

Advances in Project Management Series¹

Team dynamics and the perils of agreement

By Prof Darren Dalcher
Director, National Centre for Project Management
University of Hertfordshire, UK

Project managers are accustomed to avoiding, and overcoming disagreements inside the team, amongst stakeholders, with suppliers and with others senior managers, sponsors and leaders. Indeed, the abilities to remove or resolve conflict and deal with contradictions are highly prized in leaders in most domains.

Project management has followed a similar set of traditions and assumptions. The 6th edition of the APM Body of Knowledge focuses on the seven crucial interpersonal skills, which include conflict resolution, alongside communication, delegation, influencing, leadership, negotiation and teamwork. Similarly, The 6th edition of PMI's *A guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge* makes multiple references to conflict management, before addressing it as a key area under the Project Resource Management knowledge area, identifying it as a key interpersonal and team skill, alongside decision making, emotional intelligence, influencing, and leadership. IPMA's Individual Competence Baseline also makes a reference to the area of 'conflict and crisis' under the people section, given the need to moderate or solve conflicts and crises.

'Conflict can be defined as different objectives and attitudes between two or more parties. Conflict management is the process of identifying and addressing differences that, if left unresolved, could affect objectives.' (APM, 2012; p. 56)

'The success of project managers in managing their project often depends on their ability to resolve conflict.' (PMI, 2017; p. 348)

'The potential means of resolving conflicts involve collaboration, compromise, prevention or the use of power.' (IPMA, 2015; p. 86)

The Oxford Dictionary defines conflict as: a serious disagreement or argument, typically a protracted one; a prolonged armed struggle; or, a serious incompatibility between two or more opinions, principles or interests. Given the implication of disagreement between ideas, beliefs or perspectives, it is only natural that managers and leaders try to minimise disagreements and maintain harmony and balance.

¹The PMWJ *Advances in Project Management* series includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Gower in the UK and by Routledge publishers worldwide. Each month an introduction to the current article is provided by series editor **Prof Darren Dalcher**, who is also the editor of the Gower/Routledge *Advances in Project Management* series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. To see [project management books published by Gower and other Routledge publishers, click here](#). Prof Dalcher's article is an introduction to the invited paper this month in the PMWJ.

But what if the core of our problems stems from agreement rather than conflict?

The real problem with agreement

Variation is highly cherished, especially in teams, in order to avoid homogenous thinking and problem resolution. Nature also favours variation as a mechanism for infusing diversity, resilience and flexibility. Design is often informed by the creativity that emerges from the conflict between ideas, needs and perspectives.

Project teams bring together a diversity of opinions, views and team members encouraging a wider spectrum of approaches designed to avoid the uniformity and conformity of groupthink and encourage diversity through challenge. And yet, project managers often seek to banish conflict in order to simplify decision making, reach consensus, and limit the potential for disagreements and blockages in systems, plans and the execution of initiatives.

The approaches for addressing the harmful impacts of excessive conflict are well featured in the literature, but what about the harmful impact of violent (or perhaps, silent) agreement? Can agreement, which after all seems to be the outcome of effective conflict resolution, become powerful enough to undermine a good project or destabilise a good team? Can absolute agreement derail success?

A journey to Abilene

US management scholar Jerry B. Harvey (1974) captured the risks of agreement in the following tale.

On an extremely hot July afternoon, a couple is visiting the wife's parents in Coleman, Texas. The temperature of 104 degrees combines with a persistent wind that re-distributes the topsoil throughout the house to make being outdoors unpleasant. But as they settle on the back porch, the family has an old-fashioned fan, cold lemonade and is becoming engrossed in a game of dominoes. This has the makings of an agreeable, if slightly lazy afternoon, in Coleman, until the father-in-law suggests that they take a trip to Abilene, 53 miles North, to have dinner in the cafeteria.

The husband is concerned about making the journey, given the heat and dust storm, and the need to travel 53 miles each way in a non air-conditioned 1958 Buick.

However, when his wife retorts '*sounds like a great idea. I'd like to go. How about you, Jerry*', he fears being out of step with the others, promptly replying, '*Sounds good to me*', before adding a final opt out clause, '*I just hope your mother wants to go*'.

The mother-in-law also appears to be up to the task, responding with '*Of course I want to go, I haven't been to Abilene in a long time*'.

The drive turns out to be long, dusty and very uncomfortable. The food in the cafeteria is extremely disappointing, described by Jerry as fit for a '*first rate prop in an antacid*

commercial'. Four hours later they return to Coleman, hot, bothered and exhausted, as they all collapse in front of the fan on the porch.

