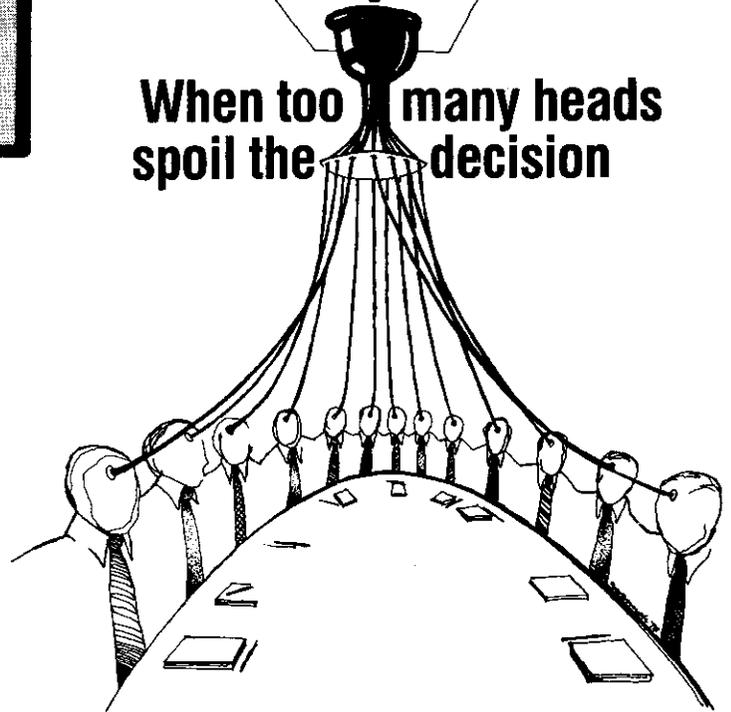


Groupthink

When too many heads
spoil the decision



Group decision making often comes up with a less than adequate answer because group psychological pressures tend to cloud basic issues. Understanding how groups think—and why—helps improve the group-think process.

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MANY OF US have at one time or another lamented the results of groups, committees, or task forces in which we have participated or have been associated. Yet we continue to spend long hours in group decision making that might be handled on an individual basis.

Much of the research on group decision making questions the

adequacy of groups for solving important problems. For example, separate researchers have found that for many kinds of tasks the pooled output of noninteracting individuals usually is better than that of interacting, face-to-face groups. Indeed, Nietzsche is reported to have said that madness is the exception in individuals but the rule in groups.

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One reason for continuing decision making in groups is that a group may be less likely to make bad decisions than will individuals. This appears to be particularly important when the cost of a wrong decision may be especially high. Although more person-hours may be employed to reach a collective decision, the resulting decision is more likely to be the correct one—which may be one of the reasons why many high-level decisions made in business and government are made in groups.

Also, rarely is a decision successful unless it is accepted by those who will implement it. Indeed, the proponents of participative decision making cite increased commitment to group-formulated decisions as one of the advantages of the participative approach. People are more inclined to accept and implement decisions that they or their representatives have helped develop.

There also has been an emphasis on group participation and decision making in organizational development (OD) activities. One survey of 45 companies engaged in OD-type activities indicated that 98 percent of the firms used participative methods in identifying and solving organizational problems.

Other group benefits

Group inputs are sought in these efforts because the quality of the contributions may be more in keeping with the values of authenticity and

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candor than if they came from an individual. This is particularly true for OD activities directed toward improvements in communication and resolution of conflicts.

Another reason for favoring group decision making deals with the diffusion of responsibility. Spreading of responsibility may appear very attractive when a good decision calls for actions that are unpopular, unpleasant, or risky. A single person may not be inclined to pursue a course of action because he or she alone will be held accountable for any negative consequences, whereas a group may decide to go on with an unpleasant, or risky, action because responsibility is shared among its members. The group may function, in effect, as a superindividual entity, in which members can achieve some degree of anonymity.

