

# GROUPTHINK AND WHAT GREAT LEADERS CAN DO ABOUT IT

One topic that we frequently encounter when working with C-Suite executives is ‘groupthink’. In a time of crisis, particularly a hugely impactful global one like this pandemic, it is hard to think of other issues that might affect your business, especially internal ones, with so much seismic activity happening outside the organisation. However, now is a great time to focus on improving your organisation overall. You can take this opportunity to assure you emerge from this crisis stronger, better, and more well equipped for the new normal.

First researched by Irving Janis, groupthink is described as the tendency of individuals within a group, who desire harmony or conformity, to simply accept the decisions of the group, or its leadership, unquestioned. Contradictory views are prevented from being expressed, either by intentional suppression, or self-censorship, and those differing views are not subsequently evaluated. The reinforcing behavior within the group can lead to dysfunctional decision-making; the group seeks to minimize conflict, so may often reach a consensus decision without applying critical thinking. Critical thinking is key to any business decision process - in the absence of complete information, we cannot make a perfect decision. Critical thinking allows assumptions to be questioned and decisions to be viewed in the round, considering the potential outcomes of any decision taken. The need for critical thinking is even more important now in a time of crisis, where there is a risk that people feel the need to be doing something, rather than doing the right thing.

## Symptoms

Here are some of the symptoms associated with groupthink:

- Decisions are not debated, opposing views are not expressed, and everyone quickly falls into harmony and consensus.
- Some team members may even engage in self-censorship, holding back on expressing opposing views or even withholding facts that may influence the decision.
- The illusion of invulnerability may emerge, there is perceived safety in numbers.
- Close-mindedness may appear and this position can cloud vision, as any other outcome is seen as ‘unthinkable’.
- The group members believe completely in the morality of the group, leading them to believe all decision are the right ones.



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**“Now I’ll check off the final item on my report: Everyone at the meeting agreed enthusiastically with all my ideas.”**

Furthermore, a culture of politeness can be a contributing factor - you can, however, debate and remain polite. *Is there healthy debate around important decisions in your team meetings?*

## Implications

Many problems can arise within an organisation as a result of groupthink. Assumptions and pre-conceived biases rule the day, where only supporting information is sought and the negative ignored or reclassified as irrelevant. Like the classic murder mystery where an amateur jumps to a conclusion and then only seeks information that supports his assumption, until the Sherlock Holmes character shows up and discovers all of the evidence, leading to the actual murderer. Furthermore, people have a tendency to take riskier decisions in a group than when acting alone, apparently because of the perceived security of being a part of a larger group. This phenomenon, especially when linked with the absence of critical thinking, can lead to disastrous decisions being taken and the downside ignored. “We’re all in this together” can have a decidedly negative impact when viewed as a security blanket in the face of risk, as opposed to a rallying cry for shared success and a shared responsibility to mitigate the downside. All being on the same boat during a shipwreck does you no good, you’re all going down together, but helping stop the boat from sinking in the first place can save everyone. The defense of the status quo becomes very prevalent. Groupthink assumes all decisions are correct because they were made with consensus. If the previous decisions taken by the group resulted in the existing state, why ‘rock the boat’? One would be questioning the previous decisions, which is not done. Innovation is therefore stifled.

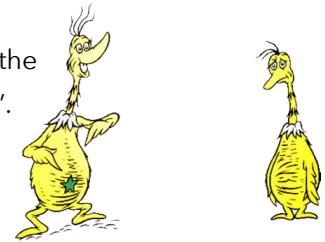


The problems associated with groupthink are not just theoretical, some very real-world problems can arise as well. For example, in IT, vendor lock-in plays very well to groupthink. It may be seen by the group as far too expensive to diversify or switch vendors. This group bias makes it easier for the vendor to further embed itself in the organisation and lock in even further. Think of major ERP vendors or network equipment providers. Groupthink can also lead to short-sightedness. Netflix was an upstart challenger to Blockbuster by first offering no late fee rentals through the post and later through streaming, true innovative behavior. Blockbuster, with its ingrained thinking and fear of killing their ‘cash cow’, doubled down on the existing brick-and-mortar business model and simply tried to sell more items in its stores, resulting ultimately in bankruptcy. In the most extreme cases of groupthink, a so called herd behavior can emerge, whereby the group moves as a whole without apparent leadership or any form of decision-making process that is necessary in an organisation. The absence of critical thinking throughout the entire process has been shown as a leading cause of innovation failure. *How well thought-out are your innovative ideas?*



