

Pretended Agreement in Decision Making: Exploring the *Abilene Paradox* in Uganda

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The author highlights the phenomena of pretended agreement or failure to manage agreement in decision making, drawing from Harvey (1988) in what is popularized as the Abilene Paradox. It is a situation of organizational members failing to manage intrapersonal differences with a group decision. With gaps in team work and communication, members agree when individually they don't. A case of academic staff is illustrated. We discuss the symptoms and possible solutions, providing insights for further studies in various contexts. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Academy of African Business and Development conference, May 2009.

INTRODUCTION

In management studies and practice, there is high emphasis on how to manage conflict and disagreement in organizations to ensure smooth work relationships. There is a rich bundle of literature related to conflict, its sources, dimensions and how to manage it. Equally in practice, many organizations have policies and guidelines to minimize the effects of conflict, both intrapersonal and inter-personal. Little is however illustrated or known of 'managing agreement'. There are scanty scholarly studies on managing agreement though there are several illustrated models of the decision process (Mann, et al, 1997). Even in organizational policies and regulations it would be difficult to find guidelines on how to manage agreement after the decision has been taken. However, Harvey (1988) documented a case that has been popularized as the *Abilene Paradox*. It is drawn from his 1974 experience in a family setting. The *Abilene paradox* is a journey that individuals as well as organizations make, wasteful, costly and at times disastrous, when they fail to manage agreement. This paper, with not so much literature on the paradox itself, uses illustrations where individuals in a perceived teamwork process, make decisions when individually none of them agrees to it. We used an unstructured investigation to document a case where faculty members at Makerere University Business School made full of the journey to *Abilene*. The outcome of this experience has pitted team work in the academic staff association and broken down the social cohesion. The case enabled us to illustrate some symptoms of pretended agreement and hints on how to avoid the behavior. With several evidences of *trips to Abilene* pointed at by our informants, the paper provides an insight and we suggest formal studies into this management dilemma in organizations and individuals. Theory building will help save organizations the costs involved.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Decision-making is a key element in managing organizations. Operations may get to stand still when there is failure or delay to make a decision. Many organizations have policy guidelines for decision-

making. When those involved in this process fail to agree conflicts will arise. This will be resolved using available organizational policy framework. Anderson and Polkinghorn (2008) posited that managing complex relationships and interdependence are necessary in managing conflict in decision processes. However there is a less explored concept of how to manage agreement. Many meetings are bogged down by the decision process and agreement may only be perceived. In such situations, little attention is put on how to manage neither the process nor the outcome of the decision. Swinton (2005) argued that effective communication in business meetings is about disagreement, expressing opinions, voicing concerns and harnessing the energy to create a solution that people want and care about. Gully et al (2006) emphasized that effective decision making is a process that has to be built, with clear and transparent commitment that is maintained through effective communication. De Cole (2005) called the decision process a continuous engagement, tagging it a meta-process. A serious gap arises in the agreed decision when team members individually do not agree with the group decision. However this may be revealed later. This is the concept that Harvey (1988) defined as pretended agreement. It is a common limitation in team building and group decision making. The explanation may range from cultural values, personality issues, and team building gaps, organizational rigidities, and lack of policy framework to poor managerial skill in steering the decision process. For instance Stainer and Stainer (2003) pointed at the role religions could have in decision making as they form the basis of beliefs, values and morality. Gully et al (2006) illustrated Hofstede (1994)'s four culture dimensions of collectivism versus individualism, power distance, conflict avoidance and masculinity versus femininity, as individual and situational conditioning factors in decision making. Harvey (1988) argued that the attention that organizations put on conflict management should equally be for the management of agreement.

