

## **AVOIDING ABILENE: BREAKING OUT OF GROUPTHINK**

by Dr. Bea Carson

### **Introduction**

Have you been trapped in the frustration of meetings that were not functioning well?

Have you sat in a meeting where you did not speak your mind because you knew the risk, or the futility of it? Perhaps you suffered in more bad meetings than you participated in useful ones. Did meetings, when nothing of value was accomplished, seem a terrible waste of time, yours and everyone else's? Reflecting on it later, did you wonder what it was that caused the teams to be so ineffective?

The situations that led to these non-working meetings tend to fall into three categories:

- 1) We are so sure that everyone is in agreement that we don't want to be the lone dissenting voice.
- 2) Our team has always been "right." We have been on the cutting edge for as long as anyone can remember – therefore we must be "right" now.
- 3) The boss says we must – therefore we must.

After biting our tongues through these exasperating meetings, the next thing we know something blows up (figuratively or literally) and we berate ourselves for not having said something. What causes this ineffective – actually, dysfunctional – behavior and how do we stop it? Let's start by putting names to those three situations described above.

### Scenario 1 – Abilene Paradox

Your boss recently heard about a great new technology. At a meeting, he asks if that system would accelerate a project that is already behind schedule. Your gut tells you “this is a bad idea,” but no one else seems troubled. Moreover, the undercurrent you believe you heard was “we must do it.” Good money is thrown after bad, trying to blend this new technology into the floundering project. As time goes on, it gets harder to bring it to the attention of your boss. Finally, when all is lost, the project is scrapped. During the post mortem, the truth comes out – everyone had seen the writing on the wall, but had relied on everyone else’s “good sense” and opted to go along with what they believed was the majority. Dr. Jerry Harvey captures this behavior in the story of Abilene.

*The Parable of the Abilene Paradox* is a short story about Dr. Harvey’s family living in West Texas in the early 60s. Four adults (Jerry, his wife, and his in-laws) 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 and playing dominoes. At some point, his father-in-law suggests they drive to Abilene to eat at a cafeteria there. Jerry thinks this is a crazy idea but everyone else seems to want to go, so he agrees that it sounds like a good idea. They get in their family car (which lacks air-conditioning) 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 are back home that it is revealed that none of them really wanted to go to Abilene – they were just going along because they thought all the others were eager to go.



Dr. Harvey used this wonderfully simple parable to illustrate what he believes is a major symptom of organizational dysfunction. He warns of the dangers of “management of agreement” – as opposed to management of disagreement or conflict.

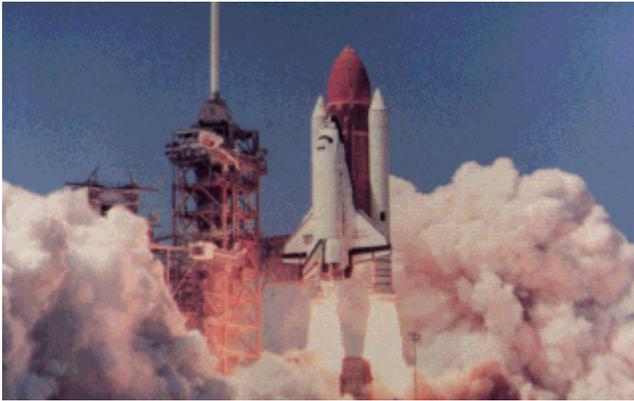
His unique perspective shows us how we do not engage in deep inquiry or self-disclosure when attempting to come to a consensus with others. If we are certain that everyone else is in agreement, we do not express our own conflicting opinion.

Contrast that with the phenomenon of “groupthink,” where the members of the group all truly believe they are doing the right thing.

## Scenario 2 – Groupthink

You have just joined a new team. The first meeting you attend you are given the low-down. You hear the history: “When we brought this to market, we were five years ahead of the competition. We are still regarded as the experts in the field. Our customers adore us and will do whatever we say.” Then you are introduced to the team that is the brains behind the product. Within minutes it is clear to you that “the gurus” are viewed as gods and nothing they say or do is open to question. You take your cue and join the flock in following the lead. Janis identified this phenomenon as “groupthink.”

