



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Bus Ticket to Abilene

I don't know if there is anybody who has managed to survive a fire service education without hearing about the trip to Abilene. For those that recall it, you will remember it as a story about going along to get along and the negative consequences of such behavior. The trip to Abilene has often been characterized as a "group think scenario" where a bunch of people who don't want to do something convince each other that they should do it because they all agreed to the fact that it needs to be done. Then they all regretted it. Have you ever been there yourself?

The Abilene paradox was first introduced by management expert Jerry B. Harvey in his article *The Abilene Paradox and other Meditations on Management*, back in 1988. The name of the phenomena comes from an anecdotal story which Mr Harvey used to illustrate the paradox. I always found it interesting that the story started in Coleman Texas, but that is only a personal bias.

Many trips to Abilene start around staff tables in fire departments. One of the characteristics of the trip to Abilene is that individuals are not honest with one another about their true feelings and subsequently allow consensus for the wrong thing to be built up. As Harvey suggests in his theory that some of our problems emerge from not being able to manage agreements as well as we should.

It is bad enough if you take a trip to Abilene. But it is even worse if you, as Fire Chief are buying the bus tickets for everybody else to take the same trip.

This month's column is really aimed at the entire idea that consensus building has another side. That side is consequence assessment of group think. Let's take an issue, any issue that you need to obtain consensus to move forward. What can you do to avoid the Abilene phenomenon? The answer is amazingly simple and at the same time intensely complex. The solution to avoiding taking a trip to a disaster is to have the organization operate at a trusting mood before the crisis occurs. You have to develop candidness in communication. Creating Candidness and Comfort at the same time is not an easy task.

In previous columns I have talked about concepts of trust and loyalty. I suppose I am suggesting that you revisit both of these concepts in the context of this topic. This is because trust and loyalty are not the sort of thing that you build up under crisis. They are built up under the best of circumstances in which individuals feel free to express their opinions without negative reaction. When negative reaction does exist it can create a poor environment for consensus building. Sometimes people are afraid to speak their minds – the result; groups think.



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What I am talking about is the process of engaging in meaningful dialogue when involved in a crisis. Most everyone today recognizes that polarization has many negative consequences. All one has to do is to take a look at the political world today and realize that polar politics are making it almost impossible to come up with good public policies.

My recommendation in dealing with controversy is that both sides set clear guidelines regarding human behavior before you engage in the resolution of the problem. Among those guidelines are considerations of such things as dealing with facts instead of emotions. When two or more people can deal with each other in confidence that they are both looking at the same facts, people feel free to express their opinion. Candidness requires both parties to simultaneously be accountable to listen to the other side's point of view even if they don't like it.

If there has ever been a time in the fire service in which we needed to avoid bad consensus building it is now. This phenomenon plays itself out in labor relations, budget reduction exercises dealing with organizational change and a whole host of activities.

The next time you are sitting down around the table and you are beginning to face a problem that you realize is going to have consequences, then do you perform a mental health check to make sure that everybody is looking at the problem the same way? If you can't honestly say that you know what to expect during a meeting, then it is possible that you really missed the bus to head to Abilene.

Going along to get along might be desirable at the beginning of the trip but it is unlikely to be a satisfying experience when you arrive at the destination. Jerry followed up his book with one entitled *How Come Every Time I Get Stabbed in the Back, My Fingerprints Are on the Knife*, so I can't help but think that he recognized that many trips to Abilene were initiated by the very person that is supposed to stop them from happening. That person is the leader.