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Groupthink: When Team Consensus Becomes “Too Much of a Good Thing”

Have you ever been in a team meeting where you thought to yourself, “Well, I just don’t agree with that at all!” And in that same meeting, did you freely speak up? Or did you decide against sharing your opinion because you didn’t want to appear unsupportive? If so, you’ve probably experienced Groupthink, a dynamic that can occur when the desire for group cohesion overrides our common sense to explore all the options or express an unpopular opinion. When Groupthink happens, our positive motivation for reducing team conflict can have a negative impact on the quality of our decisions. Here’s how to recognize when your team is in danger of Groupthink and how to avoid it.

Irving Janis, a research psychologist at Yale University, coined the term “Groupthink” in 1972 when he was researching why a team reaches an excellent decision one time and a disastrous decision the next. What he found was that a lack of conflict or opposing viewpoints led to poor decisions, because the team did not fully analyze alternatives, and therefore, did not gather enough information to make an informed decision.

Janis suggested that Groupthink also is more likely to happen when there is a strong, persuasive group leader, a high level of group cohesion and intense pressure from the outside to make a good decision.

One well-known example that illustrates this is the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster. The shuttle exploded shortly after liftoff on January 28, 1986. The launch originally had been scheduled for six days prior, but a series of problems had caused delays. The day before the rescheduled launch, an engineer raised concerns about the o-rings and booster rockets. But the NASA team was anxious to get the mission underway. They ignored serious warnings that contradicted with their goal to launch as soon as possible. Ultimately, their poor judgment cost the lives of seven people.

Groupthink can be found in far less dramatic situations and less pressurized settings. In fact one of the problems of Groupthink is that groups aren’t aware when they suffer it. So it’s important to look for these key symptoms.

1. **Rationalization** – This is when team members convince themselves that the decision or option being presented is the best one, despite evidence to the contrary. *“The production department doesn’t agree with us because they haven’t researched the problem like we have.”*
2. **Peer Pressure** – When a team member expresses an opposing opinion or questions the rationale behind a decision, the rest of the team members work together to apply pressure or coerce that person into compliance. *“Well, Sally, if you really feel that we’re making a mistake you can always join another committee.”*
3. **Complacency** - After a few successes, the group begins to feel like any decision they make is the right one because there is no disagreement from any source. *“Our results speak for themselves. We’re the best!”*
4. **Moral Superiority** – When members of a group view themselves as moral or a decision as a moral one, the pressure to conform becomes even greater, because no individual wants to be perceived as immoral. *“We all know the difference between right and wrong, and this is definitely the right thing to do.”*
5. **Stereotyping** – The more a group is alike in their views, the more they may see “outsiders” as different or inferior. The group then uses this perceived inferiority to discredit the opposition. *“The board will find any excuse to argue with us, even when the facts are clearly on our side.”*
6. **Censorship** – Individuals censor their own opinions in order to conform to the group majority. *“If everyone else agrees with this solution, then my ideas must be way off base.”*

7. **False Agreement** – Because no one speaks up, everyone in the group believes that a unanimous group decision has been made. This is what feeds Groupthink and causes a downward spiral. *“I see we all agree, so it’s decided then.”*

If Groupthink does set in, see it for what it is and act immediately. Only then will your team return to functioning at its best. Here are some tips to help you stay on track.

- If you spot symptoms of Groupthink, discuss them with your team. Once you acknowledge it, you’ll become more conscious of your problem-solving processes.
- Examine the risks to your group that are associated with all decisions. If the risks are high, make sure you take extra care to vet actions and decisions before they’re finalized.
- Seek the opinion of someone outside your group to help test your underlying assumptions. Every group has blind spots.
- When discussing important issues, divide your whole team into two smaller groups for an initial discussion. When you reconvene as a whole group, you’ll have more information to work with and it will be easier to discuss differences.
- Have various people in the group take turns playing devil’s advocate, questioning all of the group’s ideas. (Some people play this role naturally, so it’s important to intentionally rotate this role.)
- After reaching a tentative decision, go back and surface more fears and doubts about the decision. Ask “what could go wrong?” to make sure the decision is right.
- Hold “last chance” meetings to offer a final opportunity to question a decision or course of action. Some decisions shouldn’t be made on the spot.
- Leaders should be cautious about always offering their opinions first. Leaders also can increase their effectiveness by encouraging open debate and discussion.

Decisions produced through Groupthink have a very low chance of being successful. The challenge for any team is to create an effective work environment in which Groupthink is unlikely to happen in the first place.

McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond helps owners and business leaders become more successful by providing innovative financial, technology and management solutions for every stage of their organizations’ life cycle. MKS&H’s organizational consulting division, Tandem Partners, specializes in people strategies that drive business results. For more information on this article or MKS&H, please contact Margaret Wilson at 410-296-6200 or via email: margaret@mksh.com.

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