Groupthink: decision making and group assignment

Business

The term groupthink originated in 1952 in Fortune magazine by the author William Whyte. The theory, however, was not researched or clearly defined until around 1972 by Irving Janis. Whyte acknowledged that groupthink was a definition in progress; Janis picked up and further developed the study many years later. Groupthink is defined as a group's inability to make correct decisions as a result of the implied need for group cohesion. Janis provides a series of statements that collectively are a definition of groupthink: ' Groupthink refers to a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures'" (Hutter 5). Group members force themselves to come to an agreement about decisions even when some members may have differing opinions on the subject at hand. Basically, doubts are set aside out of fear of offsetting the groups balance. Janis lays out eight prominent symptoms of groupthink in his two works Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascoes (1972) and Groupthink (1982).

The first symptom occurs when the group develops a false sense of imperviousness which then leads to more risky decision making. The second symptom happens when the group chooses to ignore warnings and objections as a result of supposed invulnerability. Third, the group tends to cease questioning the morality of decisions being made due to the sense of security which results from being part of a group. In the fourth symptom, members of the group formulate stereotyped views of their opposition's leader. Next, there is pressure on dissenters to follow the majority decision.

The pressure leads to self-censorship of the dissenters. Those who do not want to express their doubts lead the group to have a false sense of

unanimity which is the seventh symptom. The last of the symptoms is the result of what is referred to as " self-appointed mindguards. " This means that members of the group refrain from sharing pertinent information to avoid damaging the group's cohesiveness and solidarity. Not all of the symptoms occur simultaneously, but many can be present at once in groupthink. In the past, researchers have often evaluated political decisions in regards to groupthink.

The major historical events frequently referred to are the Bay of Pigs invasion, the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Vietnam War, the space shuttle Challenger tragedy, and Watergate. Many of these events share common characteristics that are classified as causes of groupthink. For example, the groups in charge of the decisions had strong leaders whose ideas went unopposed by subordinates from within the group. Also, many of the events consisted of highly heterogeneous groups, which make for less diversity in regards to fresh ideas.

The underlying problem with these events is the desire for group consensus above morality and the avoidance of diversity. Based on his eight symptoms of groupthink and various historical events which have fallen victim, Janis devised several ways to prevent groupthink. When in the initial phase of group formation and task assignment, leaders should not express any opinions about the mission at hand. Next, " leaders should assign each member the role of ' critical evaluator'" (Wikipedia). This enables group members to feel free to voice objections and opinions.

The group should be broken up into smaller subgroups to get more diverse alternatives to the problem being discussed. Outside sources from within the organization should be approached to get an unbiased opinion regarding the proposed alternatives. Also, outside experts should be solicited for advice and expertise. Finally, at least one member from within the group should be assigned the role of devil's advocate. This role should be rotated regularly to obtain the most educated and unbiased final decision. Prior to the theory of groupthink, group dynamics were studied.

Group cohesiveness was looked at in a positive light before the emergence of the groupthink theory. " The predominant generalization regarding group work is that group members who are strongly attracted to the group work harder to achieve the goals of the group" (Moorhead 435). With the surfacing of the groupthink theory, cohesiveness has been thought of as a factor which clouds judgment in decision making rather than enhance it. Hence, groupthink put cohesiveness into an entirely different perspective. Research ensued over the groupthink theory because many scholars believed it to be too harsh on group dynamics.

The theory has been difficult to test due to the lack of constant variables. Another problem with testing the groupthink theory is determining what size the group should be. Janis never specified what size the group should be in terms of successful decision making, which has plagued researchers who have followed his studies. There is plenty of room for further research on the theory. Janis does not feel that cohesiveness is the predominant factor in the failure of groups in all situations. His hypothesis states, " The more amiability and espirit de orps among the members of a policy-making in-group, the

greater is the danger that independent critical thinking will be replaced by groupthink, which is likely to result in irrational and dehumanizing actions directed against out-groups" (Hutter 6). Janis is careful not to say that cohesiveness always leads to failure or that it will lead to poor decisions. He simply supposes that cohesiveness makes the chance for failure greater. Groupthink continues to be quite popular in management studies as it can be easily applied to group dynamics.

