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# Groupthink<sup>1</sup>

Groupthink is a psychological term used to describe the mode of thinking that persons engage in when concurrence-seeking becomes so dominant in a cohesive ingroup that it tends to override realistic appraisal of alternative courses of action. It refers to a deterioration in mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgments as a result of group pressures. Groups experiencing groupthink do not consider all alternatives and they turn to unanimity at the expense of quality decisions. Groupthink occurs when groups are highly cohesive and when they are under considerable pressure to make a quality decision.

Irving Janis did a great deal of work in the area of group communication. He wondered why intelligent groups of people sometimes made decisions that led to disastrous results. Janis focused on the political arena. He studied The Bay of Pigs conflict, The Korean War, Pearl Harbor, The conflict in Vietnam, The Cuban Missile Crisis, makings of The Marshall Plan, and Watergate. Janis was puzzled by the inability of very intelligent people to make sound decisions. His answer was a condition he termed "Groupthink".

Janis defines groupthink as a "a quick and easy way to refer to 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". Janis further states that "Groupthink refers to a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures". Groupthink can lead to bad judgments and decisions being made. It serves as a simple way to deal with difficult issues.

Groupthink problems can be recognized by identifying a set of characteristics including an illusion of invulnerability, self censorship, and others. Janis recommends many strategies for avoiding Groupthink.

## Negative Outcomes

Some negative outcomes of groupthink include:

- Superficial examination of the drawbacks of the chosen course
- Examining few alternatives
- Being highly selective in gathering information
- Not having contingency plans

## Symptoms

If one or more of these symptoms of groupthink are commonplace in a particular group, change must occur.

The symptoms of groupthink arise when the members of decision-making groups become motivated to avoid being too harsh in their judgments of their leaders' or their colleagues' ideas. People would adopt a soft line of criticism and avoid conflict, even in their own thinking. At meetings, all members are amiable and seek complete concurrence, which is likely to be recognized erroneously as consensus, on every important issue.

The groupthink type of conformity tends to increase as group cohesiveness increases. Groupthink involves non-deliberate suppression of critical thoughts as a result of internalization of the group's norms. The more cohesive the group, the greater the inner compulsion on each individual to avoid creating disunity, which inclines him/her to believe in the soundness of whatever proposals are promoted by the leader or by a majority of the group's members. However, this is not to say that all cohesive groups necessarily suffer from groupthink. All ingroups may have a mild tendency toward groupthink, displaying from time to time one or another of eight interrelated symptoms. But it need not be so dominant as to influence the quality of the group's final decision. The eight groupthink symptoms are:

**Pressure:** Victims of groupthink also apply direct pressure to any individual who momentarily expresses doubts about any of the group's shared illusions, or who questions the validity of the arguments supporting a policy alternative favored by the majority.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Adapted from Groupthink, by Irving L. Janis. Published in Psychology Today, Nov. 1971.

**Self-censorship:** Victims of groupthink avoid deviating from what appears to be group consensus. They keep silent about their misgivings and even minimize to themselves the importance of their doubts.

**Unanimity:** Victims of groupthink share an illusion of unanimity within the group concerning almost all judgments expressed by members who speak in favor of the majority view. When a group of persons who respect each other's opinions arrives at a unanimous view, each member is likely to feel that the belief must be true. This reliance on consensual validation within the group tends to replace individual critical thinking and reality testing.

**Invulnerability:** Most or all of the members of the ingroup share an illusion of invulnerability that provides for them some degree of reassurance about obvious dangers and leads them to become over-optimistic and willing to take extraordinary risks.

**Rationale:** Not only do victims of groupthink ignore warnings, but they collectively construct rationalizations in order to discount warnings and other forms of negative feedback that, taken seriously, might lead the group to reconsider their assumptions each time they recommit themselves to past decisions.

**Morality:** Victims of groupthink believe unquestioningly in the inherent morality of their ingroup. To the extreme end, this belief could incline the members to ignore the ethical or moral consequences of their decisions.

**Stereotypes:** Victims of groupthink hold stereotyped views of the leaders of "enemy groups," that "They are so evil that genuine attempts at negotiating differences with them are unwarranted," or that "They are too weak to too stupid to deal effectively with what ever attempts we makes to defeat their purposes." Organizations where competing groups co-exist should be cautious about this symptom because the damage of inter-group attack and/or miscommunications can counteract the totality of productivity of all groups.

