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Have you ever wanted to speak up in a group, but decided that it was better not to? Or have you ever been sure that your co-workers were making a huge mistake, but felt that you couldn’t intervene to voice a dissenting view? If either scenario sounds familiar, you may have been affected by groupthink. The term was coined in 1971 by the psychologist, Irving Janis, who wanted to understand the systematic errors made by teams involved in collective decision-making.

Groupthink occurs when people’s desire for cohesiveness and harmony results in faulty decision-making. Two well-known examples of groupthink are the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 and the Challenger Space Shuttle disaster in 1986. In the Bay of Pigs example, Janis describes the men surrounding John F. Kennedy as “one of the greatest arrays of intellectual talent in the history of American government”. There were individual dissenting voices among those men when President Kennedy gave the order for the invasion. Yet, when brought together, the group dynamic prevented them from disagreeing.

The formal investigation into the Challenger Space Shuttle identified a technical fault in the o-ring, which led to the disaster. However, it also referenced “a serious flaw in the decision-making process leading up to the launch”. Concerns about the o-ring had been circulating in NASA months before the accident, but nobody took action.

So, how can you spot groupthink in organisations? Janis outlined the following symptoms:

1. **Invulnerability**
   Members of the decision-making group share the illusion that they are invulnerable. This leads them to become overly optimistic and to make risky decisions. They don’t pay attention to warning signs. In the case of the Bay of Pigs Invasion, Kennedy was under the illusion that he could keep secret the fact that Cuba had been invaded by the United States – even after the news leaked to the media.

2. **Rationalisations**
   Victims of groupthink ignore warnings and begin to create a rationale to defend why they ignored the warning in the first place. This entrenched position reinforces the group’s illusion of invulnerability.

3. **Morality**
   Victims believe that they are behaving morally and doing the right thing. This allows the group members to ignore the ethical or moral consequences of their decisions. They create, therefore, a new morality out of their groupthink position.

4. **Stereotypes**
   The group splinters and the victims of groupthink stereotype those who are not in their group by denigrating them as stupid or not as good as them. In doing so, they reinforce their own identity.

5. **Pressure**
   Victims apply direct and indirect pressure to any member who expresses doubt about the group’s illusions. Uncertainty, individuality and questioning are extinguished.

6. **Censorship**
   Members censor their views to conform.

7. **The Illusion of Unanimity**
   Because nobody speaks out, everybody believes that there is unanimous agreement.

**How to avoid groupthink**

Janis’s optimal solution was that members of senior teams should rotate the role of critical evaluator. He also added that the director should accept the frank exchange of views. The best way to avoid groupthink is to welcome healthy dissent and disagreement. Conflict isn’t always a bad thing. Assigning somebody to be devil’s advocate can often introduce a welcome alternative perspective. Leaders who want to change a groupthink culture must lead from the front. Nobody is going to make themselves vulnerable or step out on a ledge because a leader has decided that ‘we’re not doing groupthink from now on’.

Changing a culture of groupthink requires deft and sophisticated leadership that is tuned into the emotional tone of the organisation. A leader who makes themselves vulnerable first, who is willing to hear criticism and act upon it, and who makes it safe for others to do so without retribution or punishment will go a long way towards making their organisation groupthink-free.

To create a culture free of groupthink, leaders must first make themselves vulnerable, writes Dr Annette Clancy.

**Dr Annette Clancy**

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