Groupthink: Group Dynamics and the Decision-Making Process

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Tamika, Jeff, Susan, and Rosa sat around the seminar table wondering what was going to happen next. Lisa, the director of their small liberal arts college library had been talking about 'change' and 'the future' for the past twenty minutes. This was their first meeting of the new school year and Lisa was just full of plans she had been working on over the summer.

Lisa explained that after an article in the student newspaper about the new learning commons at the nearby community college, students and faculty at their school started talking about changes they would like to see in their own library. Over the summer, some had even approached Lisa to see what changes could be implemented.

Tamika sat back and closed her eyes. This was all well and good, but she was headed toward retirement. She would let Lisa and the group have their way without much comment. Let 'em do what they wanted to do, even if it was going to damage the library; she wasn't going to have to live with it for very long. Jeff thought that spending money developing a learning commons might be the wrong path for their small school, when the library had so many other needs. Besides, the library worked well for most of the students, didn't it? And faculty – their biggest contact with library staff was to drop off their request for reserved books for the term. Why should they change what was working well for them? Jeff looked over to see what Susan was doing. He shouldn't have been surprised to see her writing down everything Lisa said. This was Susan's first job as a librarian; her dream was to become a library director. She hung on Lisa's every word, figuring that it might include information she could use on her way to the top. She knew she didn't have enough experience to make an informed comment about what Lisa was saying; she just assumed Lisa knew what she was talking about and continued taking notes. Rosa tried to keep a poker face. She was Lisa's assistant director and had seen all of the projects Lisa had worked on over the summer. She thought some of them might work out, but others… well… But even though she saw problems, Rosa did not speak up. She liked her job. She actually liked Lisa. Jobs were hard enough to get and there was no guarantee that the next one would be any better than this one. She may not completely agree with Lisa, but why pick an argument. Things might work out…

Finally Lisa stopped talking and looked around the table expectantly. The staff looked at each other. Now that they heard Lisa's ideas, they sounded good to them all. Granted, she hadn't included any of the suggestions from the student council or the faculty, but after all, they were the librarians. What did students know? For that matter, what did faculty know about running an academic library? Yeah, Lisa's plans seemed all right. There might be some holes here and there, and no one was sure where the money was going to come from, or if the college's president was on board, but why should that stop them? They agreed to move forward to put them in motion.

Sound familiar? Have you ever been in a group like this and wondered how a collection of relatively intelligent people could make such poor decisions? To paraphrase a line from the movie '*Cool Hand Luke*, 'What we have here, is groupthink.'

Groupthink is the concept developed by Irving Janis[1] to explain the effect of the group on decision-making, with the result that the decisions made are generally suboptimal. Within the group, pressures on the individual and on the group, as well as personal interests, work to reduce the hard work of thinking and considering alternatives that might result in better decisions. Selected characteristics[2] of groupthink and what it looks like in the real world are:

1. There is an *illusion of invulnerability* – as a group, we think we're pretty great. We can take risks (risks that we shouldn't take), because anything we do will work out.

2. Warnings may be unheeded and assumptions about the situation may not be fully examined as there is *collective rationalization*.

3. Have you ever been told not to 'rock the boat'? With *direct pressure on dissenters*, members are under pressure not to express arguments against any of the group's views.

4. Information that is difficult, contrary to the group's opinion, or apt to cause fragmentation is hidden by *self-appointed 'mindguards'* in order to keep the group intact.

These days, much of the work we do from the time we are school children to the time we join the workforce, is done in groups. Conventional wisdom tells us that two heads are better than one. And if two are better than one, well, what about five or twenty-five? Indeed, groups can benefit from the unique experiences and knowledge of each team member, but with groupthink, that may not happen.

For one thing, people want to be liked - they don't want to stand out from the crowd, but rather, they want to be seen as 'one of the guys.' I remember taking part in a psychology experiment as an undergrad. I was told to give my opinion about marijuana to an unseen person on the other side of a

divider. I did, with gusto (this was the 1970's; every college kid had an opinion about marijuana). Then I heard the other person's opinion, which was the exact opposite of mine. I was then asked to present my opinion again. I learned afterward that the researchers were trying to determine whether I would change my opinion to agree with the other person's. How much did I want to fit in? Were my opinions too 'out there' and would I conform them to those of the other participant? In another example, I recently read of a young archivist who was three months into his first 'real' job. He explained that as a graduate student, if he could support his arguments, he could say almost anything he wished and be protected by academic freedom. "Now, in my capacity as an archivist, I have to walk the line carefully about letting my politics influence my job. My Twitter handle is a pseudonym and my Facebook is private. I can't jeopardize my new position by saying something that someone might find inflammatory."[3] These are the other ways in which groupthink can appear – changing our individual opinions so that they eventually form a consensus on a topic or moving away from speaking out on what we think and believe as individuals to keeping quiet so as not to cause problems.