Group decision making also affords a relatively captive audience for those who like to hear themselves, a friendly club for those who seek sociability, satisfaction for those eager to deflate rivals, and a base for those who want power and status. For some individuals, satisfying those personal needs in a group is more important than the explicit goals of the group.

Finally, group decision making may be preferred because of the belief that "all of us know more than any one of us knows." Though it is not entirely supportable, this belief holds that the group's multiple perspectives, talents, and areas of expertise brought to bear in solving problems, setting goals, establishing policies, and carrying out projects or activities result in a superior product.

Pitfalls in groups

Unfortunately, many of us have been part of a group that did not func-

tion properly and whose conclusions were sometimes poorer than those an individual might have reached. The major barriers to effective group problem solving are those conditions that prevent the free expression of ideas in a group. Restraints can decrease the likelihood that the correct solution or the elements of such a solution will be made available to the group. Both obvious and subtle factors can work against the group's use of its resources.

Most of us know that obvious factors, such as embarrassment and fear of reprisal, tend to restrict free expression of ideas in groups. However, other more subtle restrictive factors, such as high regard for unanimity sought by members of groups, also are at work.

Groups tend to produce unanimous decisions, and their discussions tend to increase the uniformity of their members' individual judgments. One study reported that in groups ranging in size from two to five people, 64 percent of the groups gave unanimous answers despite instructions to members to disregard the group's discussion and that the final reports need not be unanimous.

Social-psychological studies have suggested that the more cohesive a group becomes, the less its members will deliberately censor what they say out of fear of being punished socially for antagonizing the leader or a fellow member. On the other hand, the more cohesive a group is, the more its members will unwittingly censor what they think because of their newly acquired motivation to preserve the unity of the group and to adhere to its norms. Thus, although the members of a highly cohesive group feel much freer to deviate from the majority, they also desire genuine concurrence on all important is-

sues. A desire to match their opinions and conduct themselves in accordance with each other's wishes often inclines them not to use this freedom to dissent.

The danger is not that each will fail to reveal his strong objections to a proposal, but that each will think the proposal is a good one without even attempting to carry out a critical scrutiny that could reveal grounds for strong objections. The insecurity generated by possible rejection provides a strong incentive to agree with the other members. The more esprit de corps exhibited by a group of policymakers, the more likely independent, critical thinking will be replaced by "groupthink."

As a group becomes excessively close-knit, groupthink develops. The process is characterized by a marked decrease in the exchange of potentially conflicting data and by an unwillingness to conscientiously examine such data when they surface.

This type of group process emphasizes team play at all costs and often increases the probability that the collective membership will act in a spirit of seeking unanimity, overoptimism, and a lack of vigilance. It often formulates and implements a strategy that is ineffective and not in keeping with existing realities.

Groupthink symptoms

Groupthink may be characterized as encompassing a number of symptoms, and one could argue that groupthink exists in a group to the degree that these eight symptoms are present.

1. Illusion of unanimity regarding the viewpoint held by the major-

ity in the group and an emphasis on team play.

2. A view of the "opposition" as generally inept, incompetent, and incapable of countering effectively any action by the group, no matter how risky the decision or how high the odds are against the plan of action succeeding.
3. Self-censorship of group members in which overt disagreements are avoided, facts that might reduce support for the emerging majority view are suppressed, faulty assumptions are not questioned, and personal doubts are suppressed in the form of group harmony.
4. Collective rationalization to comfort one another in order to discount warnings that the agreed-upon plan is either unworkable or highly unlikely to succeed.
5. Self-appointed mindguards within the group that function to prevent anyone from undermining its apparent unanimity and to protect its members from unwelcome ideas and adverse information that may threaten consensus.
6. Reinforcement of consensus and direct pressure on any dissenting group member who expresses strong reservations or challenges, or argues against the apparent unanimity of the group.
7. An expression of self-righteousness that leads members to believe their actions are moral and ethical, thus inclining them to disregard any ethical or moral objections to their behavior.
8. A shared feeling of unassailability marked by a high degree of esprit de corps, by implicit faith in the wisdom of the group, and by an inordinate optimism that disposes members to take excessive risks.

