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What is Groupthink?

Groupthink, a term coined by social psychologist Irving Janis (1972), occurs when a group makes faulty decisions because group pressures lead to a deterioration of “mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment” (p. 9). Groups affected by groupthink ignore alternatives and tend to take irrational actions that dehumanize other groups. A group is especially vulnerable to groupthink when its members are similar in background, when the group is insulated from outside opinions, and when there are no clear rules for decision making.

References (also see annotated [bibliography of books, articles and websites below](#))

Janis, Irving L. (1972). *Victims of Groupthink*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Janis, Irving L. (1982). *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*. Second Edition. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Symptoms of Groupthink

Janis has documented eight symptoms of groupthink:

1. Illusion of invulnerability –Creates excessive optimism that encourages taking extreme risks.
2. Collective rationalization – Members discount warnings and do not reconsider their assumptions.
3. Belief in inherent morality – Members believe in the rightness of their cause and therefore ignore the ethical or moral consequences of their decisions.
4. Stereotyped views of out-groups – Negative views of “enemy” make effective responses to conflict seem unnecessary.
5. Direct pressure on dissenters – Members are under pressure not to express arguments against any of the group’s views.
6. Self-censorship – Doubts and deviations from the perceived group consensus are not expressed.
7. Illusion of unanimity – The majority view and judgments are assumed to be unanimous.
8. Self-appointed ‘mindguards’ – Members protect the group and the leader from information that is problematic or contradictory to the group’s cohesiveness, view, and/or decisions.

When the above symptoms exist in a group that is trying to make a decision, there is a reasonable chance that groupthink will happen, although it is not necessarily so. Groupthink occurs when groups are highly cohesive and when they are under considerable pressure to make a quality decision. When pressures for unanimity seem overwhelming, members are less motivated to realistically appraise the alternative courses of action available to them. These group pressures lead to carelessness and irrational thinking since groups experiencing groupthink fail to consider all alternatives and seek to maintain unanimity. Decisions shaped by groupthink have low probability of achieving successful outcomes.

Examples of Groupthink: Past and Present

Examples of groupthink “fiascoes” studied by Janis include US failures to anticipate the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Bay of Pigs invasion, the escalation of Vietnam war, and the ill-fated hostage rescue in Iran. Current examples of groupthink can be found in the decisions of the Bush administration and Congress to pursue an invasion of Iraq based on a policy of “preemptive use of military force against terrorists and rogue nations”. The decision to rush to war in Iraq before a broad-based coalition of allies could be built has placed the US in an unenviable military situation in Iraq that is costly in terms of military deaths and casualties, diplomatic standing in the world, and economically.

Groupthink and the News Media

Knowledge is power and we as citizens and as a nation are becoming less powerful. We face an administration that believes in operating under high levels of secrecy. The American press, especially the television news media, has let down the American people and the American people have allowed this to happen. US television news is geared more toward providing entertainment than information. When one compares the news Americans received about the “war on terrorism” and “war in Iraq” with the news citizens of other countries received, it is easy to see why many Americans were eager to launch an attack on Saddam Hussein while most of the world thought this was not a good idea. The major news networks eagerly voiced almost exclusively the Bush administration’s (questionable) justifications for the attack on Iraq and ignored the voices of millions who knew that other ways of addressing the issues were still possible. Furthermore, the rapid pace of CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News opinion programs makes it difficult for viewers to process information in any depth. Americans need a press that serves as a devil’s advocate to alleviate the ongoing groupthink concerning the war on terrorism and the invasion of Iraq.

Review the following consequences of groupthink and consider how many of them apply to the Bush administration’s handling of the ‘war on terrorism’ and the issues related to Iraq and Saddam Hussein:

- a) incomplete survey of alternatives
- b) incomplete survey of objectives
- c) failure to examine risks of preferred choice
- d) failure to reappraise initially rejected alternatives
- e) poor information search
- f) selective bias in processing information at hand
- g) failure to work out contingency plans
- h) low probability of successful outcome

Remedies for Groupthink

Decision experts have determined that groupthink may be prevented by adopting some of the following measures:

- a) The leader should assign the role of critical evaluator to each member
- b) The leader should avoid stating preferences and expectations at the outset

c) Each member of the group should routinely discuss the groups' deliberations with a trusted associate and report back to the group on the associate's reactions

d) One or more experts should be invited to each meeting on a staggered basis. The outside experts should be encouraged to challenge views of the members.

e) At least one articulate and knowledgeable member should be given the role of devil's advocate (to question assumptions and plans)

f) The leader should make sure that a sizeable block of time is set aside to survey warning signals from rivals; leader and group construct alternative scenarios of rivals' intentions.

