

# Exploring the Abilene Paradox in Uganda: Pretended Agreement in Decision Making

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*In this paper, the author explores the phenomena of pretended agreement or failure to manage agreement in decision making in Uganda. The paper draws from scholarly works based on Harvey (1988) in what he popularized as Abilene Paradox. A case involving academic staff at Makerere University Business School is given. Basing on the literature and an unstructured inquiry, sources and symptoms are discussed, and ways to minimize this management dilemma highlighted. The author recommends a study to document practices in Uganda to provide suggestions to save organizations this costly behavior.*

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## INTRODUCTION

There is high concern to manage conflict and disagreement in organizations to ensure smooth work relationships. Many studies related to conflict have been done. Organizations have policies and guidelines to achieve this. Little is heard or known of ‘managing agreement’. There is less or no management of agreement and how decisions are ascertained. In this occasional paper, the presenter explores what Dr. Harvey (1988) has popularized as the *Abilene Paradox*. Drawn from his own 1974 experience, it is a journey that individuals as well as organizations make, wasteful, costly and at times disastrous, when they fail to manage agreement. The paper points out scenarios where individuals in a perceived teamwork process, make a decision when individually none of them agrees to it. The paper draws from scholarly works and a contextualized local inquiry with various Ugandans. It enlists a real case and the reasons for such behavior. Some symptoms and hints on how to avoid the situation are shared. With local evidences of *trips to Abilene* the paper suggests a formal research into this management dilemma to highlight experiences of organizations and individuals.

## BACKGROUND

Decision-making is a key element in managing organizations. Operations may get to stand still when there is failure or delay to make a decision. Many organizations have policy guidelines for decision-making. When those involved in this process fail to agree conflicts will arise. This will be resolved using available framework. However there is a less explored concept of how to manage agreement. Many meetings are bogged down deriving decisions but when members perceive that there is agreement, no attention is given on how to manage neither the process nor the outcome. Swinton (2005) argues that effective communication in business meetings is about disagreement, expressing opinions, voicing concerns and “harnessing the energy to create a solution that people want and care about”. There could be a real serious gap in the agreement when team members individually do not agree with the team decision. This is the concept of pretended agreement. It is a common limitation in team building. The explanation may range from cultural values, personality issues, and team building gaps, organizational rigidities, and lack of policy framework to lack of managerial skill in steering the decision process. The attention that organizations put on conflict management should equally be for management of agreement.

## THE PARADOX

Four adults are sitting on a porch in 104-degree heat in the small town of Coleman, Texas, some 53 miles from Abilene. They are engaging in as little motion as possible, drinking lemonade, watching the fan spin lazily, and occasionally are playing the odd game of dominoes. The characters are a married couple that has paid a courtesy call on the wife’s parents. At some point, without meaning it, the father suggests that

they make a drive to Abilene to eat at a cafeteria there. The son-in-law thinks this is a crazy idea but doesn't see any need to upset the old man, so he goes along with it, as do the two women. They get in the un-air-conditioned car and drive through a dust storm to Abilene. They eat a mediocre lunch at the cafeteria and return to Coleman exhausted, hot, and generally unhappy with the experience. It is not until they return home that it is revealed that none of them really wanted to go to Abilene—they were just going along because they thought the others were eager to go. Naturally, everyone sees this miss in agreement as someone else's problem! When they talked about it, every one denied having supported the trip. The writer, thus concludes, 'Here we were, four reasonably sensible people who, of our own volition, had just taken a 106-mile trip across a godforsaken desert in a furnace-like temperature through a cloud-like dust storm to eat unpalatable food at a hole-in-the-wall cafeteria in Abilene, when none of us had really wanted to go. In fact, to be more accurate, we'd done just the opposite of what we wanted to do. The whole situation simply didn't make sense'. It was paradoxical!

### **SOURCES OF PRETENDED AGREEMENT**

Reasons why people actually speak against their own desires are both social and psychological. They are rooted in dynamics of intra and interpersonal relationships. It is believed, according to Harvey (1988) that people behave in this manner because they are afraid of the unknown. It is generally to do with fear of loneliness, being left out, separation, and alienation. To avoid these, people will actually act against their best interests, hoping to be part of the whole.

In many organizations, members tend to believe that any decision or action is better than none at all. Today many business enterprises are drawn into such *trips to Abilene*. Various Scholars agree that this situation also occurs when members are deciding under the situation of uncertainty or risk – when there is partial information or none at all respectively. The drive to act together, to be seen as a team, overrides the need to be explicit about group assumptions, desires, opinions, and even facts. Psychologists call this "action anxiety, social conformity or social cognition". The members are held up in fantasies wondering what could be the group reactions if they spoke out their minds – in disagreement of what everyone thinks is agreement! Individuals have different decision making algorithms and there are different group-think patterns (Rich and Art 1999, Anderson 1999, Holden 1999, Wikipedia 2009). Michel (2008) emphasizes this point in these words: "*It is a well known phenomenon from social psychology that people are reluctant to voice minority opinions. When a whole group of people seems to agree on a course of action but you have doubts about it, there is a bit of psychological hurdle to speak against it*"

### **EXPLORING THE PARADOX IN UGANDA**

An investigation was made among various individuals. All people asked about this concept remembered having experienced such behavior. There were costs, bad image and faults that were suffered by their organizations and themselves individually. There are deep dimensions to this paradox. The inquiry revealed the following underlying reasons for pretended agreement among Ugandans. The views are in support of the reviewed literature.

