PRM 522 Module 3A AVP Transcript

Most of you, like me, do not enjoy conflict and often deal with conflict the best we can under the current circumstances. The Abilene Paradox is also known as the problem of failing to communicate. This topic comes from Jerry Harvey’s 1974 Parable of the Abilene Paradox. Harvey uses this parable to teach what he calls “the management of agreement”, as opposed to the “management of disagreement or conflict”.

In his parable, a married couple and the husband’s in-laws are sitting in the couple’s living room at their home in Coleman, Texas. They are playing a game of dominoes while drinking lemonade and striving to survive the 104-degree heat. The oldest member of the family who was the wife’s father suggested that they all drive their car to Abilene, which is about 53 miles away from their home, and eat at a local diner in Abilene.

Even though the elder’s son-in-law does not really desire to make the trip in the heat, he goes along with the idea. So do the other two women. They take off on the trip and end up driving through a severe dust storm near Abilene. The family is traveling in a non-air-conditioned 1968 Buick. No one in the party truly enjoys the less than awesome lunch. After finishing the meal, they all get back in the sweltering car and drive back to the house. All of them are covered in sweat, are extremely grumpy, and exhausted.

Later that evening, they discover that none of them really wanted to go to Abilene to begin with but had went because they thought that everyone else wanted to go. They did not want to let one another down.

This parable is a perfect example of how we often “follow a group consensus in order to get along” even though we might disagree with others in the group. We don’t want to stand out from the crowd, but by keeping quiet, we often cause the group we are part of to waste its time. This behavior is the same in organizations where we fail to speak up and end up allowing our company to waste time, effort, and money.

Specific characteristics of this behavior include:
- Members may individually disagree with the decision, and sometimes there is some consensus with one or more other members.
- There is also an agreement by the dissenters about how to better deal with this situation.
- Yet, the dissenters fail to communicate their opinions and in fact, often communicate the opposite and support the situation based on their incorrect perceptions of other group members.
- Based on all of these unclear and inaccurate perceptions and assumptions, members end up making a collective decision to proceed with the decision.
- After the decision has been made and the outcome is achieved, all group members experience frustration and anger with the organization.
- Lastly and most disturbingly, is the fact that members will repeat these unsatisfying behaviors unless they attain an understanding of the mismanaged agreement concept.

Harvey believes that we willingly experience the Abilene Paradox because of our deep fear of being left out or our desire to be a part of something larger than ourselves. The question you must answer is how can you, as a leader, avoid these unnecessary trips to the Abilene Paradox? My suggestion to you is to first know that it exists. Second, take time to develop healthy communication and trust with all team members. Third and lastly, take the time to communicate and get to know your team members before the project begins. Make sure
there is a clear understanding about the organization’s objectives, mission, and more specifically, its priorities and desired outcomes for the project you are working on.

End of presentation