Annotated Bibliography

Books

Hart, P. (1994). *Government: A study of small groups and policy failure*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press

In the first book-length study of groupthink since Janis's work, Paul 't Hart has provided a rigorous and systematic version of this influential theory which opens several new avenues for research. Groupthink in government examines the circumstances most likely to produce or counteract groupthink, and applies the theory to issues such as leadership style, risk taking, accountability, and prevention. 't Hart's elaborate case study of the Iran-Contra scandal demonstrates the continuing relevance of the groupthink theory in the examination of flawed decision making.

Janis, I.L. (1972). *Victims of groupthink: A psychological study of foreign policy decisions and fiascoes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Janis defines groupthink as the psychological drive for consensus at any cost that suppresses disagreement and prevents the appraisal of alternatives in cohesive decision-making groups. In this, the first edition, Janis showed how this phenomenon contributed to some of the major U.S. foreign policy fiascoes of recent decades: the Korean War stalemate, the escalation of the Vietnam War, the failure to be prepared for the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the Bay of Pigs blunder. He also examined cases, such as the handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the formulation of the Marshall Plan, where GROUPTHINK was avoided.

Janis, I.L. (1982). *Groupthink: A psychological study of policy decisions and fiascoes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

In this edition (2nd), Janis applies his hypothesis to the Watergate cover-up, portraying in detail how GROUPTHINK helped to put the participants on a disastrous course and keep them there. In addition, he presents some new ideas on how & why GROUPTHINK occurs, and offers suggestions for avoiding it.

Kowert, P.A. (2002). *Groupthink or deadlock: When do leaders learn from their advisors?* Albany: Blackwell Publishing.

This book argues that too much advice can lead to policy deadlock depending on leadership style.

The danger of groupthink is now standard fare in leadership training programs and a widely accepted explanation, among political scientists, for policy-making fiascos. Efforts to avoid groupthink, however, can lead to an even more serious problem—deadlock. Groupthink or Deadlock explores these dual problems in the Eisenhower and Reagan administrations and demonstrates how both presidents were capable of learning and consequently changing their policies, sometimes dramatically, but at the same time doing so in characteristically different ways. Kowert points to the need for leaders to organize their staff in a way that fits their learning and leadership style and allows them to negotiate a path between groupthink and deadlock.

Journal Articles

Ahlfinger, N. R. & Esser, J. K. (2001). Testing the groupthink model: Effects of promotional leadership and conformity predisposition. *Social Behavior & Personality: An International Journal*, 29(1), 31-42.

This article discusses two hypotheses that were derived from groupthink theory and were tested in a laboratory study which included measures of the full range of symptoms of groupthink, symptoms of a poor decision process, and decision quality. The hypothesis that groups composed of members who were indisposed to conform would be more likely to fall victim to groupthink than groups whose members were not predisposed to conform received no support. It is suggested that groupthink research is hampered by measurement problems.

Esser, J.K. (1998). Alive and well after 25 years: A review of groupthink research. *Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes*, 73(2-3), 116-141.

This article provides a summary of empirical research on groupthink theory. Groupthink research, analyses of historical cases of poor group decision making are included, and laboratory tests are reviewed. Results from these two research areas are briefly compared. Theoretical and methodological issues for future groupthink research is identified and discussed.

Fuller, S.R. & Aldag, R.J. (1998). Organizational Tonypany: Lessons from a quarter century of the groupthink phenomenon. *Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes*, 73(2-3), 163-184.

In this paper, Fuller and Aldag argue that the quarter-century experience with groupthink represents an unfortunate episode in the history of group problem solving research. There has been remarkably little empirical support for the groupthink phenomenon, and that the phenomenon rests on arguable assumptions, that published critiques of groupthink have generally been ignored by groupthink researchers, and that groupthink is presented as fact in journal articles and textbooks. They see continued advocacy of groupthink as a form of organizational Tonypany, in which knowledgeable individuals fail to “speak out” against widely accepted, but erroneous beliefs. They explore the nature and causes of the Tonypany and encourage researchers to cast off the artificial determinism and constraints of the groupthink model, and instead, seek to inform the general group decision making literature.

