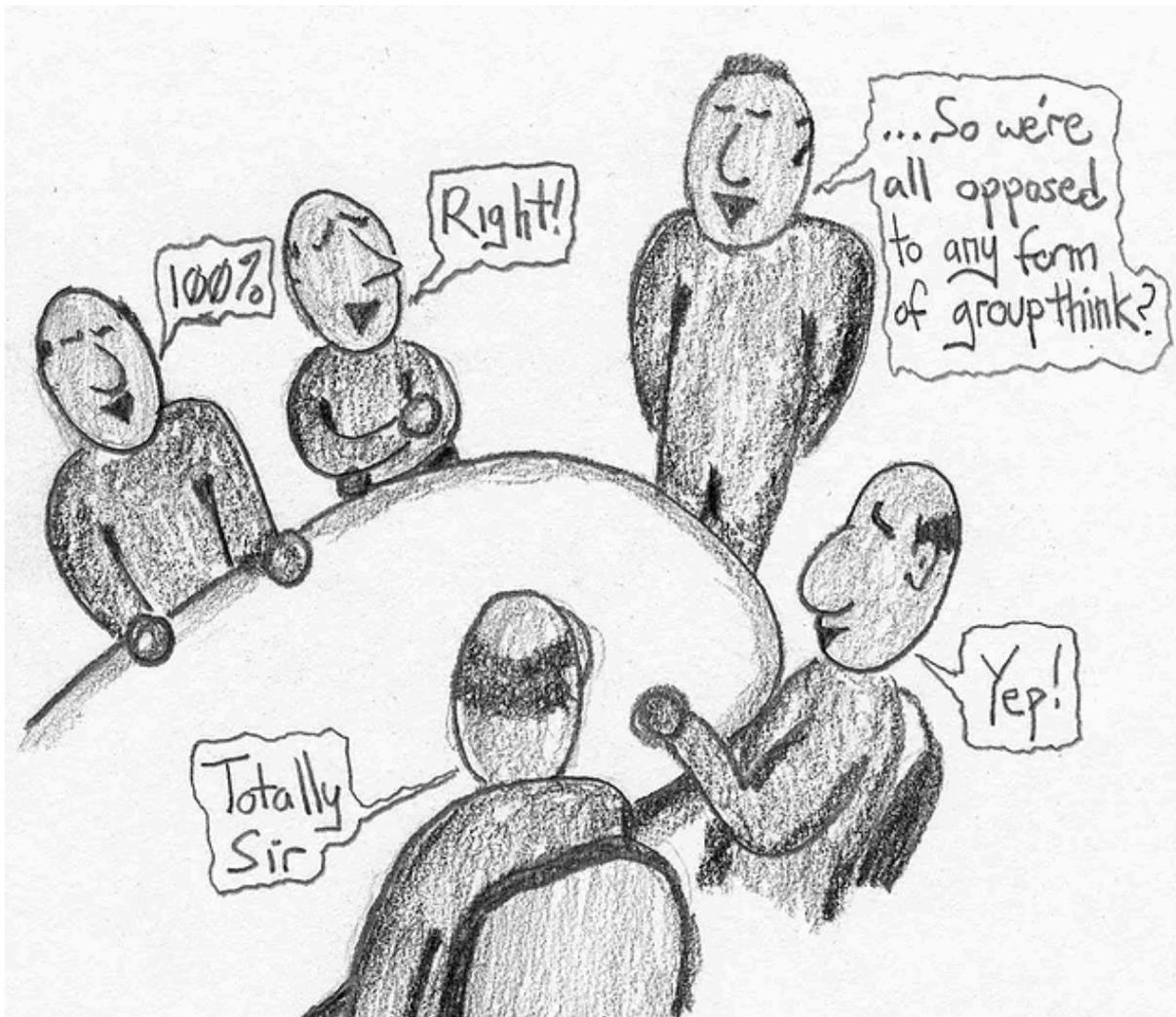


# Bouncing through Groupthink

July 1, 2017

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"Groupthink refers to a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing and moral judgement that results from in-group pressures" Irving Janis

Groupthink is a pervasive process characterised by the tendency for team-members to coalesce their views around a convenient **uncritical** narrative, drawing to premature conclusions and ultimately making bad decisions. It **values conformity over a more objective "right"**. Note this is **not necessarily consensus**. Today with **echo-chamber** politics it is possibly more important than it has ever been, at least in government, although between proponents of particular political views this may be better seen as epidemic confirmation bias. Arguably Groupthink is a substantial justification for the abandonment of party politics in favour a more diverse process, but... I digress.

