

Strategic Comms, Part 34: How to Avoid Bad Decisions by Groupthink

Posted: 21 Feb 2012 01:38 PM PST

(This is the 34th in a continuing series on strategic communications. [Click here](#) for earlier segments)

By Owen Eagan, The Saint Consulting Group



Have you ever wondered how a group of very smart people could make a very bad decision? Or how a group could reach a conclusion that isn't wiser than the sum of its parts? It could be the result of groupthink.

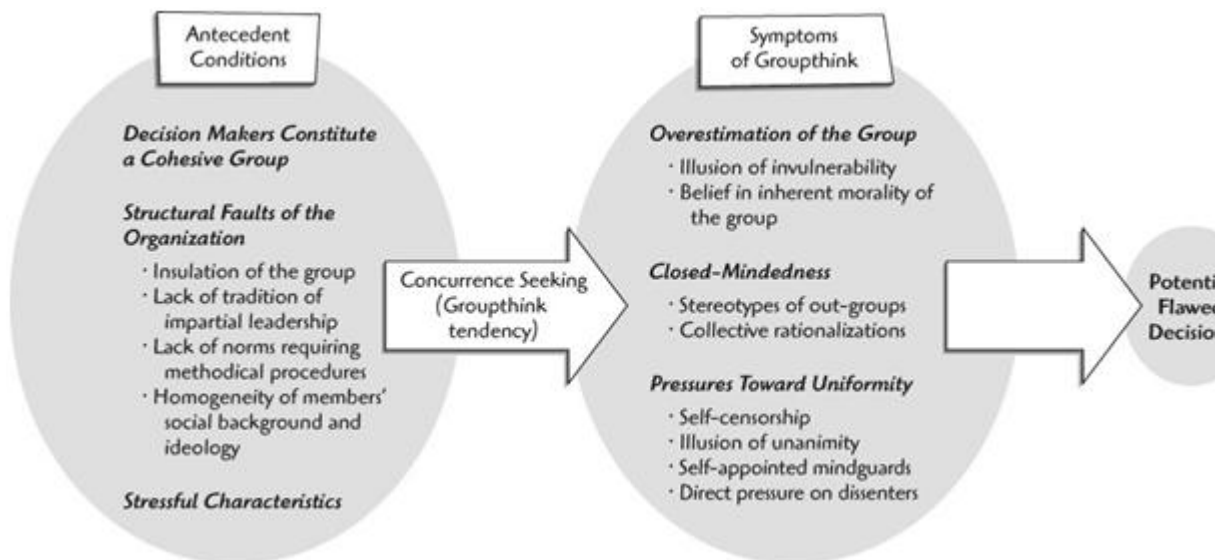
Irving Janis defined groupthink as a style of deliberating when seeking consensus outweighs the motivation to consider all reasonable options. In developing this theory, Janis analyzed small elite groups charged with making critical foreign policy decisions. Among the decisions Janis examined were those concerning Pearl Harbor, the Bay of Pigs and the Vietnam War. Specifically, he interviewed a number of people that were a part of these teams and discovered that groupthink was the cause of these debacles.

Janis focused on problem-solving groups and task-oriented groups and found that three antecedent conditions promote groupthink. The first condition is a high degree of cohesiveness, which he described as the extent to which group members are willing to work together. The second condition was specific structural characteristics of the environment in which the group functions such as group insulation, lack of impartial leadership, a lack of decision-making procedures and the homogeneity of members' social background and ideology. The third condition involves stressful internal and external

characteristics of the situation.[1]

In addition, Janis found that these antecedent conditions lead to concurrence seeking, where team members place a higher priority on supporting each other rather than challenging one another. The tendency for concurrence seeking, in turn, produces three symptoms of groupthink. The first symptom is an overestimation of the group, characterized by an illusion of invulnerability and a belief in the inherent morality of the group. The second symptom is closed-mindedness, which involves the stereotypes of out-groups and collective rationalization that causes group members to ignore the reconsideration of their thoughts and actions. The third symptom is the pressure toward uniformity that is manifested in self-censorship, an illusion of unanimity, the presence of self-appointed mindguards, and direct pressure on dissenters. These antecedent conditions and symptoms of groupthink are illustrated in Exhibit 1 below.[2]

Exhibit 1



Another scholar, Paul 't Hart has proposed four recommendations for preventing groupthink. First, groups must require oversight and control, and hold key decision makers responsible for their actions. Second, groups must embrace whistle-blowing and seek to include devil's advocates. Third, groups should encourage the participation of conscientious objectors, or group

members who might not otherwise participate based on moral or ethical issues. And, lastly, groups should strive for consensus but also consider majority support so that group members do not feel pressure to consent.^[3]

These principles apply whether your group is developing foreign policy for the President of the United States, reevaluating your company's strategy or brainstorming ideas for complex real estate development projects. Therefore, regardless of the task of your group, it behooves you to adopt these recommendations. Otherwise, you significantly increase the risk of potentially flawed decisions.

Owen Eagan is a Senior Consultant for Saint Consulting, an international management consulting firm specializing in land use politics. He is also an adjunct faculty member at Emerson College, the nation's only four-year institution dedicated exclusively to communications and the performing arts. Email Eagan@tscg.biz

^[1] Richard West and Lynn H. Turner, *Introducing Communication Theory: Analysis and Application* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 245-247.

^[2] Ibid, 247-251.

^[3] Ibid, 252-254.