Janis shows that in a mid- to highly-cohesive group the presence of specific foregone conclusions creates a greater probability that the group will demonstrate the symptoms of groupthink. Janis defines the term “groupthink” as “a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group ... members’ striving for unanimity



overrides their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action ... a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures.”

More simply, if they have always been right, but you suspect that something is amiss, how can you challenge their track record? You are trapped into agreement even if you strongly suspect there is a problem.

In groupthink, the defective decision-making is a result of the participants not evaluating alternative paths. Rather, they have become so convinced of their prowess that they do not believe they are capable of making a bad decision.

This contrasts the phenomenon known as Organizational Silence, where the group is afraid to contradict a decision made by an authority figure.

### Scenario 3 – Organizational Silence

The VP of engineering has invited you into his inner circle; you see this as an extraordinary opportunity, so you accept. You attend the first meeting with his leadership team. The VP gives you an assignment that is totally off the wall. Everyone in the room seems to agree with the VP.

You have some questions, so you raise your queries anyway. Rather than a discussion ensuing – the VP chews you out. He gives an ultimatum – take the assignment or you are off the team. You acquiesce. As the team leaves the meeting and the VP heads back to his office, the mumbles start. Everyone is agreeing how inane the project is – as well as the insanity of the boss. But – the boss is the boss. Morrison and Milliken identified this phenomenon as “Organizational Silence.”



Morrison and Milliken illustrate the concept of organizational silence through the story of the *Emperor's New Clothes*. In this story, the emperor believes he has purchased a spectacular garment, which makes him invisible to fools. This being the case, the emperor marches through town in his “new clothes” to see the reaction of the fools among the local gentry. The townsfolk praise the emperor for his exceptional taste in clothing. In organizational silence the same phenomenon is seen. Employees do not speak the truth to their superiors in an effort not to appear foolish. Frequently, they go to the extreme of praising the executive's decisions in spite of being aware of the pitfalls associated with it.

Argyris first defined this phenomenon more than a quarter of a century ago. He discussed that there are often powerful norms that prevent employees from saying what they know about issues. This was true for both technical and political issues. Redding refers to the syndrome as “don't rock the boat,” using numerous examples of organizational cultures that espouse that paradigm. Some disguise this under the heading of “organizational commitment.” As Redding points out, employees are expected to be committed to the organization – but not the other way around. Under this imbalance of power, employees quickly learn to keep their opinions to themselves.

## Problem Solving



Traditional methods of problem solving tend to follow a similar pattern. A memo is issued indicating “we” need to get together to solve a specific problem. When the group enters the room, typically two or three people have already determined what the solution is. These ringleaders tend to have very dominant personalities and spend the session talking past each other, each attempting to prove that he has the right solution. In the best of circumstances this will lead to a lively debate; traditionally, it leads to one of the dysfunctional scenarios described above.

The key consequence experienced by dysfunctional organizations is defective decision-making, which arises because:

- 1) The group has been disempowered;
- 2) The group either lacks diversity or, what diversity of thought there was, has been stifled;
- 3) The group avoids giving or receiving negative feedback;
- 4) Cultural issues exist which prevent the group from speaking up.

All lead to poor decision-making.

In the *Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge describes a **learning organization** – where individuals continually expand their ability to create, where continual learning is not only encouraged but also nurtured. Collective aspirations are set free and individuals are always supported in their efforts to discover how to learn with each other.

To end the dysfunctional behaviors that have led to defective decision-making, the organization needs a significant change in culture. The philosophy needs to be changed from one that has prized the old way of doing business to one that values the elements of a learning organization. Action Learning is a powerful tool for creating this change in culture. It breaks the old mold of doing business and replaces it with one that respects and values questioning.



## **ACTION LEARNING**

Action Learning is a dynamic process for problem solving, building teams, and developing leaders. It consists of six components:

- 1) The problem,
- 2) A group of 4-8,
- 3) A commitment to learning,
- 4) A process that encourages questioning and listening,
- 5) A resolution to take action, and
- 6) An action learning coach.

Action Learning is a powerful method of building mutual respect into an organization's training program. It teaches people to continually question, creating an environment where "because that's the way we have always done it" becomes an unacceptable answer. It empowers employees to handle the permanent white water that is part of everyday life. It sets the process in motion that allows strategies to be continually flexible.

