

GROUPTHINK

Last month, we mentioned a management board that was loathe to disagree with the boss. A report by hired consultants, indicating that management in the company was unskilled and needed training, was quickly dismissed by the managing director, and the other members of upper management were all too eager to agree with him. Nobody reminded the group that the report cost a lot of money, and that if nothing is done, work disruptions may continue, and valuable employees might leave, costing the company even more money in expertise lost to the competition.

Here we have *groupthink*: when group is more concerned with maintaining group harmony and consensus than making a good, rational decision.

Stuck like glue

Groupthink is a term coined by Irving Janis in 1971. It tends to occur in excessively cohesive groups. *Group cohesiveness* means the attractiveness a group has for its members: how much do the group members want to be part of the group? Such a group could be any collection of people: a group of friends, a sports club, a project team, a company's board of directors, or even a government.

The original example used by Janis to explain his theory, and often cited in psychology textbooks, is the US invasion of the Bay of Pigs in Cuba by the Kennedy administration in April 1961. As history tells us, it was a disaster from the start, with poor conceptualisation, planning, and implementation. Yet it had been masterminded by an advisory group composed of top policymakers, qualified experts at the highest levels of very prestigious private and government organisations.

Many government decisions have been explained using groupthink, such as US involvement in the Vietnam war, the Watergate scandal, and the invasion of Iraq. Good business examples are harder to identify, but one well-known case may be Enron, where the fraud and corruption involved could have been maintained over time by groupthink. Research suggests that groupthink in business is common, especially when they are experiencing the highs of apparently neverending good fortune. This can precipitate problems, such as an unrealistic expectation of success, which leads to carelessness.

Symptoms of groupthink

How do you know if your team is exhibiting groupthink? Janis identified eight symptoms, which we shall apply to our dysfunctional management board (for the details, have a read of last month's article, Norms and Values):

1. The team shared the illusion of *invulnerability*, where they believed they were not really affected by the problems identified by the consultants.

2. The director constructed his own *rationale* for why the consultant report was not valid.
3. There was no discussion on the issue of *morality*, although one of the main reasons employees complain about their managers is unfair treatment.
4. The team held onto the *stereotype* that the consultants were naïve outsiders who had no idea about the inner workings of the company.
5. In his dismissal of the consultant report, the director's brash comments *pressured* the others to agree with him. A powerful opinion stated early often dispels disagreement.
6. Despite the report conclusions, nobody at all voiced any doubts: there was a high level of *self-censorship*. Those that worry about the implications probably reassure themselves that their concerns are not important.
7. It appeared that the group was *unanimous* in their opinion of the situation, since nobody challenged it. During groupthink, silence means agreement.
8. Although we did not see it in the vignette, *mindguards* often help maintain the status quo. For example, deviation might be punished minimally, with an angry glare from a colleague; or in an extreme case, the dissenter could be removed from the group (such as when a junior board member is transferred to another office abroad).

How to stop groupthink

There are several ways the managing director could have prevented groupthink. The group should have been focused on the task at hand – analysing and understanding the consultant report - rather than simply maintaining group harmony. The boss should have encouraged his team to critically discuss alternatives, and hold off on his own opinions until others had stated theirs. The board could have broken up into a number of smaller discussion groups to encourage people to speak up on more controversial issues, and to compare different group conclusions. The consultants should have been present during the discussion, with sanction to challenge the opinions and decisions of the group. A group member could have played the role of “devil’s advocate”, challenging all decisions to ensure that they were the best ones.

What’s wrong with the concept of groupthink?

Janis himself admitted that not all cohesive groups suffer from groupthink. He was worried that his theory would encourage people to devalue group decisions. On the contrary, he felt a well-managed group, with its expert resources, is probably much better at making difficult decisions than an individual. However, some of the prevention methods may make decision making very time-consuming and expensive.

Groupthink does not take into account other influencing factors. For example, members of groups could be influenced by bribes (monetary rewards) or threats

(firing or public disgrace or even violence) to obtain their consensus. These could come from other members of the group, or even outside organisations.

Although it has not been disproved, there is not a lot of conclusive evidence to support the idea that groupthink is as bad as Janis has suggested. Some studies have found that groupthink symptoms appear in all kinds of groups, regardless of the quality of decision. In addition, some successful management teams do have leaders with clear preferences who try to persuade others towards their point of view.

Summary

Running unchecked, groupthink can creep up and stifle group effectiveness, causing big problems that are not easily identified until too late. Its negative effects are not inevitable, but an awareness of its existence and how to deal with it can ensure that group decisions are of a much higher quality.

Some related links (copy-paste into your browser):

Biography of Irving Janis
<http://www.answers.com/topic/irving-janis>

A concise summary of groupthink
<http://www.abacon.com/commstudies/groups/groupthink.html>

How to combat groupthink
<http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/army/groupthink.htm>

Next month, we will be discussing the difference between leadership and management.

References:

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Haslam, S.A. (2004). *Psychology in organizations: The social identity approach* (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publications.

Janis, I.L. (1991). Group Think. In D.A. Kolb, I.M. Rubin, & J.S. Osland (Eds.), *The organizational behavior reader* (pp. 259-269). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Kenrick, D.T., Neuberg, S.L., & Cialdini, R.B. (2004). *Social Psychology: Unraveling the Mystery*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.