10.6: Groupthink

After studying groups of very intelligent people who made very poor decisions, Irving Janis described a problem he referred to as Groupthink. Here, the actual group process effects decision-making. In Groupthink, the desire for group cohesion often becomes more important than making a quality decision. Instead of disagreeing and starting an argument with the other group members, a person will just go along with the group, so as not to be isolated and left out. This action is also referred to as the mismanagement of disagreement. Members disagree, but the need to be part of the group keeps them silent.

A common Groupthink experience occurs in marriage. A spouse will experience Groupthink when he or she decides not to argue with a decision that is being discussed. They may disagree with the decision being made, but they decide that harmony within the marriage is more important than their disagreement with the decision. We often refer to this as not “rocking the boat.” In this situation spouses voluntarily give up conflicting views to preserve the family’s harmony and closeness.

In our professional lives, we will often be asked to be part of a group or organization that needs to make decisions. Group interaction can create additional challenges to effective decision-making as demonstrated in the 1986 decision to launch the Challenger space shuttle.

After the embarrassment of several days of postponing the launch, NASA officials at Cape Canaveral decided to allow the Challenger to lift off. Just hours before the fateful launch, frigid temperatures, in the mid 20s, and dangerous wind gusts of 35 miles per hour had been recorded. Nevertheless, the signal to go ahead with the launch was initiated. All, seemed to go well at first. Shirley Green, the new public relations officer, remembered thinking, “It is so beautiful. It seems so perfect.”

Unfortunately, the flight was anything but perfect. Less than half a second after booster ignition, just as the shuttle began to lift off the pad, a white, then a black puff of smoke gushed from a joint between two segments of the shuttle’s right
booster. Just slightly over a minute into the flight, as Shirley Green along with millions of Americans were watching, a huge fireball appeared where the shuttle had been. There was complete silence in the control room. For a moment, there was no sound. She gripped the shoulder of Chuck Hollingshead, the Kennedy Space Center’s veteran public affairs officer. He turned to face her. “Is it gone?” she asked. “Yes,” Hollingshead said, shaking his head, “It is gone.”

Within days a Presidential Commission was established to investigate the tragedy. Reports from this committee have suggested that the decision to launch the space shuttle was totally wrong. There appears to have been a growing anxiety among the launch crew. Past successes may have given the staff the impression that nothing could go wrong.

Important information, such as the booster project engineers protesting the launch, other engineers reporting that the weather was too cold, and tests revealing abnormal “cold spots” on the lower right hand booster rocket, was not conveyed to the people making the launch decision for fear of being ostracized.

When people gather in a group to make a decision, actual communication problems can occur that will lead to a poor decision. In this case, Groupthink took place. Groupthink is a type of voluntary group decision-making that occurs when group members don’t really examine the alternatives and instead reach the agreement they feel others want.

CIA and Groupthink

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**July 10, 2004**

According to a scathing report released by the Senate Intelligence Committee, the United States went to war with Iraq on the basis of flawed intelligence assessments.

The report documented sweeping and systemic failures at the CIA and other U.S. intelligence agencies that led to the erroneous conclusions that Iraq had stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons and was reconstituting its efforts to build a nuclear bomb.

The report continued by saying that the CIA analysts suffered a case of Groupthink that rendered them incapable of considering that Iraq might have dismantled its weapons programs.
As Irving Janis stated:

"Group members adopt a soft line of criticism, even in their own thinking. At their meetings all the members are amiable and seek complete concurrence on every important issue, with no bickering or conflict to spoil the cozy atmosphere. This is known as being yes men. Here you agree with what the person in charge is saying, not because you believe in what is being said, but because you don’t want to spoil that we-feeling." ¹

To avoid Groupthink

If you are in a leadership position of any group, delay stating your opinion. Let others share their ideas first or else they may just agree with you to go along with what you are saying.

Sincerely ask for differences of opinions. Let others know you really do want to hear different points of view.

Either be or assign a “devil’s advocate.” That is force someone to disagree and make arguments against the decision that is being made. The term “devil’s advocate” was started in the early Catholic Church, when a person was being considered for sainthood. If the process was moving along too easily, without opposition, someone was assigned to speak against that person from becoming a saint. In effect, that person was “advocating for the devil.”

People don’t usually want to cause a problem in their group. They do not want to “rock the boat.” Being more knowledgeable of the process of decision-making and our decision-making style could avoid group and individual tragedies.

Interpersonal needs of inclusion, control and affection also guide our decision-making process. William Schutz had identified three interpersonal needs we strive to meet: the need for affection, the need for inclusion, and the need for control. He calls this his Interpersonal Needs Theory. Our desire to fulfill these needs we have influences the voluntary decisions we make.

The need for affection is our desire to be loved and in turn, to give love. This includes the desire for emotional intimacy and close relationships.

The need for inclusion is the need to be part of a group, organization or family. This is the desire to be a part of something important to you. It could be your family or even a supporter of an athletic team.

The need for control is the need to exert some real power of influence over the decision-making in a relationship or group where you are a member. When your ideas are respected, you are meeting this need.²

We begin to direct our decisions toward the outcomes that best meet our needs. If we have a need that is only fulfilled by one or two groups, we will have the tendency to make decisions that allow us to fulfill that need by choosing one group over another. Imagine that a control need is important to us and our family does not meet that need, but another group does. Schutz’s theory suggest that we would make decisions that support that group, instead of our family. The desire to meet our needs becomes a powerful influence on our decision-making process.

Whether our decisions are made subconsciously, out of habit, reflex or repetition, or consciously, with our active involvement in the decision-making situation, all of us at times fall prey to undisciplined or weak thinking. Because we
are always not at the top of peak performance, we do not always think clearly, precisely, accurately, logically, deeply or broad-mindedly. We do not always monitor and direct our thinking effectively. We sometimes are victims to the traps and illusions of sloppy thinking.

Reference

1. Irving Janis, Groupthink (Carlsbad: CRM Learning, 1992)