To break the silence one of them dishonestly says: *'It was a great trip, wasn't it?'*. The mother-in-law angrily retorts that she would rather have stayed at home, but was swayed by the enthusiasm of the other participants, as she felt pressured to join in.

The husband questions the version of events, stating: *'I wasn't delighted to be doing what we were doing. I only went to satisfy the rest of you.'* The wife responds, *'I just went along to keep you happy. I would have had to be crazy to want to go out in the heat like that.'* Finally the father-in-law confirms that he only suggested the excursion because he thought the others might be bored, and because the visits are seldom, he wanted everyone to enjoy the day. Personally, he explains, he would have preferred another game of dominoes on the porch and eating the leftovers from the icebox.

The group then sits back in silence, reflecting on the 106-mile trip through the desert that nobody wanted, and the food that no one enjoyed.

While each participant would have preferred to sit comfortably and relax on the porch, the entire group travelled to Abilene and back under terrible conditions, in the mistaken assumption that they were doing it for the sake of the rest of the group.

Many groups and organisations take their own Abilene journeys... Jerry B. Harvey summarises it thus: *'When organizations blunder into the Abilene Paradox, they take actions in contradiction to what they really want to do and therefore defeat the very purposes they are trying to achieve.'* (ibid.; p. 18)

Managing agreement

Organisations often find themselves embarking on unnecessary, and counterproductive journeys to their own version of Abilene. Lewis asserts that while many theorists advocate the development of conflict resolution approaches in the belief that the management of conflict is a key concern, the real challenge faced by most organisations is actually the need to manage agreement!

'Inability to manage agreement may be the major source of organization dysfunction' (ibid. ; p. 18)

The characteristics of being in an Abilene Paradox (ibid.; 18-19) can be paraphrased as follows:

1. Individual members agree in private about the nature of the problem or situation
2. Members agree in private about what steps are needed to cope with the situation or problem
3. Members fail to accurately communicate their desires and beliefs; in fact they do the exact opposite, leading one another to misperceive the collective reality

4. Invalid assumptions and inaccurate information lead the team to take actions contrary to their wishes and desires, and counterproductive to the organisation's intent and purposes
5. Members experience frustration, anger and dissatisfaction as a result of the counter-productive actions; this may lead to the formation of subversive subgroups that blame others and complain about the leaders and other groups
6. If members do not deal with the chronic inability to manage agreement, the cycle is likely to repeat with greater intensity and stronger emotions and dissatisfaction

The key feature of 'going to Abilene' is that individuals seem to act against their own preferences and against their own interest, and are aware of it and seem resentful of the sacrifice and the wrong outcome. In contrast, members of teams engaged in groupthink appear to conform to the preferred thinking patterns of the group but do not act against their own interests. Inability to express views and preferences – or to manage agreement – may thus condemn groups and organisations to actions that seem contrary to their preferences, wellbeing, and even to the success of the individual and the collective.

Team dynamics and high-stakes leadership

The Abilene Paradox depicts a particular type of group dynamic, where a wish for social conformity and social influence may result in individuals acting contrary to their own preferences in what is, mistakenly, assumed to be the inclination of the wider community. Teams are subject to a host of other influences and complex dynamics that occur within the group and between its participants. The guest article by Dr. Constance Dierickx focuses on some of the invisible traps in project teams that can lead to crises. It is derived from the book *High-Stakes Leadership: Leading through crisis with courage, judgment and fortitude* published by Bibliomotion, part of the Taylor and Francis Group.

Dierickx's work emphasises the attributes that enable leaders to address and overcome crises. Her work is important in drawing attention to the needs of teams in uncertain, ambiguous and difficult times. Recognising that leaders are tasked with the difficult decisions, especially in times of crisis, she focuses on the three key elements that make leaders great:

- *Courage* as the ability to act with clarity and focus, identify important information and eschew habit;
- *Judgment* as way of testing ideas using reason and demanding improvements and corrections; and,
- *Fortitude* as the renewable source of energy needed to inspire and accomplish great tasks

The resulting three-part model can be utilised to illuminate the mindsets, strategies and tactics that leaders must employ to resolve problematic situations and make difficult decisions. Her work also identifies three major psychological barriers, which she

describes as decision traps that get in the way of recognising and responding to crisis. The article presents the three principal decision traps of overconfidence, groupthink and anxiety avoidance and explores their role and impact in compromising decisions, complicating action and derailing initiatives.

Dierickx does a good job in offering pragmatic advice that helps leaders and organisations to act decisively; test ideas and challenge perspectives using reason; and, be resolute and inspire others to continue, even in the face of severe challenges.

