



**Turning lemons  
into lemonade**

# Unit 1 The Benefits of Public Conflict Instructor's Guide

## Public Conflict Resolution

This unit focuses on identifying the negative and positive aspects of conflict. Mental models of dealing with conflict will be addressed. The role of conflict avoidance and an overemphasis on team building in organizations will be explored. This session will lay the groundwork for addressing conflict constructively.

### **Purpose**

Conflict is a part of all organizations and communities. The purpose of this session is not to eliminate conflict, but rather to find ways that enhance its positive contributions to organizations and people and to minimize the destructive elements of conflict.

### **Objectives**

As a result, participants will:

- Understand the positive and negative aspects of public conflict.
- Understand how false agreement can lead to more conflict.

### **Time**

One Hour

### **Materials Needed**

Flip Chart and Easel  
Markers  
Overhead Projector

### **Overheads**

- 1 What Is Conflict?
- 2 Lippitt Quote
- 3 Dying Communities
- 4 Successful Communities
- 5 a-b Positive Aspects of Public Conflict
- 6 a-b Negative Aspects of Public Conflict
- 7 Why Accent the Positive Aspects?
- 8 Symptoms of the Abilene Paradox
- 9 Reasons for the Abilene Paradox
- 10 Group Think
- 11 Symptoms of Group Think

## Handouts

1. The Abilene Paradox (copies for five actors only)
2. Recognizing and Overcoming False Consensus

## Directions

1. Introduce the topic of conflict by having a group discussion of the following questions:

## Overhead 1

- a. When you hear the word “conflict,” what kinds of images or words come to mind? Display **Overhead 1**, “What Is Conflict?”.
- b. As a child, how were you taught to deal with conflict?
- c. Was there a gender difference in the way conflict was approached in your family?
- d. Describe a conflict or potential conflict you had recently. How did you deal with it? What were the results?
- e. In your experience, what contributes to successful or unsuccessful conflict resolution?

Ask participants whether they perceive each word used to describe conflict in part A as positive or negative.

2. Present the quote by Gordon Lippitt.

## Overhead 2

“Conflict is a predictable social phenomenon and should be channeled to useful purposes. The goal of organizational leadership is not to eliminate conflict, but to use it.” (**Overhead 2**)

3. Make the following observations:

## Overhead 4

“Successful communities and organizations anticipate conflict and work on it in ways that keep relationships intact.” (**Overhead 4**)

## Overhead 3

“Dying communities and organizations avoid conflict or work on it in ways that destroy relationships.” (**Overhead 3**)

## Overhead 5 a & b 6 a & b

4. Ask the group to identify ways conflict is negative and ways that it can be positive. The trainer can also use **Overheads 5 a & b and 6 a & b** to summarize the positive and negative aspects of conflict.
5. Ask the participants why we want to focus on the positive aspects of conflict. Why not humiliate and demonize those who have different values, goals or behavior?

## Overhead 7

The trainer uses **Overhead 7** (Why Accent the Positive Aspects) about the “Shadow of the future.” In essence, we emphasize the positive aspects of conflict because we want to sustain a relationship with another group or party. We don’t know what the future holds for the parties in dispute. They may need each other’s help or support later on.

For example, think of the United States' relationship with the former Soviet Union. Even though the two nations had polarized perspectives, there were many attempts to share ideas and to behave towards each other in respectful ways. Conflict became an opportunity for dialogue rather than a bitter war.

6. The next step is to talk about some of the pitfalls of conflict avoidance. Ask five participants to take on the five roles in the Abilene Paradox. Hand each of the five participants the Abilene Paradox script and let them act out the parts.
7. After the enactment of the Abilene Paradox, the trainer asks the group if they have been in groups where the organization’s members went to “Abilene?”
  - a. Why did they go?
  - b. What could have prevented it?

## Overhead 8

8. The trainer uses **Overhead 8** to discuss the symptoms of the Abilene Paradox.

## Overhead 9

9. The trainer uses **Overhead 9** to discuss the reasons why the Abilene Paradox occurs in groups. Feedback is solicited from the group about each point.

## Overhead 10 & 11

10. What happens when some people want to go to “Abilene” and others don’t want to go, but they all end up going to “Abilene” anyway? The trainer discusses another conflict avoidance problem in groups called “Group Think.” **Overheads 10 and 11** are used.
11. The trainer asks how conflict avoidance problems like the Abilene Paradox and Group Think can be minimized in groups. The participants brainstorm ideas that the trainer records on a flip chart.
12. The trainer distributes the handout on “Recognizing and Overcoming False Consensus In Groups and Organizations.”