Kramer, R.M. (1998). Revisiting the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam decisions 25 years later: How well has the groupthink hypothesis stood the test of time? *Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes*, 73(2-3), 236-271.

This paper explains how in the twenty five years since the groupthink hypothesis was first formulated, new evidence, including recently declassified documents, rich oral histories, and informative memoirs by key participants in these fiasco decisions have become available to scholars. This casts a new light on the decision making process behind both the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam. Much of the new evidence does not support Janis's original characterization of these processes. In particular, it suggests that dysfunctional group dynamics stemming from group members' strivings to maintain group cohesiveness were not as prominent a causal factor in the deliberation process as Janis argued. Viewed in aggregate, this new evidence suggests that the groupthink hypothesis overstates the influence of small group dynamics, while understating the role political considerations played in these decisions.

Hart, P. (1998). Preventing groupthink revisited: Evaluating and reforming groups in

government. *Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes*, 73(2-3), 306-326.

This article critically examines Janis's recommendations for preventing groupthink in high-level policymaking. It puts forward three models of small group functioning in government, each of which highlights different dimensions of collegial policymaking and distinct criteria for evaluating group performance. Each model also inspires different proposals for groupthink prevention and improvement of group performance in general. The article concludes with an agenda for increasing the policy relevance and practical feasibility of research on political decision groups.

McCauley, C. (1998). Group dynamics in Janis's Theory of groupthink: Backward and forward. *Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes*, 73(2-3), 142-162.

This paper traces groupthink to its theoretical roots in order to suggest how a broader and a more consistent use of research in group dynamics can advance understanding of decision-making problems. In particular, the paper explores and reinterprets the groupthink prediction that poor decision-making is most likely when group cohesion is based on the personal attractiveness of group members.

Moorhead, G., Neck, C.P. & West, M.S. (1998) The tendency toward defective decision making within self-managing teams: The relevance of groupthink for the 21st century. *Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes*, 73(2-3), 327-351.

Groupthink theory has continued relevance to organizations because of the organizational trend toward self-managing work teams. A typology is developed linking the key differentiating characteristics of self-managing teams to groupthink antecedents of group cohesion, structural faults of the organization, and provocative situational context. Building upon this framework, we more specifically examine variables that will impact the occurrence of groupthink within self-managing teams. Implications for the prevention of groupthink in self-managing teams are discussed.

Paulus, P.B. (1998). Developing consensus about groupthink after all these years. *Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes*, 73(2-3), 362-374.

In the context of these papers of this special issue, the models of groupthink are evaluated. The major focus is on the basis for its impact and its scientific status. The groupthink perspective is seen as consistent with some other contributions to the group's literature. Interesting parallels between the groupthink and the brainstorming literature are noted. It is concluded that many of the issues raised by the groupthink model are worthy of further examination in a broad-based study of group decision processes.

Peterson, R.S., Owens, R.D., Tetlock, P.E., Fan, E.T. & Martorana, P. (1998). Group dynamics in the top management teams: Groupthink, vigilance, and alternative models of organizational failure and success. *Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes*, 73(2-3), 272-305.

This study explored the heuristic value of Janis' (1982) groupthink and vigilant decision-making models as explanations of failure and success in top management team decision making using the Organizational Group Dynamics Q-sort (GDQ). Top management teams of seven Fortune 500 companies were examined at two historical junctures—one when the team was successful (defined as satisfying strategic constituencies) and one when the team was unsuccessful. Results strongly supported the notion that a group's decision-making process is systematically related to the outcomes experienced by the team. The results illustrate the usefulness of the GDQ for developing and empirically testing theory in organizational behavior from historical cases.

Raven, B.H. (1998). Groupthink, Bay of Pigs, and Watergate reconsidered. *Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes*, 73(2-3), 352-361.

In this paper, Raven argues that group decisions have often been seen as offering the benefits of collective wisdom, but may also lead to disastrous consequences. Groupthink then focuses

on the negative effects of erroneous group decisions, the two major examples being the disastrous Bay of Pigs, which then led to the Watergate scandal. While Janis seems to suggest that groupthink will ultimately lead the group to fail in its ultimate endeavors, we need to consider the frightening possibility that in the case of the Nixon group, the group actions came close to being successful.