Conflict and agreement: a reprise

Sometimes the problem may be lack of conflict, of evidence of what the common opinion is. Journeys to Abilene represent an organisational drift towards dysfunction through a series of small, yet reversible, steps.

How does one get all the way to Abilene?
One inch at a time...

The drift occurs as opportunities to identify the lack of communication are ignored, until the team finally finds itself eating that unwanted meal (perhaps, disguised as an effective prop for an antacid in a commercial) in the cafeteria at Abilene. And then the team will still have to face the journey back...

It is normally recognised in politics that an agreement cannot be the result of imposition, but it can be equally perilous to simply assume that everyone is always on board. Agreement becomes a problem, when we are unable to communicate and confirm it.

Mexican spiritualist Don Miguel Ruiz offers a simple recipe: *'Don't Make Assumptions. Find the courage to ask questions and to express what you really want. Communicate with others as clearly as you can to avoid misunderstandings, sadness and drama. With just this one agreement, you can completely transform your life.'*

Patrick Lencioni (2006) identified *Fear of Conflict* as the 2nd dysfunction of teams, which is fed by a desire to preserve artificial harmony that stifles the occurrence of productive, passionate and ideological debate. Where team members are unable to express their opinions, the quality of the resulting decision is inferior. In contrast, he observed, that *'on great teams - the kind where people trust each other, engage in open conflict, and then commit to decisions - team members have the courage and confidence to confront one another when they see something that isn't serving the team.'* (ibid.; p. 56)

Successful teams need the trust, courage and judgment to determine if everyone is on board for the journey. Even if they appear to be, there is always one more chance to question the purpose of the journey...

US business executive, Alfred P. Sloane wryly summarised *'If we are all in agreement on the decision - then I propose we postpone further discussion of this matter until our next*

meeting to give ourselves time to develop disagreement and perhaps gain some understanding of what the decision is all about.'

Whilst we may acknowledge the role of conflict management in team dynamics and organisational settings, there is ample room to improve our ability to identify and define agreement. The words that are left unspoken, and the feelings and preferences that remain unshared can also carry the abject seeds of failure and underachievement. Managing agreement is largely concerned with avoiding unnecessary and unwanted excursions to Abilene. In order to begin to challenge such unnecessary explorations, we may need to learn to listen to the silence that troubled Alfred P. Sloane, and endeavour to challenge its basis and continuing presence.

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Editor's note: Editor's note: Prof Darren Dalcher is the editor of the Gower/Routledge Advances in Project Management series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. The PMWJ Advances in Project Management series includes articles authored by Routledge book authors; the above article is an introduction to the invited paper this month by another Routledge author. [To see recent project management books published by Routledge, click here.](#)

About the Author



Darren Dalcher, PhD

Author, Professor, Series Editor

Director, National Centre for Project Management
University of Hertfordshire, UK



Darren Dalcher, Ph.D. HonFAPM, FRSA, FBCS, CITP, FCMI, SMIEEE, SFHEA is Professor of Project

Management at the University of Hertfordshire, and founder and Director of the National Centre for Project Management (NCPM) in the UK. He has been named by the Association for Project Management (APM) as one of the top 10 “movers and shapers” in project management in 2008 and was voted Project Magazine’s “Academic of the Year” for his contribution in “integrating and weaving academic work with practice”. Following industrial and consultancy experience in managing IT projects, Professor Dalcher gained his PhD in Software Engineering from King's College, University of London.

Professor Dalcher has written over 200 papers and book chapters on project management and software engineering. He is Editor-in-Chief of *Software Process Improvement and Practice*, an international journal focusing on capability, maturity, growth and improvement. He is the editor of two book series, *Advances in Project Management*, published by Routledge and of a companion series *Fundamentals of Project Management*. Heavily involved in a variety of research projects and subjects, Professor Dalcher has built a reputation as leader and innovator in the areas of practice-based education and reflection in project management. He works with many major industrial and commercial organisations and government bodies in the UK and beyond.

Darren is an Honorary Fellow of the APM, a Chartered Fellow of the British Computer Society, a Fellow of the Chartered Management Institute, and the Royal Society of Arts, a Senior Member of the Institute for Electrical and Electronics Engineers, a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and a Member of the Project Management Institute (PMI), the Academy of Management, and the British Academy of Management. He is a Chartered IT Practitioner. He is a Member of the PMI Advisory Board responsible for the prestigious David I. Cleland project management award and of the APM Professional Development Board. Prof Dalcher is an academic advisor for the *PM World Journal*. He can be contacted at d.dalcher2@herts.ac.uk.

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