Methods for Counteracting Groupthink Risk: A Critical Appraisal

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines methods for counteracting groupthink defined as the extreme concurrence seeking exhibited by decision making groups, typically under conditions of high threat and cohesion (Janis, 1982). The authors identify three major categories of interventions potentially capable of mitigating groupthink tendencies: a) traditional recommendations originally hypothesized by Janis, b) methods for enhancing intellectual conflict during the decision making phase, and c) procedures designed to minimize pressures for the activation of group social identity defenses. The authors critically review the limited research empirically examining these recommendations, identify both advantages and disadvantages associated with implementing these interventions, and discuss conditions under which they are likely to be effective and ineffective.

Keywords: Deliberative Discussion, Group Cohesion, Group Problem-Solving, Groupthink, Social Identity Maintenance, Team Decision Making, Threat

INTRODUCTION

Imagine for a moment that you had a time machine and could go back in time to advise President John Kennedy on how to handle the Bay of Pigs invasion or to change the discussion of key U.S. military personnel leading up to the bombing of Pearl Harbor or to be a member of the NASA teams responsible for the launch of the Challenger or the Columbia space shuttles or had the ear of President Lyndon Johnson as he escalated the War in Vietnam. What would you do differently that would increase the chances that these groups would make a more effective decision and thus change the course of history?

The leaders and groups making decisions about the Bay of Pigs, Pearl Harbor, the space shuttles, and Vietnam faced situations involving risks and threats that dramatically impacted their group process and ultimately led them to make poor and dysfunctional decisions in a pattern of behavior that has become known as groupthink.

The purpose of this article is to review critically the recommendations that have been made for counteracting groupthink with the goal of providing an answer for future leaders and managers to the question: What would you do differently?
OVERVIEW OF THE GROUPTHINK MODEL

Groupthink is defined as the extreme concurrence seeking exhibited by decision making groups (Janis, 1972, 1982). Janis hypothesized that groupthink is likely to occur when a group is facing situations involving crisis or extreme stress and when the group has a configuration of antecedent characteristics.

These include low esteem stemming from the belief that a better solution other than that supported by the leader or other influential people can not be found, high group cohesion, limited search and appraisal of decision alternatives, and a highly directive group leader. Consequently, groups develop extreme concurrence seeking and exhibit what Janis termed the symptoms of groupthink. These include the illusion of invulnerability, collective rationalization, stereotyping of outgroups, mindguards (members who function to suppress dissent in the group), and the unshakeable belief in the morality of the group, its processes, and its decisions.

As a result, the decision making process adopted by the group is characterized by suboptimal procedures, or defective decision making symptoms, such as poor information search, selective processing of information including favoring information that bolsters the group’s preferred solution, as well as an extremely truncated appraisal of decision alternatives. The combined forces are hypothesized to result in extremely poor decision making performance by the group.

Research on Groupthink: A Review and Evaluation

The concept of groupthink struck a chord with the public and soon became part of the popular lexicon. Its appeal is not limited to the popular press. The concept is frequently included in textbooks from a wide variety of disciplines including management, organizational behavior, psychology, political science, and marketing. Interestingly, however, the scholarly research on groupthink presents a more complicated picture of this intuitively appealing construct.

Empirical research on Janis’s conceptualization of groupthink has employed two major methodological approaches: retrospective case studies of group decisions in crisis or threatening situations and experimental studies of group decision making (for reviews of this literature see Aldag & Fuller, 1993; Fuller & Aldag, 1998; Park, 1990, M. E. Turner & Pratkanis, 1998a).

In case study research, components of the groupthink model are inferred from archival documents and from interviews with observers and participants. Experimental studies typically manipulate several antecedent conditions and assess groupthink symptoms and group decision effectiveness. What is striking about research stemming from both methodologies is the extremely limited support for the full groupthink model. Neither case nor experimental work has provided compelling evidence for the groupthink theory as originally formulated by Janis. Consequently, several concerns about the groupthink model and research have been advanced (M. E. Turner & Pratkanis, 1998b; 1998c).

Most critically, research has failed to document any evidence for the causal relations among antecedent conditions, concurrence seeking, groupthink symptoms, defective decision making symptoms and poor decision performance. Even case studies selected for their a priori resemblance to groupthink processes have generally failed to provide support for the full groupthink model. None have provided evidence that groups display the symptoms of groupthink and defective decision making, even when making what are unarguably extremely poor decisions (e.g., see Esser & Lindoerfer, 1989; Raven, 1974, 1998). Similarly, experimental research has developed only very limited support for the groupthink theory, with only one exception.

Groups given instructions to limit their decision making discussions and evaluations actually do so. However, this limited discussion does not negatively impact decision making performance (e.g., see Flowers, 1977; Leana, 1985, Callaway & Esser, 1984; Callaway,
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