## How Groupthink Forms

Groupthink can develop across a department or organisation, or just amongst the leadership. Wherever it forms, a sub-group emerges that is seen as the 'in group'. All that oppose, or even are thought to possibly oppose the thoughts of the 'in group' are relegated to the 'out group'. Their opinions are frequently and systematically ignored or dismissed as silly, irrelevant, or uninformed. This relegation can be catastrophic; all leaders have blind spots and the dissenting opinion can often point these out and better inform the decision. Without this scrutiny, irrational decisions can often be made, and negative consequences ignored.



This sort of thinking does not happen on purpose - no sensible leader wants to be surrounded by 'yes men' - people who go along with every suggestion. History has shown us that leaders who do so almost always fail. Leaders can, however, unwittingly create a situation where groupthink can emerge. For example, a leader who does not want to accept 'bad news', punishing the person who brings facts to light or diminishing the opinions of others can create a negative environment. People do not want to work in a negative environment, so a natural reaction is to capitulate, not surface bad news, and not disagree with decisions, regardless of the facts at hand. *You have to be proactive to make sure this situation does not emerge and you have to be prepared to be challenged, in fact, welcome the challenges, they will make you a better leader and help form a better team.*

## Crisis Time

A crisis, like the current pandemic, can quickly facilitate the development of groupthink as people belittle their own ability to respond to the crisis at hand and assume others are more qualified to make decisions. In line with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, at time of crisis, all superior feelings of self-esteem and one's psychological needs are abandoned for the most basic physiological needs of safety, shelter, and food. In this sort of state, if people believe that the decisions being taken are for their protection, or otherwise serve their most basic needs, they are less likely to question them. They defer to harmony and cohesiveness as opposed to the uncertainty and isolation caused by the crisis. Once they feel a part of the protected group, this connectedness begins to satisfy the next need up the hierarchy, belonging.



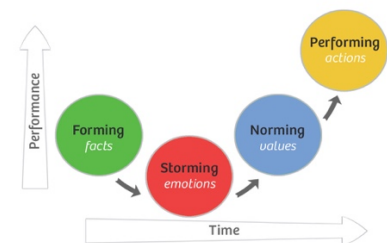
Should this phenomenon continue too long, the group ceases to question any decisions and left unchecked, groupthink can easily develop. The more the biases, beliefs, ideas, and decisions are accepted, by others, the more likely people are to accept these biases, beliefs, ideas, and decisions. There is a Chinese proverb, 'Three men make a tiger' that refers to an individual's tendency to accept even absurd information as true, provided it is repeated by many individuals. There are many classic examples throughout history, especially in political or military situations; Cuba's Bay of Pigs, the Vietnam War, and Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction, to name but a few. Human nature - the desire to fit in - will cause the thinking to propagate across the organisation like a virus. *In your last disaster management meeting, did anyone bring a dissenting opinion?*

## East vs West

The concept of groupthink (and it being an entirely negative state) is largely a Western one. Eastern culture and tradition are more aligned to a concept of group identity or interdependence. The individual does not stand out as much as an individual, but as part of a group, be that cultural, social, or business-oriented. The success of the individual, as such, is tied to the success of the group - the individual only succeeds when the group succeeds. Whilst some of the aspects of such a self-identification could feed into a groupthink situation, the outcome is not absolute. The group can be successful, even if individuals stand out a bit and engage in critical thinking. The key is that these individual actions are seen as ultimately benefitting the group and not as an individual attempting to succeed individually. Do not confuse group identity with groupthink. *You need to encourage the feeling of being part of a larger group in all constituents, regardless of cultural or other background, at the same time creating a safe place to question and engage in critical thinking within the group.*

