

## Groupthink

by Bob Larcher

In previous Horizons articles I looked at the design and delivery of outdoor based teambuilding events (Horizons 5), reviewing teambuilding activities (Horizons 15), team development models (Horizons 38) and team roles (Horizons 39). In this article I would like to look briefly at one of the mechanisms often at work in groups, Groupthink. What is it? How can it be spotted? How can it be avoided? How can we as facilitators avoid Groupthink and develop "Teamthink"?

### What is Groupthink?

Groupthink is a term that was used initially by William H. Whyte (an American sociologist) in the Fortune in 1952 and further developed, and made famous, by social psychologist Irving Janis in 1972. Groupthink occurs when a group makes faulty decisions because group pressures lead to a deterioration of "mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment" (according to Janis in his 1972 book entitled *Victims of Groupthink*).

The concept of Groupthink provides a summary explanation of reasons groups sometimes make poor decisions. Groups are supposed to be better than individuals at making complex decisions, because, through the membership, a variety of differing perspectives are brought together. Group members not only serve to bring new ideas into the discussion. but also act as error-correcting mechanisms. Groups also provide social support, which

is especially critical for new ideas. But when new perspectives are rejected (as in the "not invented here" syndrome), it is hard to correct errors. And if the social support is directed toward supporting the group's "accepted wisdom," the elements that can make groups better decision makers than individuals become inverted, and instead make them worse. Just as groups can work to promote effective thinking/decision making, the same processes which can enhance the group's operation can backfire and lead to disastrous results.

A group is especially vulnerable to Groupthink when its members are similar in background, when the group is insulated from outside opinions, and when there are no clear rules for decision making; often the case when working residentially with groups.

### Spotting Groupthink

In order to make Groupthink testable, Irving Janis defined eight symptoms that are indicative of Groupthink.

1. *Illusions of invulnerability* creating excessive optimism and encouraging risk taking
2. *Rationalising warnings* that might challenge the group's assumptions
3. *Unquestioned belief* in the morality of the group, causing members to ignore the consequences of their actions
4. *Stereotyping* those who are opposed to the group as weak, evil or stupid
5. *Direct pressure* to conform placed on any member who questions the group, couched in terms of "disloyalty"
6. *Self censorship* of ideas that deviate from the apparent group consensus
7. *Illusions of unanimity* among group members, silence is viewed as agreement
8. *Mindguards* - self-appointed members who shield the group from dissenting information

When the above symptoms exist in a group that is trying to make a decision, there is a reasonable chance that Groupthink will happen, although it is not necessarily so. Groupthink occurs when groups are highly cohesive and when they are under considerable pressure to make a quality decision. When pressures for unanimity seem overwhelming, members are less motivated to realistically appraise the alternative courses of action available to them. These group pressures lead to carelessness and irrational thinking since groups experiencing Groupthink fail to consider all alternatives and seek to maintain unanimity. Decisions shaped by Groupthink have low probability of achieving successful outcomes.

## Avoiding Groupthink

As facilitators we can make groups aware of, and at the same time prevent, Groupthink by:

- Fostering an open climate by encouraging disagreement, raising objections and concerns.
- Dividing the group into sub-groups, to separately generate alternatives, then bringing the sub-groups together to compare differences.
- Appointing a Devil's advocate to question all the group's ideas.
- Presenting the group with extremely difficult, high failure prone tasks where success is unlikely unless they get past Groupthink.

- Holding a meeting after a decision consensus is reached, in which all group members are expected to critically review the decision before final approval is given.
- Asking leaders and influencers to withhold expressing judgements and opinions that might influence others, thereby letting others speak up.
- Developing criteria to evaluate options against a team decision.
- Taking time for discussing group processes and examine the symptoms of Groupthink.

One of the roles of a facilitator when working with a team is to help the team to move from Groupthink to Teamthink ("pooling experiences to make effective, integrated decisions") in order to help the team make high quality decisions that all team members truly adhere to and that they are motivated to implement; what I call "success through cooperation". Techniques such as positive inquiry, advocacy & inquiry, and the ladder of inference are all useful in getting to underlying assumptions and insuring that the experience of all team members is used to its best effect. ■

### References:

Janis, Irving L. Victims of Groupthink. Boston. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972  
 Neck, Christopher P., and Charles C. Manz. "From Groupthink to Teamthink: Toward the Creation of Effective Thought Patterns in Self-Managing Work Teams." Human Relations. August 1994.  
 C.C. Manz, C.P. Neck, J. Mancuso, and K.P. Manz, For Team Members Only: Making Your Workplace Team Productive and Hassle-free (New York: AMACOM, 1997)  
 Janis, Irving L. Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes - 2nd edition.

### Author's Notes

I am a British independent Management Development Consultant living and working in Toulouse. I would appreciate any comments on the above article and can be contacted by the following methods:  
 E-mail: boblarcher@yahoo.com  
 W: www.boblarcher.com  
 Photos: Karen Stuart

From Groupthink	To Teamthink
Teams experience an illusion of unanimity.	Teams recognise and value member uniqueness.
Teams believe they can't fail.	Teams understand their limitations and threats.
Social pressure impedes differing views.	Differing views are encouraged.
The team has an illusion of morality.	The team recognises the ethical and moral consequences of decisions.
Team members practice self-censorship.	Team members openly express concerns and ideas.
Mind guards screen external information.	Views outside the group are sought.



*Fostering an open climate by encouraging disagreement, raising objections and concerns.*