Clarence Von Bergen and Raymond Kirk, authors of " Groupthink: When too many heads spoil the decision," write about the benefits and downfalls of working in groups. They proceed to give real life examples of how groupthink occurs in business and how it can be prevented. Von Bergen and Kirk believe groups can be beneficial because higher quality decisions result when more people are involved in the decision-making process. Also, it is easier for a group than it would be for an individual to make a decision which leads to unfavorable actions.

Conversely, groups tend to seek unanimous decisions without regard for what is best for the business. Group cohesiveness leads to individual censorship. Von Bergen and Kirk list Janis' eight symptoms of groupthink in order to show how business practices are affected by poor decision-making. A case study of nine employees was evaluated to show how groupthink can influence decisions which would not have been made in other conditions. The president of a company sought to implement a flexible hours program, but wanted input from employees.

The president wanted employees to use an automatic time accumulator device; some members of the group, however, felt this was in opposition of the initial proposal for a flexible hours program. The members who were against the device did not take a stand professing their opposition due to the implied need for unanimity and cohesiveness, which are two symptoms of groupthink. Outside managers were brought in to evaluate the decision-making process; they realized not all members were in favor of the device and brought it to the group's attention. Kirk and Von Bergen use this example to show how groupthink can be avoided.

Members of the committee felt the need to comply with the device simply because the president of the company was in favor of it, but this leads to groupthink. The authors lay out numerous ways to avoid groupthink. The author, Gregory Moorhead, of " Groupthink: Hypothesis in Need of Training" contends that groupthink is a phenomenon which needs further testing. Moorhead proceeds to lay out criteria for testing the groupthink hypothesis. The article begins by describing the nature of decisions, whether they are good or bad, and how they are arrived at and examined in hindsight. Moorhead refers to the creator of groupthink, Irving L.

Janis, and how the theory was originated based on the outcomes of six major historical events. Based on these events, Janis came up with eight flaws in decision-making which he believes to be the result of groupthink. Moorhead states that further research and testing needs to be performed before it can be determined whether groups are flawed in their decision-making processes. Based on Janis' theory of groupthink, groups tend to be incorrect

in their processes because they allow themselves to be coerced into following along with the majority view in order to make speedier decisions.

Furthermore, the group rationalizes their decisions based on the consensus they believe they have established. Moorhead states there are variables which should be put on a measurable scale to monitor a group's cohesiveness. Based on the evaluation of the group's cohesiveness put into quantifiable results, one can determine if groupthink is simply a phenomenon or a reality. Moorhead sets forth three hypotheses which he believes will test the cohesiveness of the group, whether or not the symptoms of groupthink are related to the defects in decision-making, and whether the defects are linked to lower-quality decisions.

Finally, Moorhead feels his proposed testing is important so managers and trainers can be more adept at their jobs. He feels if managers and trainers are aware of the potential flaws in groups based on the symptoms of groupthink, then they can prevent erroneous decisions which result from groupthink. In the article " Optimal trust and teamwork: from groupthink to teamthink" Ferda Erdem describes the difference between good and bad trust in regards to decision-making in groups. Trust is an essential factor in teamwork, but too much trust can lead to self-censorship and the phenomenon referred to as groupthink.

A study was performed with a set of 15 factors relating to trust in order to examine the trust to groupthink link. The trust factors examined within the study were to obtain information about the relationships between team members and the leader involved. Teamthink and groupthink are different in

that teamthink is thought to be a synergistic response to trust within a team. The group is working at an optimal level in teamthink mode, whereas, groupthink hinders the group's ability to make highly productive decisions.

The trust the group believes they have in groupthink mode leads them to be overly trusting and form decisions based on a desire for cohesiveness. Within the study performed, Erdem lays out the trust functions required for teamthink: healthy competition within the team, the belief that contrasting opinions are positive, consistent opinions for the unity of the team, team members must take risks in defending their opinions in front of the group. By contrast, the trust functions which produce groupthink are: introversion based on over-trust within the group, self-censorship so as to avoid damage to the cohesion of the group.