**Mindguards:** Lastly, victims of groupthink sometimes appoint themselves as mindguards to protect the leader and fellow members from adverse information that might break the complacency they shared about the effectiveness and morality of past decisions.

## **Remedies**

The various symptoms can be understood as a mutual effort among group members to maintain self-esteem and emotional equanimity by providing social support to each other, especially at times when they share responsibility for making vital decisions. The immediate consequences, as can be expected, are products of poor decision-making practices because of inadequate solutions to the problems being dealt with. Fortunately, researchers in this area have been able to come up with remedies through comparison of practices of successful groups and those of groupthink-style ones. Some of the recommendations are listed below.

**Formula 1:** Assign the role of critical evaluator to each member; encourage the group to give high priority to open airing of objections and doubts.

**Formula 2:** Key members of a hierarchy should adopt an impartial stance instead of stating preferences and expectations at the beginning of assigning a policy-planning mission to any group/individual.

**Formula 3:** Routinely setup several outside policy-planning and evaluation groups within the organization to work on the same policy question, each deliberating under a different leader to prevent insulation of an ingroup.

**Formula 4:** Require each member to discuss the group's deliberations with associates, if any, in his/her own unit of the organization before reaching a consensus. Then report back their reactions to the group.

**Formula 5:** Invite one or more outside experts to each meeting on a staggered basis and encourage the experts to challenge the views of the core members.

**Formula 6:** At least one member should play devil's advocate at every general meeting of the group to challenge the testimony of those who advocate the majority position.

**Formula 7:** Whenever the issue involves relations with rival organizations, devote a sizable block of time to a survey of all warning signals from these rivals and write alternative scenarios on their intentions.

**Formula 8:** When surveying alternatives for feasibility and effectiveness, divide the group from time to time into two or more subgroups to meet separately, under different chairmen. Then come back together to hammer out differences.

**Formula 9:** Hold a "second-chance" meeting after reaching a preliminary consensus about what seems to be the best decision to allow every member to express all his/her residual doubts and to rethink the entire issue before making a definitive choice.

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Irving Janis described eight symptoms of groupthink. Subsequent researchers have added to the list. Some symptoms of groupthink are:

1. Illusion of invulnerability
2. Stereotyping outsiders
3. Bounded rationality and tethered assumptions
4. Belief in the group's inherent morality
5. Self-censorship
6. Exercising direct pressure on dissenters
7. Using mindguards to protect the group from negative information
8. Illusion of unanimity

### **Symptoms**

Some symptoms of groupthink are:  
Rationalizing poor decisions

The symptoms of Groupthink are clear:

1. "illusion of invulnerability" happens when a group thinks that they cannot go wrong. Confidence among the members of the group is remarkably high and is reflected in the decisions that they make.
4. "belief in inherent morality of the group" occurs when the group thinks tremendously of their morality. The group believes that it is doing the right thing in all circumstances.
3. "Collective rationalization" by a group causes the group to believe that nothing can be wrong with their plan even if there is significant evidence to prove otherwise. Shared stereotypes guide the decision.
2. "out-group stereotypes" often cause groups to pay little attention to what outsiders have to say. This disregard for others' options often results in a lack of creativity. Groupthink members see themselves as part of an in-group working against an out-group which is opposed to their goals.
5. "Self-censorship" occurs when group members don't share their ideas with the rest of the group because of fear of being rejected.
8. The "illusion of unanimity" explains that silence can often be interpreted as acceptance.

### **Solutions**

Some solutions include:

- Using a policy-forming group which reports to the larger group
- Having leaders remain impartial
- Using different policy groups for different tasks
- Dividing into groups and then discuss differences
- Discussing within sub-groups and then report back
- Using outside experts
- Using a Devil's advocate to question all the group's ideas
- Holding a "second-chance meeting" to offer one last opportunity to choose another course of action

One of the suggested ways of preventing group think is to have a devil's advocate appointed by the leader.<sup>2</sup> Another idea that emerges very clearly from the situation of isolation is to have the leader bring in someone who can immediately contribute and introduce new alternatives.

Every group should include a specific member who has the job of playing "devil's advocate". This person should seriously question much of what the group members say. The "devil's advocate" must be willing to vocally share his ideas with the rest of the group. This strategy will force the group to take a second look at every decision that is made. The "devil's advocate" of the group must be taken seriously and be allowed to speak at will if this strategy is to be effective.

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<sup>2</sup> From Discovering Psychology with Phillip Zimbardo, Ph.D., Updated Edition  
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