



## Lessons From NASA and The Dangers of 'GroupThink' in Technology Rollouts

Watch out for "groupThink" when it comes to multi-site technology rollouts.

Mark Kelly, the NASA astronaut, is an excellent public speaker. His speeches focus on the topic of how to build high-performance teams, and they are anchored by a quotation he learned early in his NASA career – *"None of us is as dumb as all of us."*

At first reading, this statement seems counter-intuitive: in life, we are taught that by collaborating, we can often arrive at a better solution than by working alone. Yet this quote suggests the opposite. That being so, what does Kelly mean by the quote, and what lessons does it offer for multi-site technology rollouts?

### Where does the Quote come from?

Why does a distinguished astronaut use such a simple motto? It's because he knows that at critical moments, in rooms filled with some of the smartest people on the planet, NASA teams have shown themselves to be capable of "Groupthink".

**Groupthink is a psychological phenomenon** where a group makes decisions in a way that discourages creativity or, worse still, individual responsibility for the decision. The

Kelly's own words offer insight, *"A well-meaning team of people will sometimes make a horrible decision that no single individual would ever make. In the past, Groupthink – an unwillingness to disagree with the bosses – was too often a problem at NASA. When this happens 'none of us is as dumb as all of us.'"*

## Understanding Groupthink

To illustrate Groupthink at NASA, Kelly uses the story of the poor team decision-making that contributed to the space shuttle Columbia disaster. This was personal for Kelly, as three of the astronauts who died were his classmates.

In February, 2003, Columbia disintegrated as it returned to earth. Two weeks earlier during its launch, foam detached from the shuttle, striking the left wing of the aircraft and causing damage. The damage was never fully investigated, and the Columbia was allowed to complete the mission without a proper safety inspection. During re-entry, the shuttle broke apart, killing all seven crew members.

The **Columbia Accident Investigation Board (CAIB)** reported that multiple NASA employees found the shuttle to be severely damaged and in need of inspection, yet they never came forward with this information. How did such a preventable disaster occur?

An article in the **Project Management Institute (PMI) Journal** notes that at the time, NASA had created a culture that would not accept *any* external criticism. During the Columbia mission, it was made clear that *management had already made the decision* about the shuttle, which made it increasingly difficult for anyone to come forward with opposing information.

## How to Avoid Groupthink

- Remain open to criticism
- Work with diverse groups of people
- Include members outside the group in meetings and decision-making
- Train team members in group decision making

To support the recommendations, Kelly offers his own experience, *"I have learned that you cannot ask the shuttle commander, the flight director, the chief engineer, or the program manager for their opinion first. If you do, you won't get effective advice from the people below them."*

Finally, the lessons learned at such a high price from the Columbia accident, as well as the Challenger accident before it, resulted in the stark warning that is painted on the NASA Mission Management Team conference room wall at their Houston complex.

The warning says *"None of us is as dumb as all of us."*

## The Bottom-Line: Avoiding Groupthink is Key to Overcoming Problems

If your multi-site technology rollout hits an unexpected snag, it's essential to ensure that Groupthink does not take over your decision-making process.

The best way to do this is by **creating a business culture that encourages the healthy questioning of decisions**. For this to happen, team members must feel empowered to **speak up, regardless of where they sit in the project hierarchy**.

So, before you begin your next technology rollout, ask your rollout company how they handle major challenges. If you don't like their answer, or you begin to see them using Groupthink in technology rollouts, **talk to us**.

to manage situations like this.

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