Erdem feels detrimental trust factors should be explained to members of a group following group formation so negative group solidarity can be avoided. Challenging opinions in a group is not harmful and can maximize group synergy. Teamthink should prevail over groupthink; the author feels solidarity is a means to an end. With proper training and acknowledgement of trust factors, a group can be highly successful. Glen Whyte reviews groupthink in his article " Groupthink Reconsidered. " Whyte asserts that groupthink may be a scapegoat for alleged poor decisions made in high stress situations.

He cites many examples commonly referred to in history, including Watergate, the Vietnam War, the Bay of Pigs, and the Challenger space mission. These events are defined by the risky decisions which were made.

Whyte feels that other group dynamics come into play and that highly successful groups have the same levels of solidarity at times; therefore, groupthink may not be a prominent factor in situations where poor decisions were made. Whyte finds holes in Janis' theory of groupthink by means of other determinants in group dynamics such as group polarization.

Whyte writes about the aspiration level concept as one that helps describe how leaders choose between losses and risk aversion when making management decisions. The certainty effect is a prominent aspect in decision making under the level concept. Leaders want to be certain that their decisions will not make the situation worse, but are sometimes forced into risky decisions for a more positive final outcome. Whyte feels that the predisposition of the decision maker has more to do with poor decisions than the symptoms of groupthink.

The process by which group members structure their decisions and select alternatives is more important than the stereotype against group cohesion that is groupthink. Training is necessary for avoidance of poor decision making; decision makers should not evaluate problems based on potential gains and losses, but rather in terms of final states and assets. Decision makers should be encouraged to think of a variety of possible solutions for a problem before acting. Ronald Sims covers unethical business practices resulting from groupthink in his article " Linking Groupthink to Unethical Behavior in Organizations. Sims states that although many are quick to cite historical events as proof of groupthink, there are many examples in the business world. Standards of right and wrong, otherwise known as ethics, are not taken into account at all times in decision making. Other factors prevail

as a result of the symptoms of groupthink that Janis lays out. Beech-Nut, a baby food company is cited as an example of unethical behavior resulting from groupthink. The company was selling fake apple juice and marketing it as real in order to make up for losses in profits.

Beech-Nut justified their decision to sell fake juice by means of convincing themselves that other companies were doing the same thing. Also, they used the excuse that no testing could prove whether ingredients were natural or artificial. The company later faced criminal charges. This company became a victim to groupthink in an unethical way; groups feel more inclined to back an unethical decision when in the comfort of the group. Sims uses Salomon Brothers as an example of bottom-line thinking. This line of thinking puts money as the deciding factor to be considered, which often leads to unethical occurrences.

Sims prescribes a method to remedy unethical decision making in groups by way of Janis' proposal of using group members as a devil's advocate. Every member of the group should form a critical evaluation of the proposed decision. This way, unethical decisions can be caught before errors are made by the group. By using a devil's advocate approach, groups are forced into evaluating their methods of decision making. Sims acknowledges the difficulty in overcoming groupthink, but thinks groups should think outside the box to become successful.

David Boje and Keith Murnighan seek to combat " Group Confidence Pressures in Iterative Decisions" by means of written feedback technique. The authors describe how flawed decisions come from groups based on

symptoms of groupthink. " Group decisions not only involve accurate and efficient decision making, they also involved the process of (1) self justification that a decision is accurate; (2) group rationalization that is accurate; and (3) explaining or legitimizing the group decision to the powers that be" (1187).

The technique of written feedback combats what the authors call group confidence pressures more so than face-to-face feedback. Boje and Murnighan propose that written feedback enables group participants to feel more comfortable giving their opinions on matters they may disagree with. The technique is a variation of the Delphi technique; participants are given open-ended questionnaires in which they fill out responses and turn back in. They then receive a list of responses to evaluate all feasible alternatives from the group. Based on previous studies, the technique has been highly successful in coming to accurate decisions.