Groupthink in business: A case study

A company president, who wanted to implement a flexible work hours program, asked a committee of lower-level managers and professionals to investigate the feasibility of flexible work schedules in his firm. The committee was composed of nine salaried employees, most of whom were young and all of whom held staff positions.

For five of the individuals, membership on the committee was seen as unusual in that rarely had they been asked to consider corporatewide policies. It could be said that these group members felt honored to be a part of the group.

Two other members had initiated the idea of appointing the committee and were therefore committed to making it a success. Thus there existed a considerable degree of attraction to the group, with membership in it highly valued. Such circumstances are conducive to a high frequency of groupthink symptoms, which, in turn, can lead to a high frequency of decision-making defects.

The committee was aware of the president's favorable attitude toward flexible hours. However, several members expressed skepticism about implementation of a flexible-hour schedule.

Over the course of its meetings, the committee critically appraised and reappraised the potential advantages and disadvantages of such a program. It solicited viewpoints and opinions from organizations that had experience with flexible-hour programs and interviewed representatives of five companies. Finally it decided to give a positive recommen-

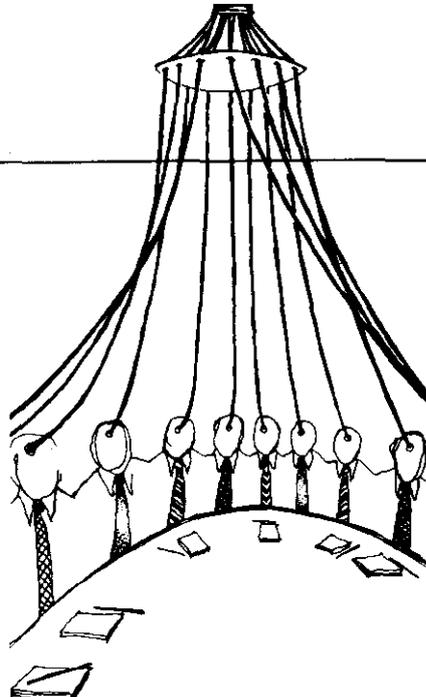
dation and proceeded to deal with the details of implementation.

Following some initial disagreements, all of the procedural details were satisfactorily resolved, except how employees were to account for their work hours. Several options were open, each having precedent in the companies that were visited. One was an honor program in which the employees would simply indicate the number of hours worked each week on their time cards; a second required employees to sign in when they arrived for work and to sign out at the end of the day (also to sign in and out at lunch periods); the third required employees to operate an automatic time-accumulating device that would keep a cumulative record.

The matter of time accountability was discussed at several meetings, but the committee members tended to insulate themselves between meetings and did not discuss the issue with other managers. (Insulation of group members from outside input is typically encountered in groupthink situations). Moreover, most members were aware that the company president was quite receptive to the use of an automatic time accumulator (a factor that, in the end, facilitated concurrence).

The group's cohesiveness, insulation, and awareness of the president's desires increased the likelihood that independent, critical thinking was replaced by groupthink. The president's opinion, in particular, tended to focus the group's recommendation on the time-accumulator device, and five or six committee members initially expressed enthusiasm regarding it.

One of the symptoms of groupthink, however, is illusion of unanimity, which, in the case of the



flexible-hours committee, was apparent from the beginning of its discussions of time accountability. It was almost as if the decision had already been made and all that was needed was formal approval of the device. Although one of the more influential members of the group was unwilling to make up his mind about the time accumulator, he consistently refused to take a stand on the issue. Another member expressed some doubts that the accumulator was compatible with the objectives of flexible hours, but was almost apologetic in presenting her concerns. (In private conversations, however, this member was much more aggressive and opinionated.)

Such behavior typifies the self-censorship symptom of groupthink—that is, self-censorship on the part of individuals in raising objections to the apparent group consensus.

