Groupthink: The Dark Side Of Teamwork[1]

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As you know from my previous Timely Tips, I'm a strong proponent of teams and teamwork. So talking about the "dark side" of teamwork might surprise you. However, as wonderfully effective as a team may be in coming to a constructive decision or solving a problem, there is a danger we all need to be aware of: *Groupthink*. Groupthink is a concept introduced as a theory by Irving Janis[2] almost 40 years ago—a theory that is as relevant today as it was then.

1. What Is Groupthink?

The beauty of a team is its cohesiveness. A group of people all aligned in the same direction, operating as one, in pursuit of a collective goal—a synergistic collection of individuals achieving far more together, than each could achieve alone.

> *One piece of log creates a small fire, adequate to warm you up, add just a few more pieces to blast an immense bonfire, large enough to warm up your entire circle of friends; needless to say that individuality counts but team work dynamites.*   *—Jin Kwon*

Unfortunately, cohesiveness can lead to *Groupthink*. Groupthink occurs when the focus of team members on achieving consensus in making a decision or solving a problem is so strong that they fail to systematically consider other viewpoints or courses of action. They isolate themselves from any opposing opinions and fail to seek outside information or expertise during their deliberations. It's almost as if they all are being swept up in a giant wave.

In the long run, Groupthink results in poor decision making based on bad judgments. It also lowers the potential of arriving at creative decisions and innovative solutions to problems.

2. What Are Some Symptoms Of Groupthink?

Be alert to several symptoms of Groupthink in highly cohesive teams pressured to make decisions or solve problems:

♦ **Strong Leadership.** The team has a strong leader who presses the team to accept his or her ideas for what decision should be made or how a problem should be solved.

♦ **Driven to Consensus.** Feeling pressured to achieve consensus, team members don't spend enough time considering alternative courses of action. They are so focused on their desire to achieve consensus they have tunnel vision.

♦ **Illusion Of Unanimity.** Everyone on the team perceives a shared illusion of unanimity concerning judgments conforming to the majority view.

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[1] From: http://www.arniedahlke.com/110228_Groupthink_The_Dark_Side_Of_Teamwork.pdf

[2] Janis, I. L. (1971). Groupthink. *Psychology Today,* November, pp.43–46, 74–76.

- **Invulnerability.** Team members see themselves as invulnerable, which leads them to be overly optimistic and take extreme risks.

- **Self-Censure.** Individual team members are likely to censor themselves from any deviations from an apparent group consensus by minimizing the importance of their own doubts and counterarguments.

- **Insulated.** Team members avoid seeking any expertise outside of the team. They collectively rationalize their decisions when faced with discounting warnings that could lead them to challenge their assumptions.

- **Unquestioned Morality.** Team members ignore ethical or moral consequences of their decisions and actions because they don't question the team's inherent morality

A special form of Groupthink often takes place in highly cohesive teams, in which team members share a close similarity in values, beliefs, and attitudes. It is known as *Group Polarization*. This is the tendency for team members to make decisions that are more extreme as a team than they would make alone as individuals. Research on Group Polarization has shown that when participating in a team discussion, team members tend to advocate more extreme positions and call for riskier courses of action than they would have done as individuals not participating in a team discussion.

3. What Are Some Strategies For Avoiding Groupthink?

Following are some suggestions for avoiding Groupthink.

- **Control Team Size**. Limit the team size to about a dozen or less members—as group size increases, people feel more intimidated and take less personal responsibility.

- **Educate Team Members.** Raise the awareness of team members to the dangers of Groupthink by educating them about the causes and consequences of Groupthink.

- **Ensure Impartial Leadership**. Use an impartial team leader (from outside of the team, if possible) who encourages an environment of open inquiry and does not state any of his or her own preferences and expectations at the outset of the deliberation process.

- **Challenge Thinking.** Challenge team members to think carefully and deeply about actions, and policies along with their underlying assumptions and implications.

  - **Play Devil's Advocate.** Encourage every team member to play the role of devil's advocate, questioning and evaluating assumptions and decisions as they are being discussed. Establish the following team norm: objections and unpopular alternatives must always be given a hearing.

- **Seek External Views.** Tell team members to periodically discuss teams deliberations with someone they trust and report the results back to the team. Invite outside experts to team meetings from time to time, encouraging them to challenge the views of team members.

- **Form Independent Subgroups.** Assign two team sub-groups to work independently on the same critical issue and report back to the team.
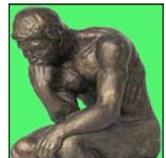
PROTECT YOUR TEAMS FROM *GROUPTHINK*, THE DARK SIDE OF TEAMWORK!