

## **Groupthink (Irving Janis)**

### **Reference:**

Janis, Irving L., *Victims of Groupthink*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1972)

Janis, Irving L., *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*, Second Edition, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1982)

*Groupthink*, a term coined by social psychologist Irving Janis (1972), occurs when a group makes faulty decisions because group pressures lead to a deterioration of “mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment”. Groups affected by groupthink ignore alternatives and tend to take irrational actions that dehumanize other groups. A group is especially vulnerable to groupthink when its members are similar in background, when the group is insulated from outside opinions, and when there are no clear rules for decision making.

### **Symptoms of Groupthink**

Janis has documented eight symptoms of groupthink:

1. Illusion of invulnerability –Creates excessive optimism that encourages taking extreme risks.
2. Collective rationalization – Members discount warnings and do not reconsider their assumptions.
3. Belief in inherent morality – Members believe in the rightness of their cause and therefore ignore the ethical or moral consequences of their decisions.
4. Stereotyped views of out-groups – Negative views of “enemy” make effective responses to conflict seem unnecessary.
5. Direct pressure on dissenters – Members are under pressure not to express arguments against any of the group’s views.
6. Self-censorship – Doubts and deviations from the perceived group consensus are not expressed.
7. Illusion of unanimity – The majority view and judgments are assumed to be unanimous.
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.

When the above symptoms exist in a group that is trying to make a decision, there is a reasonable chance that groupthink will happen, although it is not necessarily so. Groupthink occurs when groups are highly cohesive and when they are under considerable pressure to make a quality decision. When pressures for unanimity seem overwhelming, members are less motivated to realistically appraise the alternative courses of action available to them. These group pressures lead to carelessness and irrational thinking since groups experiencing groupthink fail to consider all alternatives and seek to maintain unanimity. Decisions shaped by groupthink have low probability of achieving successful outcomes.

## **Examples of Groupthink: Past and Present**

Examples of groupthink “fiascos” studied by Janis include US failures to anticipate the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Bay of Pigs invasion, the escalation of Vietnam war, and the ill-fated hostage rescue in Iran. Current examples of groupthink can be found in the decisions of the Bush administration and Congress to pursue an invasion of Iraq based on a policy of “preemptive use of military force against terrorists and rogue nations”. The decision to rush to war in Iraq before a broad-based coalition of allies could be built has placed the US in an unenviable military situation in Iraq that is costly in terms of military deaths and casualties, diplomatic standing in the world, and economically.

## **Groupthink and the News Media**

Knowledge is power and we as citizens and as a nation are becoming less powerful. We face an administration that believes in operating under high levels of secrecy. The American press, especially the television news media, has let down the American people and the American people have allowed this to happen. US television news is geared more toward providing entertainment than information. When one compares the news Americans received about the “war on terrorism” and “war in Iraq” with the news citizens of other countries received, it is easy to see why many Americans were eager to launch an attack on Saddam Hussein while most of the world thought this was not a good idea. The major news networks eagerly voiced almost exclusively the Bush administration’s (questionable) justifications for the attack on Iraq and ignored the voices of millions who knew that other ways of addressing the issues were still possible. Furthermore, the rapid pace of CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News opinion programs makes it difficult for viewers to process information in any depth. Americans need a press that serves as a devil’s advocate to alleviate the ongoing groupthink concerning the war on terrorism and the invasion of Iraq.

Review the following consequences of groupthink and consider how many of them apply to the Bush administration’s handling of the ‘war on terrorism’ and the issues related to Iraq and Saddam Hussein:

- a) incomplete survey of alternatives
- b) incomplete survey of objectives
- c) failure to examine risks of preferred choice
- d) failure to reappraise initially rejected alternatives
- e) poor information search
- f) selective bias in processing information at hand
- g) failure to work out contingency plans
- h) low probability of successful outcome

## **Remedies for Groupthink**

Decision experts have determined that groupthink may be prevented by adopting some of the following measures:

- a) The leader should assign the role of critical evaluator to each member.
- b) The leader should avoid stating preferences and expectations at the outset.
- c) Each member of the group should routinely discuss the groups' deliberations with a trusted associate and report back to the group on the associate's reactions.
- d) One or more experts should be invited to each meeting on a staggered basis. The outside experts should be encouraged to challenge views of the members.
- e) At least one articulate and knowledgeable member should be given the role of devil's advocate (to question assumptions and plans).
- f) The leader should make sure that a sizeable block of time is set aside to survey warning signals from rivals; leader and group construct alternative scenarios of rivals' intentions.