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Unit 1  
The Benefits of Public Conflict  
Handouts



# The Abilene Paradox Handout 1

## Public Conflict Resolution

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Five volunteers are needed to play the roles of the narrator, Jerry Harvey, Beth Harvey, Mary Smith and Al Smith. The narrator stands at a podium to the side while the Harveys and Smiths sit at a table or in a semicircle facing the audience.

**Narrator:** "Let's step in on Jerry Harvey and his wife Beth Harvey and Beth's parents, Joe and Mary Smith. The Harveys are visiting the Smiths for a week of vacation. That July afternoon in Coleman, Texas (population 5,607), was particularly hot -- 104 degrees. In addition, the wind was blowing fine-grained West Texas topsoil through the house. But the afternoon was still tolerable -- even potentially enjoyable. A fan was stirring the air on the back porch; there was cold lemonade; and finally, there was entertainment. Dominoes. Perfect for the conditions. The game requires little more physical exertion than an occasional mumbled comment, 'Shuffle 'em.' and an unhurried movement of the arm to place the tiles in their appropriate positions on the table. All in all, it had the makings of an agreeable Sunday afternoon. Then something happened."

**Joe Smith:** "Let's get in the car and go to Abilene and have dinner at the cafeteria?"

**Narrator:** "Jerry thought, 'What, go to Abilene? Fifty-three miles? In this dust storm and heat? And in an un-air-conditioned 1958 Buick?'" But his wife chimed in.

**Beth Harvey:** "Sounds like a great idea. I'd like to go. How about you Jerry?"

**Jerry Harvey:** "Sounds good to me. I just hope your mother wants to go."

**Mary Smith:** "Of course I want to go. I haven't been to Abilene in a long time."

**Narrator:** "So off in the car they went. The heat was brutal. Perspiration had cemented a fine layer of dust to their skin by the time they arrived. The cafeteria's food could serve as a first-rate prop in an antacid commercial. Some four hours and 106 miles later, they returned to Coleman, hot and exhausted. They sat silently in front of the fan for a long time. Then, to be sociable and to break the silence, Jerry decided to speak."

**Jerry:** "It was a great trip, wasn't it?"

**Mary Smith: (after a long pause -- irritated)**

"Well, to tell the truth, I really didn't enjoy it much and would rather have stayed here. I just went along because the three of you were so enthusiastic about going. I wouldn't have gone if you hadn't pressured me into it."

**Jerry:** "What do you mean 'you all?' Don't put me in the 'you all' group. I was delighted to be doing what we were doing. I didn't want to go. I only went to satisfy the rest of you. You're the culprits."

**Beth: (shocked)**

"Don't call me a culprit. You and Daddy and Mama were the ones who wanted to go. I just went along to keep you happy. I would have had to be crazy to want to go out in heat like that."

**Joe Smith: (irritated)**

"Aw, heck. Listen, I never wanted to go to Abilene. I just thought you might be bored. You visit so seldom I wanted to be sure you enjoyed it. I would have preferred to play another game of dominoes and eat the leftovers in the icebox."

**Narrator:**

"After the outburst of charges and countercharges, they all sat back in silence. Four reasonable people had just taken a trip that they did not want to go on. Later on, Jerry Harvey labeled this phenomenon as "The Abilene Paradox" or the inability to handle agreement. As Jerry Harvey studied organizations, he found that many groups blunder into the "Abilene Paradox." They go on excursions where they don't want to go on. Out of fear for conflict, individuals don't express their real concerns. But in

failing to communicate their real concerns, individuals create a situation that leads to even more conflict than before."

Source for Abilene script: Harvey, Jerry B., The Abilene Paradox and Other Meditations on Management, Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1988.



# Recognizing and Overcoming False Consensus In Groups and Organizations Handout 2

## Public Conflict Resolution

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There are many reasons why groups and organizations need to encourage their members to express their differences in order to be successful. If an organization overemphasizes teamwork and group loyalty and excludes the airing of differences and concerns, it can seriously damage the group. The reasons become clearer when one studies two kinds of group behavior that minimize conflict. One is known as the "Abilene Paradox" and the other is called "Group Think."