Reasons why people actually speak against their own desires are both social and psychological. They are rooted in dynamics of intra and interpersonal relationships. It is believed, according to Harvey (1988) that people behave in this manner because they are afraid of the unknown. It is generally to do with fear of loneliness, being left out, separation, and alienation. This discussion is extended by Larrick (1993) and Mann, et al (1997) who emphasized fear for embarrassment from publicly made decisions, regrets, loss of reputation and self esteem, failure and disappointment. To avoid these, people will actually act against their best interests, hoping to be part of the whole. Group members may then turn to maximize their expected outcomes and to maintain a positive self-image. In many organizations, members tend to believe that any decision or action is better than none at all. Various Scholars agree that this situation also occurs when members are deciding under the situation of uncertainty or risk – when there is partial information or none at all respectively. The drive to act together, to be seen as a team, overrides the need to be explicit about group assumptions, desires, opinions, and even facts (Holden, 1999, Tung, 1998). This rises what Psychologists call action anxiety, social conformity or social cognition. The members are held up in fantasies wondering what could be the group reactions if they spoke out their minds – in disagreement of what everyone thinks is agreement! Anderson and Polkinghorn (2008, pg 189) posited that decisions that are based on sound technical opinions are easier to accept than if they are based on the dictum of “my opinion counts more than yours”. Lopes (1987) discussed a dichotomy between decision makers who are risk averse and those who are risk seekers reflecting opportunities and constraints people see in the decision as affecting their behavior.

Individuals have different decision making algorithms and there are different group-think patterns (Rich and Art 1999, Anderson 1999). Michel (2008) emphasized this point as a well known phenomenon from social psychology that people are reluctant to voice minority opinions. When a whole group of people seems to agree on a course of action but one person has doubts about it, there is a bit of psychological hurdle to speak against it. The resultant behavior is pretended agreement. Such scenario, with its realities and ramifications is just one case of the many that account for decision inefficiencies in the public service in Uganda (Bagire, 2008). Pretended agreement is enshrined in immature team processes (Kathryn, 1999). Teamwork is assumed to be an obvious outcome of people being assigned tasks to work on together while as in essence it is a process through stages of team building that should be well guided by those in higher authority. This will minimize what Mc Avoy and Butler (2006) called group think behavior. Tung (1998) posited that group decision making is a complex process that should

incorporate diverse individual views into a blended final decision. Dyer and Forman (1992)'s model of group decision is based on consensus, voting or compromising, mean of individual ideas and combining results. The first two elements in this model could possibly account for pretended agreement. Hoppe (2003) illustrated that pretended agreement is common in academic leadership where faculty colleagues are tied to opinions of others and faculty who manage by agreement. In a nut shell, decision processes will often put members into situations destined to repeat unsatisfying and dysfunctional behavior if they do not check the decision process hence the genesis of failure to manage agreement.

THE PARADOX

Harvey (1988), in *The Abilene Paradox and other Meditations on Management*, provides the following illustration of his experience in failure to manage the decision process that manifested into pretended agreement.

Four adults were seated on a porch in 104-degree heat in the small town of Coleman, Texas, some 53 miles from Abilene. They were engaged in as little motion as possible, drinking lemonade, watching the fan spin lazily, and occasionally were playing the odd game of dominoes. The characters were a married couple that had paid a courtesy call on the wife's parents. At some point, without meaning it, the father suggested that they could have a drive to Abilene to eat at a cafeteria. The son-in-law thought this was a crazy idea but did not see any need to upset the old man, so he let the idea pass on and so did the two women. They all got in the un-air-conditioned car and drove through a dust storm to Abilene. They ate a mediocre lunch at the cafeteria and returned to Coleman exhausted, hot, and generally unhappy with the experience. None of them expressed insight on the trip. It was until they returned home that it was revealed that none of them really wanted to go to Abilene—they just went along because each one of them thought the others were eager to go. Naturally, everyone saw this miss in agreement as someone else's problem! When they opened up, every one denied having supported the trip, including the father-in-law! The writer, thus concludes, "Here we were, four reasonably sensible people who, of our own volition, had just taken a 106-mile trip across a godforsaken desert in a furnace-like temperature through a cloud-like dust storm to eat unpalatable food at a hole-in-the-wall cafeteria in Abilene, when none of us had really wanted to go. In fact, to be more accurate, we'd done just the opposite of what we wanted to do. The whole situation simply didn't make sense. It was paradoxical!"

