

research in brief

Group Think

Group Think is the psychological drive for consensus at any cost that suppresses dissent and appraisal of alternatives and cohesive decision-making groups. The results of this small-group phenomenon often spells disaster, states author Janis. Group Think paved the way for some of the major U.S. fiascos of recent decades: the Korean War stalemate, the escalation of the Vietnam War, the failure to be prepared for the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the Bay of Pigs blunder. Yet there are cases, such as the handling of the Cuban missile crises and the formulation of the Marshall Plan, where Group Think was avoided.

It's through documented portrayal of these cases of the invasion and avoidance of Group Think that Janis builds his hypothesis and offers suggestions for counter action.

Janis' major purpose is to increase awareness of social, psychological phenomenon in decisions of historical importance, so that group dynamics will be taken into account by those who try to understand the performance of world leaders and members of the supporting cast. Neglective actions, as Janis outlines, especially in the case of major fiascos, can be responsible for staging an appalling comedy of errors that ends up as a tragedy.

Janis presents a number of suggestive leads concerning instructive interventions in the government's decision-making process that should improve the quality of policy decisions. The hypotheses about conditions fostering Group Think are correct. The author, in his concluding summary, poses the question: "How can Group Think be prevented?" He suggests an appropriate decision-making process to avoid the dangers of Group Think:

1. Thoroughly canvas a wide range of alternative forces of action.
2. Carefully weigh the costs, drawbacks, and subtle risks of negative consequences, as well as the positive consequences, that could flow from what initially seem to be the most advantageous courses of action.
3. Continually search for relevant information for evaluating alternatives.
4. Conscientiously take into account all information and expert judgments even when information or

judgment doesn't support the course of action that may be initially preferred.

5. Reexamine the positive and negative consequences of all the main alternatives including those originally considered unacceptable before making a final choice.
6. Make detailed provisions for executing the chosen course of action, with special attention to contingency plans that might be required if various known risks materialize.

Victims of Group Think. Irving L. Janis. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1972.

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