- i. First, the belief that the organization 'is not mine and I alone will not accomplish all there is to be done'. Members feel that the organizational decision should not stall because as an individual one has realized a gap. Thus each individual goes by the perceived agreement of the team.
- ii. Lack of adequate information in decision processes. Leaders and managers tend to use inadequate information to manipulate others. Members are made to believe that all is well. Feeling internal inadequacy, each team player assumes that his or her dissent will reveal the lack of appreciation for the little information available, most often from the bosses. Members may also be held in this ransom where they do not have adequate information and individually think opposing the idea will be show of self-ignorance.

- iii. Within many organizations in Uganda, there is a tendency of pretence. Many organizational members see the reality but pretend to please the bosses. It may go along the old adage that ‘bosses are always right’.
- iv. There is a socio-cultural dimension to the many trips to *Abilene* in Ugandan organizations. Many Ugandans are held in the web of cultural beliefs rather than show of individual dissent when a gap has been identified. Culturally, those interviewed agreed, when in a meeting and an elder of a sort has presented a decision direction it is not right to vehemently oppose him or her.
- v. Conflict avoidance is another common reason for trips to *Abilene*- meetings where decisions are taken are just one in many aspects that bring together organizational members. It is believed to be wrong to oppose a colleague when you will interact in other aspects of organizational life. Pretended agreement is used as a way of preserving relationships for a ‘rainy day’ when it will be one’s turn seeking the support of colleagues. A network of such thinking ends the group on trips to *Abilene* often at a very high cost.
- vi. Organizational structures were also cited in the evidences that contribute to pretended agreement. The tall bureaucratic setups are prone to *Abilene trips* due to complexities in reaching the final decision. At the operational level members feel the higher echelon will be more critical while as the latter feel that the former were more critical to have forwarded such a decision for endorsement. Structures that do not provide checks and balances in decision taking often fall prey to this.
- vii. Respondents also shared a lot of experiences on how poorly meetings are managed in Ugandan organizations. There are hidden agendas, poor attendance, held in a rush, communication is received late, work documents are circulated late or never given out, facilities are poor, at times the agenda is very long, some members are denied chance to contribute, audibility is wanting, attendance is a times not checked and worst, meetings always start late and by the time of decision making members are exhausted. They agree with any idea put forward.
- viii. Communication problems are also a common cause – many organizations lack a feed-forward system that is critical to being pro-active. Many managers depend on feedback, often too late to refine the decision. Many individuals do not have opportunity to air out their feelings during meetings.
- ix. The issue of team building was explored. But those talked to did not accord it a strong linkage to poor decision making. From literature, pretended agreement is enshrined in immature team processes (Kathryn, 1999). A tentative proposition is that Ugandan organizations are still indisposed with the concept of team building. Teamwork is assumed to be an obvious outcome of people being assigned tasks to work on together. In MUBS for instance, a course in a given program is handled by a team of lecturers. In many such teaching groups however, there no teamwork.

### **SYMPTOMS OF PRETENDED AGREEMENT**

We can point out key manifestations that the meeting or group is due to experience pretended agreement. Individuals in a group that is failing to manage agreement effectively can detect the following symptoms amongst themselves:

- i. Members are submissive, restless and at times hostile.
- ii. Sub-groups form in the meeting, there is lack of initiative to the agenda, combative or blaming positions become frequent.
- iii. Members individually, but privately, agree about their current situation.
- iv. Members agree, again in private, about what it would take to deal with the situation but are reluctant to express it.
- v. Members fail to communicate their desires and/or beliefs to one another, and, most importantly, sometimes even communicate the very opposite of their wishes based on what they assume are the desires and opinions of others. Senge (1994) explains that communication comes from the inside of the person and once there is internal pressure not to do, but one has to do so, the result is wrong expression of the intended message.

- vi. People make incorrect assumptions about consensus openly or inwardly. This begins the sequence of individual agreement with the concept in spite of each person's private misgivings about the desirability and wisdom of the collective action.
- vii. An icebreaker point is reached, often after the decision is taken. This could be an expression of frustration, fatigue, anger, exasperation, assumed excitement or compliment.