Action Learning is effective for solving dilemmas of all sizes. It is most powerful for solving problems that require creative, out-of-the-box solutions. (It is ineffective for solving puzzles, that is, problems with a single solution.) Senge describes a need to get away from institutional training and generate a learning environment; Action Learning creates this environment. It teaches people to question and think about how to do it better, rather than blindly continue the old way of doing tasks.

### *Action Learning Coaching*

The Action Learning coach brings the power of individual coaching to the group level, but is even more powerful because Action Learning groups work only on real problems requiring real solutions. The action learning coach not only establishes rapport with the group members but also builds empathy between group members. Through the Action Learning process the group members self-awareness is not only raised by the coach, but also by virtue of the of the process. Rather than setting goals for the group, the coach leads the group to set its own goals. The feedback from the coach takes the group to a deeper level of learning. Instead of just focusing on "what" has transpired, the coach leads the group to understanding the "how" and "why" of its actions. Finally, by focusing the group on learning, rather than just solving a problem, the coach takes the group to extraordinary levels of renewal and growth.



The Action Learning process on the surface appears fairly simple but, in truth, is extremely powerful.

### *Action Learning Process*

A typical action learning session starts with the coach establishing the ground rules. The coach will have one participant state, in two to three minutes, the problem the group needs to consider. (The time limit on this prevents the team members from being led down a pre-resolved path.)



At this point, the problem solving begins, with team members asking questions of each other, as well as the person who presented the problem. In addition, the presenter asks questions. With each question, the seeds of the solution are planted.

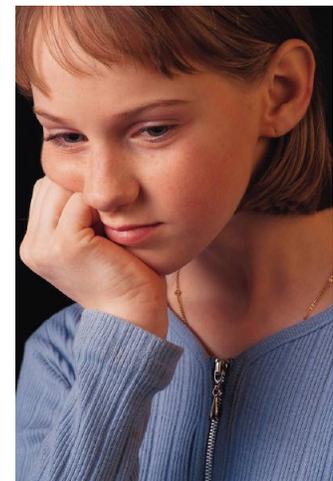
During the questioning, the coach listens for learning opportunities; they present themselves in several forms. The simplest is an early intervention. This one takes place typically within the first ten minutes of a session. The purpose is to determine how the group has started as a team, but more important, it is a time to insure everyone is participating.

The other two opportunities the coach looks for are:

- 1) When things are going astray, or
- 2) When things are going particularly well.

On each occasion, the coach will test how the group feels it is doing – digging deeper. Through this process, the team will discover if there are issues they have been hiding below the table and surface them, allowing the air to be cleared of the tension, and the group to focus energies on being a better team and solving the prime issue.

The problem solving is done in two stages. The first focuses on coming to a consensus as to what the problem is. As has been seen in many Action Learning sets – the conflict that is typically presented is merely a symptom of the true problem. The coach plays a key role in insuring the group reaches consensus on the problem before allowing the group to move to the solution stage. The coach accomplishes this by recognizing when the conversation shifts from dissecting the problem to moving to a solution. When the coach becomes aware of the shift, an intervention is in order. During this intervention, the coach will have each person write down what he or she understands the problem to be. Once everyone has written his or her concept of the issue, each member will read what he or she has written. This exercise of writing and reading “the problem” forces individuals to each consider what each believes is the conflict.



Typically, the participants do not have consensus during a first intervention of this nature. The power of this exercise is seen in the questions that follow this intervention. As the participants hear what others believe the problem to be, they recognize aspects they had not previously seen. Many first time participants of Action Learning find this process frustrating; they are used to jumping into the solution mode of problem solving without considering what the real problem is. What they quickly discover is that as they dissect the troubling situation, they are actually planting the seeds for the solution. Regardless of how certain the participants were of the nature of the problem when they entered the problem-solving session, this exercise quickly opens their eyes to other possibilities.

### *Pattern of learning*

Action Learning groups tend to show similar patterns. The process starts slowly – the members typically find it hard to ask questions. After the first intervention, the process begins to pick up; the coach draws all members into the conversation and helps them figure out how to communicate better. In addition to determining how to ask better questions, and work better as a team, the coach probes to insure the members know *why* certain actions will work better. Action Learning coaches restrict their participation to asking questions, and letting the members find the answers for themselves. This questioning process forces the participants to reflect – thinking about the impact of their actions. With each intervention, the participation becomes more intense.