The term Groupthink was coined by **William H. Whyte in Fortune magazine in 1952**. However the most important figure in developing the concept of Groupthink was the Yale Psychologist **Irving Janis**, who in 1972 developed the term in his book "Victims of groupthink; a psychological study of foreign-policy decisions and fiascoes".

# WAR!

(Associated Press by Transpacific Telephone)  
**SAN FRANCISCO, Dec. 7.**—President Roosevelt announced this morning that Japanese planes had attacked Manila and Pearl Harbor.

# OAHU BOMBED BY JAPANESE PLANES

**SIX KNOWN DEAD, 21 INJURED, AT EMERGENCY HOSPITAL**

**Attack Made On Island's Defense Areas**

**CIVILIANS ORDERED OFF STREETS**  
The army has ordered that all civilians stay off the streets and highways and not use telephones.  
Evidence that the Japanese attack has required some hits was shown by three following pillars of smoke in the Pearl Harbor and Hickam field area.

**ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUNS IN ACTION**  
Four indicators of the raid came shortly before 8 o'clock morning when anti-aircraft guns around Pearl Harbor began sending up a thousand bursts.  
At the same time a vast cloud of black smoke arose from the naval base and also from Hickam field where flames could be seen.

**Hundreds See City Bombed**  
Names of

Janis applied himself to investigating political events, notably the **US failure** to anticipate or to act upon warnings of the attack of **Pearl Harbour**, the **Bay of Pigs** debacle, and the **Vietnam** war. In the case of Pearl Harbour there were multiple indicators that a shift in the Japanese position was coming, but these were largely ignored at all levels.



In planning the Bay of Pigs invasion, mindful of President John F Kennedy's desire to overthrow Fidel Castro in Cuba, his subordinates were excessively influenced by his views and failed to consider other options as they might have done without his (possibly overbearing) involvement. The plan had originated during the Eisenhower administration as a more or less overt invasion complete with air cover and provision for bombing.

Kennedy himself was influenced by intelligence reports that subsequently found to be false, or at least flawed, and their analysis was superficial. Wishful thinking was prominent - confirmation bias - in suggesting that a covert invasion was possible. The result was a plan that pleased Kennedy, and importantly, in not providing for air support, allowed for plausible deniability, but which was tactically and strategically flawed. Indeed the ultimate strategic consequence was to consolidate Castro's position, but also

to up the stakes and increase his dependence upon Soviet



Russia.

More recent examples include the **Bush-Blair invasion of Iraq**, which again rehearsed the **wishful interpretation of incomplete intelligence**, indeed rather the intelligence driving decision making, intelligence was used to provide retrospective justification for action which had been decided upon for political reasons; and the **Challenger**

disaster where senior NASA managers overrode the advice of the Morten-Thiokol engineers who were experts in the performance of the components of the Space Shuttle.

[Try watching this video on www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

Groupthink was a feature of the Bristol Cardiac Surgery Scandal, wherein clinicians simply failed to recognise that the outcomes of surgery were so poor that "switch" operations for "transposition of the great vessels" should be suspended.

Groupthink is widely recognised as an important phenomenon in undermining good decision making and destroying otherwise good businesses as certain beliefs become mantras that go unchallenged.

Groupthink typically occurs in situations when there is:

- Directive Leadership. A strong, persuasive group leader.

- **Homogeneity**. A high level of group cohesion. Homophily (affinity for **similarity**) may also play a part (stereotypically groups of white, privately and university educated, married, middle-aged men).
- **Isolation**. The group does not have exposure outside information which could be used to help reach a more balanced decision. Perhaps more culpably they may not value, want or seek external information.