EXPLORING THE PARADOX IN UGANDA

The approach we used to illustrate the paradox was real case analysis and unstructured interviews with randomly purposively selected officers various organizations known to be key in decision processes. We sought their views on the constructs of pretended agreement, namely the decision process, members' views on the decision after the meeting, the atmosphere during and after the meeting and follow up actions. This unstructured investigation involved 68 informants and was to be a basis to document the cases of pretended agreement. An astounding experience among the academic staff at Makerere University Business School then formed the basis for this paper. All our informants posited that this behavior is paradoxical and they had experienced it in many situations. Pretended agreement had led to various costs like severe conflicts, bad image, financial loss and faults suffered by their organizations and themselves individually. The underlying reasons revealed by our inquiry were in concert with the literature reviewed, like Mullins (2005) who stated that inertia in organizational decision making leads to increased costs, reduced competitiveness and individual demoralization. The informants reechoed a common belief among employees that the organization is not theirs and would leave someday. Many decision makers hold that organizational decisions should not stall because an individual has differences if others seem to agree. Thus among our respondents individuals had gone by the perceived agreement of the others. The lack of adequate information in decision processes was also cited. Leaders and managers tended to use inadequate information to manipulate others. Members were made to believe that all is well.

Also pertinent is feeling internal inadequacy where a team player assumed that his or her dissent will reveal the lack of appreciation for the guidelines available towards a decision. Informants revealed that organizational members are also held in this ransom where they do not have adequate information and individually think opposing the idea will be a show of self-ignorance and disrespect. There was a socio-cultural dimension related to the many trips to *Abilene* in Ugandan organizations. Many Ugandans are held in the maze of cultural beliefs against a show of individual dissent when a gap has been identified. Culturally, those interviewed agreed, when in a meeting and an elder of a sort has presented a decision direction it is not right to vehemently oppose him or her. Conflict avoidance was another common reason for this behavior. Meetings are just one forum that brings together organizational members. It is believed to be wrong to oppose a colleague at a meeting when other aspects of organizational life could need reliance on each other. Pretended agreement was used as a way of preserving relationships for a rainy day. A network of such thinking was feared to have led to high decision costs. Organizational structures were also cited in the evidences that contributed to pretended agreement. The tall bureaucratic setups are prone to pretense due to complexities in reaching the final decision. At the operational level members believe that the top echelons would be more critical while as the latter consider that the former were more analytical in the pre-decision work. Structures that do not provide checks and balances in decision taking often fall prey to this. Respondents also shared a lot of experiences on how meetings are poorly managed in Ugandan organizations. There are hidden agendas, poor attendance, held in a rush, communication is received late, work documents are circulated late or never given out, facilities are poor, at times the agenda is very long, some members are denied chance to contribute, audibility is wanting, attendance is at times not checked and worst, meetings always start late and by the time of decision making members are exhausted and agree with any idea put forward.

THE CASE OF PRETENDED AGREEMENT AMONG MUBS ACADEMIC STAFF

This is a documented case of mismanaged or pretended agreement whose investigation is the backbone to this paper. It is a case among the academic staff at Makerere University Business School (MUBS). We illustrate it for the reader to relive the events as they occurred for critical internalization of the paradox.