Particularly exciting sessions occur when a group reconvenes after taking a night off. The subconscious – having worked all night on the learnings and the problems – creates an intense



fire when the group reconvenes in the morning. This new relationship between the group members infiltrates their day-to-day activities from that moment forward; conversations shift from statements to questions because those who have participated in action learning realize the real power is determining what is *not* known, not showing off what is known. The Action Learning coach is the catalyst who causes this transformation to occur.

### **Action Learning – Answer to Organizational Dysfunction**

Action learning focuses on questions – asking questions to fully understand the problem before moving to a solution phase. As Marquardt stated, in *Action Learning in Action*, "By focusing on the right questions rather than the right answers, action learning focuses on what one does not know, as well as what one does know." Action learning is more than problem solving; Pedler tells us it encourages the participants to also reflect on the learning and personal

development. This questioning and reflection is so new to many of us that the first time participants engage in an action learning session they tend to start very slowly. Groups must be able to identify and confront their dysfunctional behavior.

### *Empowerment*

One of the key elements of Action Learning is that the group must be empowered to do something about the decisions they reach. More than just being empowered, the group is required to define, specifically, what will be done as a result of their action learning set. For Action Learning to work at its peak, the groups should work only on real problems that are in their purview to resolve. The group will take greater ownership in the process if it will be expected to follow through with the solutions that were determined. This requirement can be met in one of two ways – either the person with authority is a member of the Action Learning set or the person with authority gives authority to the group.

Within an Action Learning set, all participants are equal. Even if persons at different hierarchies within the organization are present, their rank is quickly forgotten during the problem processing. If this equality does not happen naturally through learning interventions, the coach will ensure that it happens. The coach does this simply by asking questions that bring the group to understanding the power bestowed by working as equals.

### *Diversity*

The coach generates participation of all members through learning interventions. During these interventions, the coach draws everyone into the conversation. The coach accomplishes this in two ways: the first, through asking questions that all members must answer; the second, by asking questions during the learning interventions that lead participants to understand the importance of diverse views.

### *Negative Feedback Avoidance*

The coach helps the group to come to better means of processing by recognizing issues within the group. As these issues, which lie below the surface are recognized, the coach will ask questions to expose the internal conflict. This airing of these issues allows the team to move past them – preventing them from further interfering with the interactions of the group members.

### *Cultural Issues*

A marked change can be seen in how members of the group behave in all future encounters. This change is seen not only in verbal communications, but also in written communications. After participating in an Action Learning set the members quickly discover the power of questions. They learn that the true power in problem resolution is to ask questions about the aspects they do not



understand. They come to understand that by making statements and showing off what they know, they learn nothing new. This shift in attitude has been seen repeatedly with Action Learning groups – chance meetings in the hall as well as email exchange focus on asking questions to expand knowledge as opposed to making statements that simply grandstand. This shifted approach to problem solving brings the group to discover powerful out-of-the box solutions they had not considered in the past.

### **Conclusion**

As Barnard stated, in *Functions of the Executive*, more than a half century ago, “...a fundamental element of organizational functioning is individuals with diverse skill and experiences coming together to work and solve problems.” In today’s white water world of change, this definition is inadequate – before solving the problem, individuals must FULLY understand the problem.

The atmosphere of an Action Learning session goes beyond encouraging the use of questions to solve problems – it makes it a requirement. By doing this, individuals who had been afraid to question a defective decision now have a forum where it is a mandatory – and safe – mode of operating.

In each of the dysfunctional modes described at the beginning of this paper, the participants had stopped questioning. Worse than not questioning the solution, they did not question the nature of the problem. In the Abilene Paradox – no one questions because each believes everyone, other than him or herself, is in agreement. In groupthink, the members of the group believe they are above question. In organizational silence, the members know better than to question the boss.

Action Learning brings back the epistemological curiosity that takes us to new heights of learning. Initially, the questioning is a mandatory constraint thrust upon the group. By the end of the first sessions, participants embrace the power of questions, not only during planned problem solving, but also as a way of life.

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