

## The Abilene Paradox: 7 Tips for Effective Communication in Business Meetings

By Lyndsay Swinton

Why go to the far away town of Abilene when no-one wants to go? That's the example paradox given by Jerry B. Harvey to explain the phenomenon of groupthink – the arch enemy of effective communication in business meetings.

The Abilene Paradox explains why groups often come up with a solution no-one expressly wants or cares about (a camel is a horse designed by a committee : >). Unseen pressure to conform curtails creativity, dissent and singular thought. Effective communication in business meetings is about all of those things – disagreement,

expressing opinions, voicing concerns – and harnessing the energy to create a solution that people want and care about.

Avoid visiting the far away town of Abilene by following these tips for effective communication in business meetings.

### **1. Speak up everyone!**

Create an environment where people can speak up without fear of mockery, reprisals or condemnation. Use meeting “ground-rules” written up on a flip-chart, to ensure everyone in the meeting understands what behaviour is expected and acceptable.

### **2. Stick to plan**

Agree and stick to an agenda. Don't go off topic, however interesting a diversion this may be.

### **3. Two ears, one mouth!**

Let one person speak at a time. If this proves hard to enforce, maybe use a

“talking stick” or some other object which is held by the speaker and passed to the next speaker.

#### **4. Empty vessels make the most noise**

Increase the thought put into individuals' contributions by encouraging them to write down their points before it is their turn to speak.

#### **5. Agreed? Let's move swiftly on**

Avoid “violently agreeing” within the group – if you have achieved consensus, move on and don't waste time discussing why the idea is so good.

#### **6. One meeting one memory**

Take comprehensive notes on a flip chart, for all to see, that way you'll reach agreement quicker than if everyone is taking their own, slightly different, notes. Publish these notes quickly after the meeting.

#### **7. Get a reputation**

Behaviour breeds behaviour, so be consistently good at running meetings and in turn, your meetings will become more effective.

The Abilene Paradox explains why people often do the things that damage the group most, whilst trying to achieve the best for the group. Avoid going to Abilene by following these tips for effective communication in business meetings.

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