## High Performing Teams

Bruce Tuckman proposed that there are four phases that all groups must pass through to become an effective team; Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing. Much good can be said for this model and it is commonly taught and is widely used by leaders when convening a new team. However, the danger lies in the Norming phase. Tuckman describes this phase as the one where people start to resolve their differences, socialize, and provide constructive feedback. If the team falls into an acceptance of the group consensus, they may no longer act in the way he describes. If they begin to suppress their innate differences and do not challenge others in the group, including the leader, with critical thinking in the decision-making process, groupthink may arise. Your team may normalize into an under-performing team, not the high-performance team Tuckman promises. *You have to normalise critical thinking during the Norming phase and congratulate those who do it well.*



## What Great Leaders Do About Groupthink

It is possible to prevent groupthink. Even if you think you may already suffer from groupthink, it can be reversed. You have to create an environment where critical thinking and the examination of the facts, not to mention the raising of the facts in the first place, is encouraged. It will take time, but as people realise they will not be punished for bringing forward an opposing view and that they are actually doing the team a service, their behavior will slowly change. You are changing a culture at this point; culture is 'the way we do things' and you will be fighting what is probably years of inertia. Culture change is hard, arguably the hardest thing to change in an organisation.

It is paramount to learn from failure - discuss previous decisions and what led to the undesired result or the failure. What could have been done differently? What information was missing? How can you improve in future discussions and decisions? This sort of retrospective discussion can help bed-in the kind of positive behavior you want to foster. This process is commonly called a post-mortem. A lightweight, formal decision review

process could be helpful here. Do not ignore the steps of implementing the decision; clear milestones can indicate success or whether new facts may cause the decision to be rethought or a pivot taken. This process may more easily allow the leadership to make changes, without losing face. An additional clever idea is that of a *pre-mortem*; before the project is kicked off, get each team member to explain, as if it were after the fact, why the project failed. This added information may allow you to prevent this potential future and increase the likelihood of success. *Are you a great leader?*

## 6 Actions to Prevent Groupthink:

**Encourage diversity:** Promote diversity in all areas; different parts of the business, age, experience, sex, race, background, and opinions. It is more difficult for sub-groups to form in this kind of environment. It is one of the oldest tricks to combat groupthink.

**Devil's advocate:** It may be helpful to play the role of devil's advocate or have a team member or facilitator who can do this - to take an opposing position for the sake of fostering argument and conflict.

**Never assume silence is consent:** Just because a team member does not say anything, does not mean they have nothing to say. If you are not hearing from team members, you need to call them out - get them to engage in the conversation.

**Hold your opinion:** It is tempting to open a discussion with your own opinion and 'cut to the chase', but it is best to hold your opinion until the last. Foster a healthy, unbiased discussion amongst the team. You will always have time to weigh in. Perhaps your opinion may even change in the process.

**Use structured discussion:** By having a clear process and a facilitated discussion, you can remove time pressures and avoid 'rabbit holes' along the path to a well thought-out decision.

**Use experts:** Not only subject matter experts, but experts in process and facilitation can be very helpful in getting the best decisions out of groups. Engage in facilitated workshops and/or pre-mortems.

## Leadership

At the end of the day, it is all about leadership; great leadership is even more critical in a crisis. It has been shown that an open leader, one who can wear different hats, such as consultant, adviser, and facilitator, depending on the situation, is the most effective. The climate needs to welcome both feelings and ideas - the opposite of closed leadership. The alignment of statements, actions, and what behaviours you model are the only way an organisation can see the way to successful change. You may not be able to wear all these hats, or play all of these roles alone, especially in a critical situation or time of crisis. You may need to engage outside facilitation and coaching for you and your team to reverse the situation. *Great leaders accept help; world leaders have advisors; great world leaders actually listen to them.*