Events of that day are still in the mind of some academic staff but no one wishes to talk loud about them, possibly hindered by the subjudice principle of not commenting on issues before the courts of law or more strongly not to talk about actions of past leaders of the MUBS Academic Staff Association (MUBASA). The atmosphere at the campus had been tense over several weeks. It was one such afternoon on 18th September 2006 that a meeting of MUBASA had been called to deliberate on the issues at stake. The wrangle between MUBS, hither to an affiliate college, and her parent institution, Makerere University had reached fever pitch. The events had swallowed in cabinet, parliament, the national council of higher education and the high court. MUBS council had declared independence and instituted structures in effect of a university status. This followed a high court ruling in a case that involved a former student at MUBS against Makerere University. The High court judge in the ruling had expressed a legal opinion that MUBS was in letter and status an independent university. On the basis of this MUBS council had taken the position. The mass media was having a field day. High level meetings and court redresses had taken place. The Ministry of Education as the voice of government on the matter pronounced that the development would not be recognized. MUBASA executive did not wish to act in isolation of members' views. The meeting had been called to consult on the events and decide way forward by staff in lieu of council decision. The attendance was exceptionally high. The meeting supported the position taken by council but was concerned with the move by the Ministry of Education to block the process. In the course of deliberations a proposal emerged, was aptly discussed and a consensus vote taken. The resolution was passed to sue the Ministry of education for interfering in a high court pronouncement. The Executive was mandated to get a lawyer to handle the case. Each member of the association would contribute Ushs 30,000 towards the legal costs, deducted directly by the salaries office. No objection at the meeting was raised to the pertinent issues in the decision. The meeting ended

and lecturers exited with a distrustful atmosphere. While a few were in a jovial mood, many others gathered in small groups as if to open the debate on the decision. Others walked away seemingly dejected.

From this author's previous review of Harvey's work in a 1998 MBA class assignment on team building in which the Abilene paradox had featured, the surrounding atmosphere manifested pretended agreement in the meeting that had just ended. The events were symbolic of a trip to *Abilene*. A few days later, when the storm had settled, the events were recorded and an investigation conducted. It was revealed that there were pains among many individuals at that meeting. The interviewed lecturers wondered whether such a decision was ever wise and called for. Unanswered questions ranged from the wisdom in the decision to the likely outcome. There were individual concerns on the cost of the suit and the Shs.30,000 deductions from members' remuneration to pay legal fees. The staff would have instead asked the School to pay for such litigation; did individual employees need to commit their labored earning for such a cause? In normal public service system would a government department drag to the courts of law the parent ministry? If MUBASA won, what would be the group benefits? Were the association leadership sworn respondents in such a circumstance? Many such questions made the decision indeed paradoxical, but it was too late.

The investigation revealed that many of the academic staff including some on the association executive never thought such a decision was wise. Individually they did not support it. For various personal reasons, it was not wise to object. This response was chorused by several of our informants who attended the association meeting. Later on, one lecturer broke the ice and circulated an email distancing him-self from such a group decision. He quoted his personal conscience and legal profession. But, it was too late; the dusty trip to *Abilene* had been taken, and at a high cost. His email raised fresh thinking of whether the lecturers were fighting a battle that was on their front line. It gave credence to this author's effort to document this case into a scholarly piece of work. The case of MUBASA against the Minister is still before the courts of law, unresolved. Many sections of the suit were however, negated by the cabinet decision that MUBS still belonged to Makerere university as an affiliate and could not proceed with establishing university structures though exercising financial and administrative autonomy. The more severe cost of this pretended agreement was the breakdown in the cohesion that bound MUBASA. The association has gradually gotten to its lowest ebb since that day.

SYMPTOMS AND RESOLVING OF PRETENDED AGREEMENT IN ORGANIZATIONS

We point out key manifestations that meetings or groups experience when under pretended agreement. Individuals in failing to manage agreement effectively are submissive, restless and at times hostile. It is common that sub-groups form in the meeting, there is lack of initiative to the agenda, combative or blaming positions become frequent. In such circumstance, members fail to communicate their desires and/or beliefs to one another, and, most importantly, sometimes even communicate the very opposite of their wishes based on what they assume are the desires and opinions of others. Senge (1994) explained that communication comes from the inside of the person and once there is internal pressure not to do, but one has to do so, the result is wrong expression of the intended message. Organizational policies on meetings, decisions, conflict management, among others are found lacking at that very moment and will often be placed in the background. Members will start to make incorrect assumptions about the outcome of the decision with expressions of frustration, fatigue, and anger, exasperation, assumed excitement or compliment. Gully Et al (2006) put emphasis to stakeholder dialogue and to be aware of the moral aspects to the decision. Avoiding *trips to Abilene* should become among urgent managerial issues of focus. What is needed first is to build a system of healthy and effective organizations. This could be through task designs, role identity, process clarity and organizational structures. This was illustrated by Harvey (1988) when he argued that structures are important in avoiding unwarranted decision making. Gully et al (2006) agreed with this position and posited the need to be aware of the evolving values and priorities, to understand the stages of growth and lifecycle as they all will lead to structure changes.

