

Module 11: Group Decision-Making and Conformity/Groupthink

Another important group process that impedes effective decision making in groups is groupthink. Psychologist Irving Janis coined the phrase groupthink in the seventies. This refers to the proclivity of individual members of a group or team to go along with the group even if they don't agree with the decision or behavior. Janis defined the behavior as: "a mode of thinking people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' striving for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action. Groupthink refers to a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures."

Groupthink is often but not solely an outcome of conformity bias of group members or the tendency of people to behave like those around them rather than use their own personal judgment. One of the earliest pieces of evidence of conformity bias came from Solomon Asch, who conducted an experiment to investigate the extent to which social pressure from a majority group could affect a person to conform. Asch (1951) devised what is now regarded as a classic experiment in social psychology to document conformity and groupthink. Asch used a lab experiment to study conformity, whereby 50 male students from Swarthmore College in the US participated in a 'vision test.' Using a line judgment task, Asch put a naive participant in a room with seven confederates/stooges. The confederates had agreed in advance what their responses would be when presented with the line task. The real participant did not know this and was led to believe that the other seven confederates/stooges were also real participants like themselves.

Each person in the room had to state aloud which comparison line (A, B or C) was most like the target line. The answer was always obvious. The real participant sat at the end of the row and gave his or her answer last. There were 18 trials in total, and the confederates gave the wrong answer on 12 trials (called the critical trials). Asch was interested to see if the real participant would conform to the majority view. Asch measured the number of times each participant conformed to the majority view. On average, about one third (32%) of the participants who were placed in this situation went along and conformed with the clearly incorrect majority on the critical trials. Over the 12 critical trials, about 75% of participants conformed at least once, and 25% of participants never conformed.

Asch's experiment also had a control condition where there were no confederates, only a "real participant." In the control group, with no pressure to conform to confederates, less than 1% of participants gave the wrong answer.

Why did the participants conform so readily? When they were interviewed after the experiment, most of them said that they did not really believe their conforming answers, but had gone along with the group for fear of being ridiculed or thought "peculiar". A few of them said that they really did believe the group's answers were correct. These responses of the participants suggest that people conform for two main reasons: because they want to fit in with the group (normative influence) and because they believe the group is better informed than they are (informational influence). That is, pressures towards uniformity and overestimation of group knowledge, power and morality.

These motivations to conform work alongside group assumptions and behaviors to lead to groupthink. These include: (a) false consensus, when team members overestimate the extent to which their own beliefs, preferences, choices etc are typical of others; (b) pluralistic ignorance, which is a false assumption by individuals that other in-group members are unanimous in their beliefs or knowledge; (c) false uniqueness, which is the sense that one is without support for dissenting from what is apparently the group's position; (d) group polarization, which can foster confidence that the popular group decision is correct even if all relevant information has not been considered; and (e) ethnocentrism, which reduces consideration of alternative positions, particularly those that would lead to relationships with out-group members.

Research has outlined several conditions that predispose a group to groupthink. The phenomenon is especially likely in groups that prioritize their group identity and keep out outsiders. That is, group cohesiveness and isolation/ insulation. Organizations in which dissent is discouraged or openly punished or derided are similarly likely to engage in groupthink when making decisions. Stress and pressure to make timely decisions is yet another driver of this phenomenon. Leader intimidation and absence of decision-making procedures also contribute to the phenomenon.

So, how can we avoid groupthink? First it is important to allow enough time for all critical issues to be discussed. Second, it is important to create psychological safety in the group. Members must be encouraged to share their opinions and dissent accommodated. Once group opinion is moving in a certain direction, especially after powerful people have spoken, very difficult to speak up, present alternative views, or change direction. Given that group members refrain from expressing opinion because of fear of disagreement with the leader, it can be beneficial for the leader to step back and allow members to debate the issue themselves. It might also be a good idea for one member of the team to be appointed as the "devil's advocate", a lone dissenter who will argue against consensus to highlight potential flaws and advocate different answers. Third, it is important to systematize group discussions by following good meeting procedures – for example, have an agenda, have a template for discussion that includes presentation of the problem statement, list of competing views, templates for discussion and questions that guide recommendations. In order to prevent group isolation, it would be helpful to bring in external influencers such as outside experts on a routine basis, and also allow for group decision making.

I hope this awareness of biases and behaviors in groups alongside knowledge of strategies to mitigate them will lead you to more effective decision-making in your organizations.