Conforming our opinions to that of the group or keeping our opinions to ourselves are two relatively benign ways that being in a group can go wrong. But there are also more serious downsides to group behavior. We know that people in mobs will do things that they would never do as individuals. Even when it doesn't rise to the criminal activity of a mob, the unthinking behavior that often occurs in groups may have disastrous results. A frequently touted example is the behavior of engineers prior to the Challenger disaster – the one in which the O-rings failed in cold weather. A hierarchical structure made it unlikely that lower-ranked engineers would go to supervisors with their concerns. Group members also held the belief that NASA was full of smart people – if something were wrong, surely someone else would have said something. In the end, people who thought something was wrong did not speak up, and brave men and women lost their lives.

Pressures that Encourage Groupthink

Groupthink may exist when members feel pressured to reach particular decisions and results. Pressure can come from a variety of sources such as a lack of funding or new organizational initiatives. These pressures can result in members not doing all they could do – such as considering all alternatives and bringing their values into the decision making process – to arrive at good decisions. I consider here two forms of pressure, normative isomorphism and social identity maintenance.

Normative Isomorphism

Group members with similar educational backgrounds can negatively affect decision-making and result in groupthink. According to the theory of institutionalism, we can know why people in organizations behave the way they do once we know the forces that act upon them, pressuring to behave in certain ways.[4] One such force is normative isomorphism. When people have similar educational and professional backgrounds, they tend to think the same way about problems. For example, the same civil rights issues may be seen in different ways by different professions – as legal issues by lawyers, as social issues by sociologists, as economic issues by economics, etc. Librarians have a librarian worldview, shaped by their library and information science education as well as by the goals and initiatives of the various professional associations that affect how they see problems. Despite new courses in digital librarianship or building mobile apps, most people who attend a library or information program have a shared core of similar courses – even more so if they obtained their degree a number of years ago. Professionals act in similar ways due to the similarity of their education and the effect of the standardizing practices of professional associations on the behavior of members. "Such mechanisms create a pool of almost interchangeable individuals who occupy similar positions across a range of organizations and possess a similarity of orientation and disposition"[5] And when these 'almost interchangeable' professionals get together to make decisions, well… groupthink, anyone?

Social Identity Maintenance

Another pressure which can affect decision-making is Social Identity Maintenance (SIM)[6] in which the group is not just a collection of random people, but people whose identity is tied to being a member of the group. They have a positive image of the group and seek to retain that image in the face of threat. The desire to be part of the group and to keep it going exerts such a pull, that when faced by a threat, group members will make those decisions, rational or not, that will help the group continue. In fact, a member may be removed if his or her presence appears to damage the group's image.[7] The focus on the threat against the group (as opposed, say, to threat to the organization in which the group operates) helps maintain the group's positive image of itself. A good example of this focus on the threat to the group rather the threat to the organization is the Nixon White House during Watergate. People protected themselves in the face of accusations and wrongdoing not necessarily because they believed they were in the right, but because their self-image was wrapped up in remaining a member of the group (White House insiders).[8]

On the Other Hand…

Research suggests that rather than focusing on the decisions that come as a result of groupthink, the focus might be on the communications process. Not every decision that happens as a result of groupthink is a bad one. The same groupthink processes existed for previous shuttle flights where there was no O-ring disaster. "The difference in outcomes was not related to differences in decision-making processes but almost random, unpredictable factors."[9]

Also, poor results as a result of bad decision-making happen all the time, yet only a few disastrous decisions make it into the research. Some bad outcomes do not get a lot of attention because they are uneventful in the larger scheme of things, such as when small business owners go out of business.[10] I am a fan of shows like *Restaurant Impossible* with Chef Robert Irvine. Time after time, failing restaurant owners who have asked Chef Robert to help them out of a desperate situation, suddenly think they've done everything right and Chef Robert is wrong. 'My food is great. We've got great service. The place looks great. I have no idea why we're not making money.' Usually the chefs and owners (deeply invested in the success of the group/restaurant) nod in agreement, though, tellingly, wait staff, with little monetary and personal investment in the restaurant, usually tell the truth about how bad things are. Of course, Chef Robert, with no investment in this particular group, has to bring them back to reality, "If everything is so great, where are the customers? Why did you call me?" If the in-group restaurant principals listen to outsider Irvine, they have a chance of overcoming their difficulties and staying open. If they go back to groupthink (which happens surprisingly often), they will probably fail because they are too invested in perpetuating the image of themselves as successful restaurateurs.

When we think of groupthink as a communications issue, the importance of the organizational environment becomes clear. When people work in an environment in which they feel safe giving their opinion, when everyone has an opportunity to be heard with respect, and when management is not so enmeshed in its own worldview that it excludes or punishes input from others, people working in groups can communicate with each other in such was as to garner the information needed to make effective decisions that reflect the reality of the group's situation.

Conclusion

Groups are not going to disappear from the workplace anytime soon. Making use of individual talents and experiences in the decision-making process is a good thing. Where it can fail is when individuality is a threat to the group, when it is more important to kowtow to supervisors and the organizational structure, more important to adhere to professional roles and rules, more important to

keep one's place in a preferred group, and more important to be a seen as a team player than an individual willing to bring up difficult questions, that less than optimal decisions are likely to result. To improve group decisions, it may be useful to take the focus off of the results and put it on the process. Improving group interactions and creating organizational environments where staff is not afraid to share opinions, and management is not afraid to hear them, is a start.

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