what the individuals in the group want or know to be right because each of them does not want to do anything to “go against the flow” or to “rock the boat.” Ultimately this phenomenon became known as “the Abilene Paradox.”

Probably, we all have probably experienced similar “trips” in the workplace. We do not want to appear too pushy or confrontational by requesting additional information on a transaction, so we just sign the invoice and move on. We do not want to second guess a coworker, so we do not follow up on a troublesome reconciling item, but instead convince ourselves that it will eventually resolve itself. We do not confront a coworker who we believe has a lifestyle problem, such as gambling or other addiction, which is having a serious effect on the employee’s work performance. All of these instances of passive agreement with the status quo defeat our internal control systems and send us on our own unique roads to Abilene.

Undoubtedly, ignoring blatantly unethical or illegal actions by people in your agency can be the most serious of all. Fear of retaliation or loss of the job may prompt an employee to ignore warning signs of inappropriate conduct or even agree to participate in questionable agency activities. When requested by a supervisor or some other powerful agency employee to do something inappropriate or illegal, it may be tempting to go with the flow

and not speak up, but simply do whatever was asked, despite what your conscience might be telling you. However, remember that this is collusion. It takes collusion to take a trip to Abilene. Everyone has to be in agreement.

Each of us has a choice and an equal responsibility to prevent a potential trip to Abilene. It is each and every employee’s responsibility to report suspected fraud, misconduct, or other risky behaviors through your agency’s designated reporting channels. By not speaking up, you and your fellow employees will probably suffer more negative consequences in both human and economic loss, than had someone spoken up sooner. In other words, you may opt to take the trip rather than run a short term risk of being labeled as “not a team player” or “disloyal”, only to encounter a much larger set of negative effects down the road.

Do not let the fear of peer pressure send you and your coworkers on a trip to Abilene. Instead, confront uncomfortable situations openly and directly. You and your organization will be better off as a result.

*Suggested action steps:* Can you recall any group decisions you and/or your coworkers recently made that caused you to take a trip to Abilene? Does your agency culture promote a questioning of authority and does it reward employees when they take the risk of speaking up? Do what you can to encourage employees to participate and voice their opinions, even in uncomfortable situations.

If you have questions, please contact Jeanine Kuwik at [Jeanine.Kuwik@state.mn.us](mailto:Jeanine.Kuwik@state.mn.us) or (651) 201-8148.