Other factors that can be important are:

- **Expediency** - "we know we need to do - let's get this done with the minimum of fuss"
- **Time pressure** - "this needs to be done yesterday"
- **Fear** - "don't cross the boss" ... "listen this is a \$10 billion business don't argue"

- A perceived need to make a **definitive decision** rather than "fudge" - "we need to know once and for all which way we are going"
- **Cynicism** - culturally embedded cynicism and/or a desire to follow a path of least resistance - "what does it matter anyway, he always gets his way, don't let's make waves"

## Symptoms of Groupthink

Janis identifies **eight symptoms** of groupthink:

1. **Complacency** and a sense of **Invulnerability** – leads **excessive risk taking**.

2. **Collective rationalization** – **warnings** are **discounted** and assumptions are **not challenged**. Team members convince themselves that despite evidence to the contrary, the decision or alternative being presented is the best one.
  
3. **Moral high-ground**, or put another way, an illusion of inherent morality – convinced of the rightness of their cause, group members ignore the ethical or moral consequences of their decisions. Each member of the group views him or herself as moral: The combination of moral minds is therefore thought not to be likely to make a poor or immoral decision. When morality is used as a basis for decision-making, the pressure to conform is even greater because no individual wants to be perceived as immoral.
  
4. **Stereotyping of out-groups** – undermines attempts to resolve, rather than ignore contrary views. As the group becomes more uniform in their views, they begin to see **outsiders** as possessing a different and **inferior** set of morals and characteristics from themselves. These perceived negative characteristics are then used to

discredit the opposition.

5. Peer pressure acting to put direct pressure on dissenters – overt pressure is applied to prevent dissenters speaking out. When a team member expresses an opposing opinion or questions the rationale behind a decision, the rest of the team members work together to pressure or penalize that person into compliance.
6. Self-censorship – group members fail to speak out about their doubts, possibly for fear of ridicule, disciplinary action, or being seen as not a team player
7. Illusion of unanimity – a circular process emerges from effects of pressure and self-censorship
8. Self-appointed ‘mindguards’ – Members protect the group and the leader from information that is problematic or contradictory to the group’s cohesiveness, view, and/or decisions.

Groupthink can result in unconscious distortion of facts to support a narrative and sometimes overt dishonesty in order to ensure the prevailing view is not challenged. It is ironic that in a state where a sense moral superiority prevails, immoral conduct emerges as rationalisation enables people assuage their guilt and for example to determine that:

- "the end justifies the means",
- "we have no choice",
- "if we don't do this we will all lose our bonuses",
- "we all know it is true, even if we can't prove it" ...

Scapegoating and victimisation are common and obvious consequences, but are not always easy to identify. A useful "tell" maybe the repetition of opinions mismatched to the expertise or domain of the group members, common language and resonant phrases. When junior staff have strong views that the Chief of Structural Engineering is wrong about the design of a bridge, it is clear a narrative

has been established and groupthink is at work, and is being manipulated.

It is important to recognise that there is evidence that false memories can be created through the use of particular interview techniques and it is likely that rehearsal of a group narrative will have a similar effect.

It is not hard to imagine that informal discussions could be even more effective at implanting memories and creating a narrative, simply through imprecise leading language, "she was always".

[Try watching this video on www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

Psychological distortions have led to Miscarriages of justice have occurred in a variety of ways including pressurised false confessions, whilst misleading eyewitness testimony has led individuals to death row. While certainty may increase it is unlikely that the quality of evidence really improves with rehearsal. Groupthink is important in all these cases because confessions are only pressurised when there is a prevailing view amongst investigators of the guilt

of a particular individual, and there is a corresponding unwillingness to consider other possibilities - tunnel vision takes control.

