

Groupthink

Groupthink being a coinage — and, admittedly, a loaded one — a working definition is in order. We are not talking about mere instinctive conformity — it is, after all, a perennial failing of mankind. What we are talking about is a rationalized conformity — an open, articulate philosophy which holds that group values are not only expedient but right and good as well.

William H. Whyte in *Fortune*. 1952

Irving Janis, who did extensive work on the subject defined it as:

A mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action.

Irving Janis originally studied how groupthink affected the Pearl Harbor bombing, the Vietnam War, and the Bay of Pigs Invasion.

Some researchers point to the Bay of Pigs Invasion as the archetype of the groupthink phenomenon.

The decision to execute this disastrous military campaign was made with almost unanimous agreement by President John F. Kennedy and his advisors.

These advisors were, almost without exception, very similar in background to the President and lacked military command experience.

General David M. Shoup, Commandant of the Marine Corps at the time and not part of the group, predicted failure for the invasion, which went forward with disastrous results.

Many other kinds of social organizations, such as businesses, have likewise been cited as examples of "groupthink."

Some of this is undoubtedly just revisionist history or a search for scapegoats, it has nonetheless been observed many times that individuals sometimes produce strikingly better solutions to certain problems than groups of those same individuals do, and that the dissenting lone voice (even within a "groupthinking" organization), is the one that, retrospectively speaking, probably should have been followed

(a prime example of this is the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster where an engineer warned the O-ring would fail but was shouted down by his peers, although they harboured similar concerns).

It is important to observe that terms such as "groupthink" are generally intended to describe the decision process that resulted in an inferior decision, not to the inferior decision itself.

Likewise, the phrase is never used to describe the same decision process if it resulted in glorious success.

The term "groupthink" is generally used in a derogatory manner, being generally attached to poor decisions and not to collective successes, and usually post facto.

Janis's "antecedent conditions" likely to encourage groupthink:

- * High stress from external threats, low hope of a better solution than the one offered by the leader(s)
- * High group cohesiveness
- * The persuasive strength of the group's leader

His eight symptoms indicative of groupthink:

1. Illusion of invulnerability
2. Unquestioned belief in the inherent morality of the group
3. Collective rationalization of group's decisions
4. Shared stereotypes of outgroup, particularly opponents
5. Self-censorship; members withhold criticisms
6. Illusion of unanimity (see false consensus effect)
7. Direct pressure on dissenters to conform
8. Self-appointed "mindguards" protect group from negative information

Janis' seven symptoms of a decision affected by groupthink:

1. Incomplete survey of alternatives
2. Incomplete survey of objectives
3. Failure to examine risks of preferred choice
4. Failure to re-appraise initially rejected alternatives
5. Poor information search
6. Selective bias in processing information at hand (confirmation bias)
7. Failure to work out contingency plans

Clark McCauley's three conditions under which groupthink occurs:

- * Directive leadership
- * Homogeneity of members' social background and ideology
- * Insulation of the group from outside sources of information and analysis

Remedies:

1. Consultative Autocrat (Vroom/Yetton) instead of consensus seeker
2. Devil's Advocate
4. Anonymous feedback via suggestion box or online chat
5. Inspector general or ombudsman system
6. Bebugging

An alternative to groupthink is a formal consensus decision-making process, which works best in a group whose aims are cooperative rather than competitive, where trust is able to build up, and where participants are willing to learn and apply facilitation skills.

Criticism

1. Evidence has largely failed to support predictions linking certain antecedent conditions with groupthink phenomena.
2. Most of the "groupthink" phenomena described by Janis occur in a far wider range of group settings than he originally envisioned.

Collectively, these data imply Janis erred when identifying the necessary and sufficient antecedent conditions for groupthink.

Ubiquity model of groupthink specifies a revised set of antecedent conditions to explain why groupthink-like behavior occurs in mundane, temporary, and even minimal groups and yet is not an invariant feature of group decision making.

Summarized from "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Groupthink>"