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How Groupthink Played a Role in The Challenger Disaster

Have you ever felt pressured to do something while you were part of a team or group that led to a flawed decision? In January of 1986, the orbiter Challenger exploded 73 seconds after the launch due to that exact reason. Decision Makers and top echelons at NASA and Morton Thiokol cared more about satisfying and entertaining its major customer, the American people rather than the safety of the launch and its crew members. America was becoming disinterested in spaceflight and NASA saw the dwindling popularity and excitement in their space shuttle program. Groupthink theory could help explain how leaders and decision makers played a major part in the disaster that occurred in 1986.

Groupthink is defined as “a process of flawed decision making that occurs as a result of strong pressures among group members to reach an agreement”. (Gruman, J. A., Schneider, F. W., & Coutts, L. M., 2017). After the explosion, the Rogers Commission examined the causes of the explosion and one of the “potentially catastrophic” elements was a rubber part called an O-ring. In the article, *Challenger Explosion: How Groupthink and Other Causes Led to the Tragedy* it states, “The O-ring was known to be sensitive to the cold and could only work above 53 degrees. Temperature on the launch pad that morning was 36 degrees.”. With this knowledge that NASA and Morton Thiokol had, how did the launch get approved for launch? Was it a lack of communication amongst the groups, a way to chase publicity that the companies saw was dwindling, a result of major pressure the group had internally and externally, or all three?

There was national, group, and political pressure on NASA and Morton Thiokol, the company that built the solid rocket boosters to have the





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Challenger launch on time. NASA had averaged five missions a year after the projected frequency of the space shuttle program was 50 flights a year. How could they keep America's interest if they weren't having as many missions as originally promised? They diversified the astronaut crews with women, people of color, and scientists but that proved to not be enough to keep the country's attention. President Ronald Reagan was also announcing the launch at his Union address that night. The only option that NASA and Morton Thiokol felt they had was to continue with the launch as scheduled. As we know, that faulty decision making led to seven people losing their lives.

The effects of groupthink could be small or big but regardless of the impact of the flawed decision, it is important for people to know about it while trying to prevent it. "Janis (1983) proposed a set of prescriptions for preventing groupthink. The prescriptions generally focus on helping a group carefully examine all relevant information and courses of action to ensure that it does not rush into making a poorly informed and reasoned decision". Maybe if NASA and Morton Thiokol followed Janis' set of prescriptions for preventing groupthink or examined all of the information before rushing into the launch due to pressure they felt, the outcome of that day could have been different. The Challenger tragedy led NASA to focus on a safer future in space by fixing communication and the management of safety at the organization. Next time that you are part of a group, consider ways to prevent groupthink to stop any flawed decisions from being made.

References:

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