## What are the consequences of Groupthink?

The lesser consequences of groupthink are bad decisions or business failures. More seriously the process results in miscarriages of justice, and the process has been implicated in many high profile legal cases. At the extreme Groupthink can result in economic failure - on a macro-scale the subprime crisis arising in the US that underpinned the Banking Crisis of 2008 has features of groupthink, although the term is usually applied to rather more formally defined groups. Indeed it may be useful to consider the evolution of "bubbles" as manifestations of groupthink. The failure of Lehman Brothers and the need for banks like RBS, HSBC, and Lloyds for government support because of overexposure to high risk loans and

investments are perhaps more typical examples of groupthink.

One of the features of groupthink is that **bad decisions tend to snowball**, and the Groups fail to find ways to break out of a process that becomes **self-fulfilling**. So it is that the alleged decision by the board of Barclays to deny the need for support and instead to commit criminal offences in the use of suspect loans to and from Qatar may best exemplify the damage groupthink can do, both to the institutions and the individuals who fall under its spell.

## Related Pathologies

Groupthink is related to several other psychological pathologies. Indeed when unravelled Groupthink can be akin to be a **voyage into a sea of logical fallacies**. The fact confidence has been drawn from a common or shared perception can be seen as **confirmation bias**. Similarly the effect of the **dominance** of a **leader** can be seen as the **"bandwagon effect"**. The failure to use wider sources of

information can be seen as oversimplification, evidence suppression or cherry-picking.

In the decision making process many fallacies can operate to restrict thought

Thought terminating clichés such as "you are over thinking" can have an important effect. These were explored by Lifton in his 1961 book the catchily named Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of "Brainwashing" in China.

Manipulation using Groupthink is more or less de rigeur for Narcissistic Leaders.

## **Misperceptions about Groupthink**

A concept central to libertarianism and free-market ideals is "the **wisdom of crowds**". The notion is that whilst experts may be wrong, the crowd or market knows better. Part of

this belief stems from the fact that when individuals each separately reach the same conclusion it is more likely to be correct. This of course ignores the effect of "opinion-formers" and the high bandwidth of communication that exists today. Groupthink therefore can exist beyond the boundaries of a single group or organisation.

However it is important to recognise that Groupthink is not a function just of communication within a group, as for example held by Centola, it is exemplified by pathological communication. Groups, especially when diverse, with different sources of information and influences; communicating honestly, imaginatively and freely are powerful, and are likely to provide a better basis for decisions than a single individual, especially when dealing with complex information.

**How can Groupthink be mitigated or avoided?**

# Good Leadership

*Good leadership is invested in the substantial outcome rather than in any particular option for achieving that outcome.*

It is important to recognise that Groupthink is sometimes exploited by leaders in order to pursue a *personal* agenda. In certain circumstances may be a successful strategy, although it usually makes poor use of the Human Resources available. It also exposes businesses to serious risk because of its reliance upon distorted thinking.

Above all therefore in order to avoid of groupthink as a factor undermining good decision making is the need for good leadership, a feature of which is the willingness of the leader to step back from the process whereby options

are generated and evaluated, and instead to focus on facilitating the process and of course making the ultimate decision once the best facts and options have been established.

*“Blind belief in authority is the greatest enemy of truth.”*

*Albert Einstein*

## **Designing the Group**

Two factors that mitigates towards groupthink is **homogeneity** of the group, and **familiarity** of the individuals. The latter factor means that individuals **conform to hierarchical standards** or base their contributions established relationships and allegiances rather than contributing their views on merit.



It follows therefore that diversity is a helpful starting point. Keith Sawyer, in his book *Group Genius* argues that productive thinking, whether creative idea generation or achieving better decisions, can be expedited by groups, provided certain conditions are met. From his list of key factors, the following can be distilled, relevant for every business:

- Some tasks are best handled by individuals, whereas those where the amount or complexity of information

is too much for one individual to handle are identified as ‘additive’ groups

- If a group is required, it should be no bigger than necessary, and critically, it should be diverse, composed of people from different disciplines and experience.
- Facilitators avoid allowing the group becoming bogged down or diverted.

“If group members are too familiar with each other, interaction is no longer challenging, and group flow fades away. Only by introducing diversity can we avoid the groupthink that results from too much conformity.”