Glaringly this did not occur at the MUBASA meeting, agreeing with the findings of Hoppe (2003) on leadership among academics. Building new communication habits and getting beyond fears of information sharing in meetings is emphasized by Swinton (2005) who adds simple tips like to stick to the agenda, to have one person speaking at a time, taking comprehensive notes and having a good conductor. Openness in meetings or decision-making requires individual resolve to refuse being victimized on grounds related to the decision. If this is in-built among individual psyche it will be hard to be absorbed into decisions one does not agree with. In the MUBASA case, some staff revealed that they feared to be seen as opposing the wave of change that had swept the structures of the institution. When one member distanced himself openly from the decision, there were replies blaming him for being reactionary, a coward, and anti-progress! The majority of the members stood on the fence. Gully et al (2006) argued for management to take time to think, deliberate and conceptualize – never to sacrifice logic for urgency in decision making. Alienation in teamwork processes leads to individuals wanting to keep the spirit. Scenarios of mismanaged agreement are prevalent in immature teams. As teams mature members become open and easily identify amongst themselves manifestations of pretended agreement. Organizations should undertake team building exercises. Rich and Ross (1999) posited that this approach builds a system of dialogue in the decision process where members test the agreement so far reached by raising assumptive dilemmas to the action being proposed. Team leaders should first let open doors to any decision suggestion, implore members to critique the proposed action and galvanize thinking. This out rightly dissuade individuals who would pretend to agree. The MUBASA presidium tried this pointer but the decision environment caught them off guard and was swept into the paradox. Some scholars propose tactical delays which may reveal the width of the pretended agreement. Members may open up before the cost is incurred. If the MUBASA Executive had tactically delayed to get the lawyer to start the court process, on reason of technical consultations, it would have been possible to detect the paradox that engulfed the decision. De Colle (2005) illustrated a ten step model for ethical decision making. The elements that must be emphasized are to identify and map all key stakeholders in the decision, assess issues at stake, identify corporate values of the decision, assess current commitments, review policies and prioritize issues, among others. This model could have worked for MUBASA.

CONCLUSION AND MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

Management of agreement should be given equal weight as managing conflict in running organizations. Conflicts lead to wastage and bitter relationships and mismanaged agreement has equally worse consequences. This paper explored the concept and paradox of pretended agreement. It was found to be an outcome of mismanaging agreement as well as inability to manage the decision process. Decision making being a routine activity in organizations, the paper raises serious concerns. Managers should give attention to team building, communication and building organizational structures that provide for decision checks and balances. For the academic community, the paper has raised interest for empirical studies to enumerate the constructs in pretended agreement and how they could be measured. The manuscript was based on a real life documented case involving academic staff at Makerere University Business School in Uganda. The experience and work of Harvey (1988) popularized as *Abilene Paradox* formed the conceptual under pinning. The discussion was blended with rich literature on decision processes that are important for managers. There are key lessons on handling relationships and decision processes. We propose documenting such cases for teaching, research and policy development. Management is an integrated process that encompasses individuals with different perceptions and competencies. Understanding of this paradox is important for management development in leadership training, self efficacy, team building, organizational communication and management decision simulations. The paper has provided an insight for further research that could document practices, reasons thereof and develop models to save organizations the costs of pretended agreement in their operations. Where pretended agreement may be tested to bring out appropriate policy direction and good results for organizations, further empirical tests could build this approach as another model of decision making. The ideas in this

paper may have been limited by the scope of the investigation and the concept being in nascent stages of its development in academic literature.

Note: Bagire Vincent is A Lecturer in the Faculty of Management at Makerere University Business School, Kampala, Uganda, and a PhD candidate (Strategic Management) at the University of Nairobi, Kenya.

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