Another incident suggesting the operation of self-censorship involved a committee member who held strong reservations about the time device but expressed his feelings in the restroom rather than in the meeting room, where he sat quietly and

did not raise questions or voice objections. Another group member who was aware of the other members' concerns also kept silent. Thus the group assumed that "silence gave consent."

Another groupthink symptom exhibited by this group was an expression of self-righteousness, which led members to regard their actions as ethical and just. (Flexible hours were viewed as a benefit designed to give employees more self-determination and freedom.)

Previously, only management and professional employees were permitted some degree of flexibility, although it was by no means as extensive as that envisioned in the proposed program. Thus the companywide proposal was seen as a noble cause; it had the president's support and was "right" for the employees involved. Even though the time-accumulator device might be seen by many employees and managers as a time clock and, thus, a regressive step, it would still be part of a "positive" program.

The committee had a sense of unlimited confidence and excessive optimism about flexible hours, and no time accumulator was about to ruin the program. Indeed, the committee exhibited a sense of invulnerability regarding the ability to successfully implement the program.

Three members of the group were aware of one outside manager's misgivings about the time accumulator, but were reluctant to voice his concerns. Thus there was a tendency to discount warnings that might have led the committee to reconsider its decisions.

At the last meeting before submitting the committee's recommendations to the president, the final de-

tails were discussed. At this late stage, it seemed taboo to bring up the issue of a time accumulator; nevertheless, an individual who had been sitting in on the meetings as an expert advisor asked what the final decision was regarding the time accumulator, saying there still appeared to be some unanswered questions.

The committee moderator seemed surprised at this intervention, saying that he thought the issue had been settled and that the accumulator would be recommended. Nonetheless, he proposed taking a quick poll, although at that point he noted that the meeting had already gone past its scheduled period and that it was time for lunch.

The moderator started the poll by indicating why he favored the accumulator. As the voting went around the table, it became progressively more difficult for other group members to state divergent views. Such open voting puts considerable pressure on each group member to agree with the apparent consensus. Thus, the group leader's suggesting a certain approach and essentially acting as a mindguard, the public polling of the members, and the time pressures to make a decision before lunch all led to approval of the accumulators. Several days later the president received the recommendation and expressed general agreement with it.

It appeared, then, that the flexible-time program would be implemented using the time accumulator. But a manager who had earlier not felt free to voice his reservations quickly wrote a two-page letter to the moderator asking that the matter be reconsidered. Though not a group member, this manager had been invited to attend several ses-

sions. In this letter he expressed concern that the accumulator would simply be a check on the employees and that its use was meaningless if the employees felt their rights were being violated.

This formalized reservation, together with some coffeebreak banter by several other managers, prompted the group moderator to get more detailed views from other corporate managers who would be obliged to introduce accumulators to their departments. When this survey of a few outside managers was completed, it was painfully clear that use of accumulators in conjunction with the flexible-hour program would be met with considerable resistance. Department managers would regard it as a threat to their autonomy in their departments.

On the basis of these developments, the group moderator proposed that the flexible-hours recommendation be modified so that, when the program was implemented, each department would determine how it would account for employees' time. The change was approved by the president, and a potentially disastrous problem was avoided.

Preventing groupthink

While most managers have probably experienced groupthink at one time or another, it is not inherent in all group decision-making activities and can be avoided. The following guidelines, while not all inclusive, are useful in preventing the appearance of groupthink.

1. *Leader encouragement.* In most organizations group members need encouragement to feel free to disagree with the boss or group



leader. The subordinates in the group must feel free to disagree if they are to contribute the best of their thinking.

The leader should encourage free expression of minority viewpoints. Since the majority viewpoint is more likely to be well known, it is easier to speak in its behalf. On the other hand, group members holding minority views are more likely to be on the defensive and more hesitant in voicing their opinion. To introduce balance into the situation, the leader must do all he or she can to protect individuals who are attacked and to create opportunities for them to clarify their views. Such a process does not simply entail a challenge to the group with a quick "Does anyone object?" and, if no one raises a hand in two or three seconds, to proceed with "Let's go ahead then."