The lack of social pressure resulting from the written feedback technique is what makes it a successful technique. Boje and Murnighan did a study in which groups were formed and participants were asked to make decisions in both face to face manner and written feedback technique. Confidence levels and accuracy were measured. As confidence increased, accuracy decreased which is what often occurs in groupthink situations. The face to face technique measures yielded the least accurate results, which show that written techniques are better at combating groupthink.

Peter Schutz and Brian Bloch take a look at departmental groupthink from within a large corporation in Germany. The authors study groupthink from

within an organization and look for remedies to " departmental egoism, turf wars, fuzzy thinking, and tunnel vision" (32) which occur as a result of departmental groupthink. Groups can be victims of groupthink towards members of the same company in the same way that groups are biased against competitors. Schutz and Bloch feel there are many ways in which companies are in danger of egocentrism on a departmental level.

The fractures can be in one's own department, in the value chain, and on a managerial level. The authors of this article feel chemistry between individuals of the group is an important group dynamic. There are many different types of people who could be placed together, but not all will get along. Basically, they feel group members can be categorized as people who absorb energy and people who drain energy. This is a new approach to groupthink in that individual member's personalities are not generally taken into consideration.

Different personalities play an integral role in the success or failure of the group. Next, the authors look at interdepartmental groups in terms of what role they play in the company. For example, the marketing department does not understand the tasks and roles the production team must take on. The group spends more time focusing on stereotypes against one another than they do on the end goal which is a common theme in groupthink. Schutz and Bloch feel more communication between the departments can help combat groupthink. A bridge between the departments must be built for success of the organization.

This is a new approach to groupthink which examines factors not previously taken into account. Model for the Avoidance of Groupthink Group Formation ? Grouping of a heterogeneous team Task Assignment ? Group leader excluded from this phase Group Breaks into Subgroups ? Problem dealt with on subgroup level to get a variety of possible solutions Group Reconvenes with a List of Alternatives ? Group can evaluate all feasible options Devil's Advocate is Assigned ? Someone from within the group questions the alternatives and solutions Outside Expertise Brought In ?

An expert evaluates solution before a final decision is made. Decision Executed Model Explanation The first phase in my model is group formation. A heterogeneous team should be formed so that many alternatives are established; a better decision will result if different perspectives are taken into consideration. Next, the leader should stay out of the task assignment phase. When the leader hands out the task, he or she tends to voice their own thoughts and desires for an outcome. Groups tend to heed the information as important when deciding on an outcome which is not always the best means to an end.

The group should break up into subgroups so that a longer and more diverse list of alternatives is created. Group members will more likely voice their doubts about alternatives if they do not have the need for group cohesiveness from the start. By forming subgroups, members of the group will be more truthful in regards to how they feel about the alternatives and a more educated decision will be made. A devil's advocate will help the group see the idea in terms of its downsides. The selection process will be more thorough if this role is established and rotated amongst the group.

Finally, outside expertise should be brought in to give advice, ask questions which have not been posed, and provide guidance with an unbiased final decision. Once all this is done, groupthink can be avoided. As a result, the best possible efforts have been made to make an educated and impartial decision. It seems that the most research on the groupthink theory occurred during the late 1970's to mid 1990's. Irving Janis provided a systematic framework for other scholars to evaluate and utilize in their own research. The causes and symptoms of groupthink can be applied to both politics and business practices making it very useful.

I think the research that has been executed proves that groups tend to act based on a desire for cohesiveness and that groups make poor decisions as a result. Some of the later research which suggests there are other elements which should be taken into account should be elaborated upon. For example, the German scholars Schutz and Bloch assert that group member's personalities play a large role in the effectiveness of the group. Janis does not touch upon this notion, but it is an interesting aspect which should be researched further.

Janis lays out his symptoms quite clearly and concisely. He also provides many historical examples in both of his books. For the most part, scholars seem to agree with his theory. Many researchers acknowledge the difficulty in establishing a study to either prove or refute groupthink with quantifiable variables. The results tend to be quite subjective, which seems to be the reason research has tapered off in recent time. I feel the research has been exhausted, but that it is necessary so that alternative means of group decision making can be found.