### **The Abilene Paradox**

"The Abilene Paradox" is named after a situation that occurred on a hot dusty day in Coleman, Texas. Four adult family members were relaxing on the front porch when someone suggested they go to Abilene for dinner. One by one, each family member indicated that they wanted to go. After the trip, one family member said she would rather have stayed home. Gradually, each family member revealed the same sentiments. In reality, no one wanted to go. This phenomenon has been observed in community organizations and private firms.

The Abilene Paradox occurs when group members take an action or "go to Abilene" when no one really wants to go. Essentially, it is the inability of group members to handle agreement. It occurs frequently in organizations and groups.

### **Symptoms of the Abilene Paradox**

1. Organization members fail to communicate their real desires or beliefs to one another. They do just the opposite. The data in effect says, "It's a great idea. Let's go to Abilene."
2. With invalid and inaccurate information on the table, organization members arrive at results that are counterproductive to the organization's intent and purposes.
3. As a result of taking actions that are counterproductive, members experience frustration, anger, irritation and dissatisfaction with the group. Subgroups are likely to form that blame other subgroups or authority figures for the organization's dilemma.
4. The cycle repeats itself -- an inability to manage agreement occurs frequently. Fortunately, the Abilene group recognized the process and did not repeat their mistakes.

### **There Are Several Reasons Why The Abilene Paradox Occurs:**

1. Action anxiety. Thinking about acting in accordance with one's intuition can make some people extremely anxious. It's easier to go along with the crowd.
2. Negative fantasies. Some individuals and groups conjure up negative fantasies about owning up to their beliefs and interests. Few ask if such fantasized consequences are likely.

3. Real risk. Individuals do not take the time to assess the real risks of saying no.
4. Fear of separation. Ostracism can be one of the most powerful punishments devised. The fear of separation has led White House staff members to engage in illegal activities they don't really support for research groups to fund projects they don't believe in.

### **Group Think**

Group Think is different from the Abilene Paradox. Group Think occurs when some members of the group want to take a course of action while other members will hide their questions or disagreement about the proposed action.

Irving Janis (1979) coined the term, "Group Think," after he analyzed how important governmental decisions on foreign policy were made. He found that group emphasis on team building and consensus impaired decision making, reality testing and moral judgement. He reached his conclusion after examining the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, the American decision to invade North Korea, the failure to read the warning signals about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the Vietnam War.

### **Symptoms of Group Think:**

Janis found there were up to eight major symptoms of Group Think.

1. An illusion of invulnerability which creates excessive optimism and taking extreme risks;
2. Collective efforts to rationalize and discount warnings about the inadequacies of group assumptions;
3. An unquestioned belief in the group's inherent morality;
4. Stereotyped views of enemy leaders as too evil or too dumb to warrant genuine attempts to negotiate;
5. Dissenting opinions are viewed as disloyalty to the group;
6. Self-censorship occurs. Each member of the group minimizes his/her doubts and counter-arguments;
7. Shared illusion of unanimity conforming to the majority view. Silence is viewed as consent;
8. The emergence of self-appointed mind-guardians who protect the group from adverse information.

In attempting to maintain consensus, only a few courses of action are considered. The group spends more time considering arguments for the plan than against it, and optimism about the plan causes the group to overlook setbacks or to prepare contingency plans in the event of failure.

### **Avoiding the Pitfalls of False Consensus:**

There are several steps organizations can take to avoid the false consensus of the Abilene Paradox or Group Think. These steps are not prescriptive for all groups. Each group will have to develop its own plan to minimize the pitfalls of conflict avoidance. Some steps to consider include:

1. The group should openly recognize that differences and conflict strengthen organizations;
2. Individuals should be encouraged to express their differences with each other;
3. The group should intentionally seek voices to be part of the group that may be different from the majority -- voices that can offer fresh ideas;
4. The group can systematically examine the negative and positive consequences of its proposed actions;
5. The group can make links with other groups that have other perspectives.

### **Questions For Group Discussion:**

#### The Abilene Paradox

1. Have you been in a group that went to "Abilene" when no one really wanted to go? Why do you think it happened?
2. What could a community, group or organization do to make sure that they would not relive the Abilene Paradox?

#### Group Think

3. Have you been in a group that had some or all of the symptoms of Group Think? How did you feel as a member of the group?
4. What should a group do to make sure that Group Think does not occur?
5. Can we avoid Group Think and still encourage group loyalty? If so, how?
6. How could you voice your differences in ways that do not destroy relationships or the group?

### **References:**

Harvey, Jerry B., The Abilene Paradox and Other Meditations On Management, Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1988.

Irving, Janis, Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign Policy Decisions, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972.