2. *Diversity of viewpoints.* Attempt to structure the group so that there are different viewpoints. Diverse input will tend to point out nonobvious risks, drawbacks, and advantages that might not have been considered by a more homogeneous group.

3. *Legitimized disagreement and*

skepticism. Silence is usually interpreted as consent. It should be explained that questions, reservations, and objections should be brought before the group and that feelings of loyalty to the group should not be allowed to obstruct expression of doubts. Genuine, personal loyalty to the group that leads one to go along with a bad policy should be discouraged. Voicing objections and doubts should not be subordinated to fears about "rocking the boat" or reluctance to "blow the whistle." Each member should take on the additional role of a critical evaluator and should be encouraged by the leader and other members to air reservations.

4. *Idea generation vs. idea evaluation*. A major barrier to effective decision making is the tendency to evaluate suggested solutions as they appear, instead of waiting until all suggestions are in. Early evaluation may inhibit the expressing of opinions, and it tends to restrict freedom of thinking and prevents others from profiting from different ideas. Early evaluation can be particularly destructive to ideas that are different, new, or lacking support. The group and the leader should encourage problem-mindedness at the expense of solution-mindedness.

5. *Advantages and disadvantages of each solution*. The group should try to explore the merits and demerits of each alternative. This process of listing the sides of a question forces discussion to oscillate from one side of the issue to the other. As a result, the positive and negative aspects of each strategy are brought out into the open and may become the foundation for a new idea with all its merits and few of its weaknesses.

6. *New approaches and new people*. In many cases, thinking about the problem by oneself or discussing it with an outside associate can result in refreshing new perspectives. Any belief that one should be able to generate correct answers to complex problems and issues the first time they are dealt with should be dispelled. Indeed, the norm should be "to think about it again, and think about it in a new way." This implies recording the answer derived by one approach, putting it aside for a while, then coming back to the problem afresh. Also, it may be helpful if, in the intervening time, each of the group participants consults a trusted colleague, who is not a member of the group, to bounce off him or her the tentative decisions and feelings. Ideally, these colleagues should be someone different in expertise and orientation from the group members, so that they can offer critical, independent, and perhaps fresh ideas, which can be reported back to the group.

7. *Examination of group processes*. A group should periodically examine the processes it uses to assess how its members are working together. Perhaps after each decision has been made, the group should examine the process it used in generating the proposed solution. Such questions may include: Who talked to who? Why didn't Joe say very much? Are all members participating? Is a majority pushing a decision through over other members' objections?

Although groupthink is a dysfunctional consequence of a group interaction, there is a strong reluctance by existing policy and decision-making groups to examine their own

group processes and interpersonal behaviors.

- Through the years it has become customary not to be publicly explicit about the interpersonal process within the group, and this tradition or custom has become a determinant in its own right. How often do we hear something to the effect of "Let's be logical and keep personalities out of this"? In most cases the personality issue is synonymous with the group process issue, which, if not adequately addressed, can adversely affect the group product.

- The almost compulsive need to achieve specific goals is so prevalent that attention and time devoted to intermediary social processes is often consciously neglected. Most organizations are geared to getting the product out the back door, and anything not directly associated with this task or entailing a short-run sacrifice is looked upon with suspicion, if not overt resistance. In many cases, the long-term investment in the constructive attention to group processes that may pay off in sound internal relations and increased performance is simply not recognized.

- Bringing into the open the various roles, relationships, and group difficulties is almost inevitably anxiety-producing. Making differentiations among people creates tension. Publicly expressing one's observations, for example, who talks to whom, who talks the most, and so on, raises anxieties that many feel are better swept under the rug. Being aware of the symptoms of groupthink and recognizing it in their own group interactions may increase the willingness of decision-making groups to examine their own processes to minimize the adverse consequences of groupthink behavior. •