#### **CASE OF MUBS ACADEMIC STAFF IN MISMANAGED AGREEMENT**

*It is still in the mind of some academic staff but no one wishes to talk loud about it. Possibly hindered by the pronounced subjudice principle of not commenting on an issue before the courts of law or more strongly not to talk about actions of past leaders of the Academic Staff Association (MUBASA). It is a relatively cool afternoon on 18th. September 2006. A meeting of MUBASA has been called to deliberate on the current issues. The wrangle between MUBS and her parent institution, Makerere University has reached fever pitch. It has swallowed in cabinet, parliament, the national council of higher education and the high court. MUBS has declared independence and has instituted structures in effect of a university status. This follows a legal opinion in a judgment by the high court in a case involving Makerere University and a student previously studying at MUBS. The mass media is having a field day. High level meetings are taking place but government is yet to pronounce herself on the developments. MUBASA executive does not wish to act in isolation of members' views. A meeting is called and attendance is exceptionally high. The main item is to seek members' views on the MUBS council decision to establish University structures. The meeting supports this position but is concerned with the moves by the Ministry of Education and Sports to block the process. In the meeting a proposal is forwarded, aptly discussed and a consensus vote taken. A resolution is thus passed to sue the Ministry of education for interfering in a high court pronouncement. The Executive is mandated to get a lawyer and each member would contribute Ushs. 30,000 towards the legal costs. No objection is raised. The meeting ends.*

*Lecturers come out in a jovial mood and in various patterns are exchanging a variety of opinions. A few days later, from this author's interaction with members, individuals start to wonder whether such a decision was wise. Questions arising range from the rationale to the shs.30,000 deductions from members' remuneration to pay legal fees. Wouldn't the School pay for such litigation? One member breaks the ice. He circulates a minority report on the staff mail. It raises fresh thinking of whether the lecturers are fighting a battle that is in their mandate. Is suing the line Ministry sensible?*

*A survey conducted reveals that many of the academic staff including some on the executive never thought such a decision was wise. Individually they did not support it. 'For various personal reasons, it was not wise to object!' this response is chorused by several of those talked to. But, it was too late; the dusty trip to Abilene had been undertaken, and at a high cost.*

The writer rests the case here as any more could be subjudice. The case is still before the courts of law. Some sections of the suit have however been negated by the events that have unfolded over time. The cost of this group-think decision is still being felt. In a nut shell, members may be destined to repeat this unsatisfying and dysfunctional behavior if they do not begin to understand the genesis of mismanaged agreement. Such scenario, with its realities and ramifications is just one case of the many that account for decision inefficiencies in the Ugandan Public Service system (Bagire, 2008).

#### **AVOIDING THE TRIP TO ABILENE**

Building from the literature search, the MUBASA case, and views obtained from respondents, it is possible to improve the management of agreement in organizations.

- First is building a system of healthy and effective organizations, by aspects of task designs, role identity, process clarity and organizational structure. This was illustrated by Harvey (1988) when he argues that structures are important in avoiding unwarranted decision making.

- Building new communication habits and getting beyond fears of information sharing in meetings. Swinton (2005) gives the following tips: stick to the agenda, have one person speaking at a time, take comprehensive notes and have a good conductor.
- Openness in meetings or decision-making requires individual resolve to refuse being victimized on grounds related to the decision. If this is in-built among individual psychology it will be hard to be absorbed into decisions one does not agree with. In the MUBASA case, some staff revealed a fear to be seen as opposing the wave of change that had swept the structures of the institution. When one member distanced himself openly from the decision, there were replies blaming him for being reactionary, a coward, and anti-progress! The majority of the members stood on the fence.
- Alienation in teamwork processes leads to individuals wanting to 'keep the spirit'. If the team is immature scenarios of Abilene are prevalent. As teams mature members become open and easily identify amongst themselves manifestations of pretended agreement. Organizations should undertake team building exercises. This will build a system of dialogue in the decision process where members test the agreement so far reached by raising assumptive dilemmas to the action being proposed. (Rich and Ross, 1999).
- Team leaders should first let open doors to any decision suggestion, implore members to critique the proposed action and galvanize thinking. This will out rightly dissuade individuals who would pretend to agree. The MUBASA presidium tried this pointer but the decision environment caught them off guard and was swept into the van.
- Tactical delays – this writer has experienced circumstances where a tactical delay to implement a decision reveals the pretense. Members may open up before the cost is incurred. If the MUBASA Executive had tactically delayed to get the lawyer to start the court process, on reason of technical consultations, it would have been possible to detect the paradox that engulfed the decision.  
This paradox is important in management development, leadership training as well as a practical guidance to consultants in team building. When time comes for a group to make a decision, the members should ask each other, 'are we going to Abilene?' ; this makes decisions legitimate not merely a kind of group-think ( Mc Avoy and Butler, 2006).

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Management of agreement should be in concert with managing conflict in running organizations. Conflicts lead to wastage and bitter relationships but mismanaged agreement has worse consequences. The paper explored this concept and paradox. The presentation was based on the experience and writings of Dr. Harvey and the popularized *Abilene Paradox*. The presenter picked line from various writers on pretended agreement and commentaries on Harvey (1988). The writer, since 1999 when he reviewed the concept while working on an MBA class assignment on team building, has found interest in this management dilemma. It is common among many local groups and stretches to public offices. He has used it in team building and leadership training. His efforts to out rightly point out the pretense amidst tensions in the decision process have saved some groups the cost. An informal search was done to raise ground for further study. This paper has highlighted the paradox from a real life experience of the lecturers at Makerere University Business School. With evidences of local scenes of pretended agreement and the literature available, the writer recommends a further study into this practice among organizations in Uganda. The research will document practices, reasons thereof and propose practical solutions to save organizations the costs of pretended agreement in their operations.

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