**Building an intellectually credible process**

To this end it is important to develop processes that first objectively establish the salient facts, sense-check the fundamental assumptions that will underpin important decisions, to verify and validate the decision-making process, and to evaluate the risks involved.

Important elements include:

- Establishing and exploring the objectives
- Considering alternatives
- Encouraging the challenging of ideas without reprisal
- Examines the risks if the preferred choice is chosen
- Tests assumptions

- Utilising "Devil's advocate" strategies, whether formal or informally
- Inviting outside experts
- Iteration and reiteration of the decision making model
- Piloting
- Grading of information, valuing objective external information more highly
- Plan B

## **Specific Tools for identifying Groupthink in decision making**

There are some of the specific strategies you can use to avoid groupthink in decision making, although may seem a little contrived

## The Nominal Group Technique

Individuals write down ideas on post-its, and then in turn present them. A group discussion follows on the topics generated. This ensures (unlike brainstorming) that everyone has a say.

## The Delphi Method

Allows group members to contribute individually without the group necessarily ever having to come together. The individual may not even be aware of who the other

members of the team are. Individuals are asked to respond to a series of open questions by email, the responses to which are then collated. These are then fed back to all group members for comment and ranking in importance.

## The Stepladder Technique

this starts with a group of two, and adds one member at a time to the group, allowing each new team member to express their opinion on the solution each time, before group discussion begins.

## The Six Thinking Hats Technique

Forces the team to look at a problem from different perspectives. This technique was developed by Edward de

Bono. He defines **six perspectives** from which a problem should be viewed to ensure that people do not simply view this in a stereotyped manner. Each individual is asked to wear a different hat.

## Summary

*"Groupthink realises the tyranny of the  
'yes man'"*

Groupthink is a powerful force, and is a corollary of cohesion, and **esprit de corps**. Whilst in some instances groupthink may be harnessed in promoting a common vision, ultimately groupthink is invariably a **malign force** because it is defined by distortion of behaviour, failure to gather adequate information, **bias** and is likely to generate **poor decisions**.

Groupthink can be mitigated, and awareness is key both for leaders and managers who should adopt strategies to avoid its pervasive effects, and for subordinates who need to be aware of the destructive effects of being swept along. In hindsight, nobody emerges with credit.

And the take home for leaders?

1. To make good decisions keep your preferences and preconceptions too yourself, let others have their say first.
2. Be rigorous about gathering the best information - beware the "smiler" with all the answers... Challenge the information you are given corroborate it with multiple independent sources where you can.
3. Where you need committees and groups, try to diversify and vary their membership.

4. When you employ people, look for at least a few "difficult" people, don't just go round appointing people who are just like you, however tempting it is...

*"Cherish dissent - it ensures decisions are honest and resilient"*

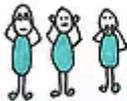
## GROUP THINK IRVING JANIS

### INVULNERABILITY RATIONALE



- Over-optimistic.
- Take extraordinary risks.
- No realisation of threat.

### MORALITY



- Blind to the moral or ethical implications of a policy.

### STEREOTYPES

- Tend to stereotype their enemies.
- Ignore any evidence that challenges thinking.



### PRESSURE



- Doubters have subtle pressure exerted on them to keep them quiet.
- Members allowed to express (some) doubts but not push them.

### SELF-CENSORSHIP

- Members careful not to express any doubts outside the group.



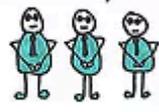
### UNANIMITY



- Once a decision is reached, any opposing views are carefully screened out of people's minds.

### 'MINDGUARDS'

- Members set themselves up as bodyguards to the decision.
- A doctrine of collective responsibility is used to stifle dissent outside of the group.



Sketchnote by Hayley Lewis  
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www.halopsychology.com

[The Dry rot of Groupthink in Academia](#)

[The Science of Brainwashing](#)

[Amazon: Keith Sawyer "Group Genius"](#)

[Amazon: Kathleen Taylor "Brainwashing: the science of thought control"](#)

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