Schwartz, J. & Wald, M. L. (2003, March 03). Smart people working collectively can be dumber than the sum of their brains: "Groupthink" is 30 years old, and still going strong. *NY Times*. Retrieved February 20, 2004, from Ebsco database.

This issue came into sharp focus in Houston in 2003 at the first public hearing of the board investigating the Columbia disaster last month. Reprinted at: <http://www.mindfully.org/Reform/2003/Smart-People-Dumber9mar03.htm>.

Street, M. D. & Anthony, W. P. (1997). A conceptual framework establishing the relationship between groupthink and escalating commitment. *Small Group Research*, 28(2), 267-294.

This article presents three propositions designed to demonstrate a theoretical relationship between the groupthink and escalation commitment models. Proposition that groups exhibiting groupthink characteristics are more likely to escalate commitment to a losing course of action than are groups not exhibiting groupthink characteristics.

Turner, M. E. & Pratkanis, A. R. (1998). Twenty-five years of groupthink theory and research: Lessons from the evaluation of a theory. *Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes*, 73(2-3), 105-115. Retrieved January 20, 2004, from Ebsco database.

This is from a special issue on theoretical perspectives of groupthink, a twenty-fifth anniversary appraisal. The article examines the historical development of the groupthink model of decision-making processes and discusses recent responses to the body of empirical evidence amassed on the model. The article concludes by articulating general lessons implied by the evolution of research on the groupthink model.

Whyte, G. (1998). Recasting Janis's groupthink model: The key role of collective efficacy in decision fiascoes. *Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes*, 73(2-3), 185-209.

This paper advances an explanation for decision fiascoes that reflects recent theoretical trends and was developed in response to a growing body of research that has failed to substantiate the groupthink model (Janis, 1982). In this new framework, the lack of vigilance and preference for risk that characterizes groups contaminated by groupthink are attributed in large part to perceptions of collective efficacy that unduly exceed capability. High collective efficacy may also contribute to the negative framing of decisions and to certain administrative and structural organizational faults. In the making of critical decisions, these factors induce a preference for risk and a powerful concurrence seeking tendency that, facilitated by group polarization, crystallize around a decision option that is likely to fail. Implications for research and some evidence in support of this approach to the groupthink phenomenon are also discussed.

Web Sites

Groupthink Central: <http://www.groupthinkcentral.blogspot.com/>

This website is for groupthink central, and has the following quote by Walter Reuther. "There is no greater calling than to serve your fellow men. There is no greater contribution than to help the weak. There is no greater satisfaction than to have done it well." --

A First Look at Communication Theory: <http://www.afirstlook.com/main.htm>

This website is primarily designed as a companion to communication theory by Em Griffin and the Instructor's Manual by Glen McClish, and Jacqueline Bacon. This site includes links to

resource materials for texts, and a description of Conversations with communication theorists, a video of the interviews conducted with the authors of a number of theories featured in the book. Links to theories in the current (5th) edition can be found, as well as theories in the archives of past editions.

Chapter 18 by Irving Janis, in the book *A First Look at Communication Theory* (1997), by Em Griffin <http://www.afirstlook.com/archive/groupthink.cfm?source=archther..>

In this chapter, Janis discusses the events behind the Challenger disaster, as a model of defective decision-making. He describes the mode of thinking and how people in a cohesive group have a tendency to seek concurrence with others in the group to finalize their decisions. The chapter outlines the eight symptoms of groupthink, and offers a critique on avoiding uncritical acceptance of groupthink.

Errors and Accidents: Groupthink <http://www.ess.ntu.ac.uk/miller/error/groupthink.htm#linking>.

This BSc Psychology website developed by Hugh Miller and Bill Farnsworth at the Nottingham Trent University offers chapters on Groupthink by Irving Janis and others.

Argos Press GROUPTHINK Risk Management and Decision Making Glossary: <http://www.risk-management.argospres.com/groupt.htm>.

This website is a glossary to risk management and decision making, systems thinking, and situation awareness. This site has a comprehensive glossary of utility terms and a Peer Tool that can be ordered free online to guide the group towards making better decisions.