

Thinking outside the group

Have you ever done something against your better judgement because you believed it was what everyone else wanted – and then discovered they all thought like you? Dr Leandro Herrero would describe you as a victim of groupthink, a surprisingly common phenomenon that blights political, business, and family life

It had been discussed, analysed and planned for months, and now it was happening for real. Everything was ready for the invasion. The local population would rise up, the intelligence people said, and salute the invaders with enthusiasm and flowers. They would be grateful forever. Let's go. And they went. The reality they encountered, however, was not what they expected. There were no flowers, no local uprising and not much gratitude.

You would be forgiven for thinking Iraq. But this was Cuba more than 40 years earlier. As is well known, once the invasion had taken place and disaster was in the air, President Kennedy stopped supporting it. The Bahia of Pigs saga was soon part of history.

Although a small army in comparison with recent events – 1,500 Cuban exiles – it had the whole of the CIA behind it. The US intelligence body believed locals in their thousands would welcome them. That didn't happen. It believed that if things went wrong, the invaders could retreat to the mountains and start a guerrilla war. But the mountains were on the other side of the island. It had counted on the high spirits of the army of exiles, which also wasn't the case. And, most naïvely of all, it believed the involvement of the US administration could ultimately be denied. Hard to credit.

How groupthink works

Psychologist Irving Janis wrote about the Bahia of Pigs in 1972, creating the concept of groupthink. He defined the term as “a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group [and] when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action”.

Groupthink is often present as a form of faulty, collective decision-making in which members of the group try to conform with expectations. These may well be explicit, but they can also be what is perceived to be the expectations of others within the group. The outcome is a type of decision by consensus which is intrinsically flawed but nobody seems to see it.

Groupthink as a concept has since been applied to a variety of socio-political and economic events, at least as a serious contributing factor. Among them are the space shuttle disasters of both Challenger and Columbia, the corporate scandal at Enron, as well as many aspects of the Vietnam war. And it has been in the news recently to explain the intelligence fiasco about Iraq, particularly within the US and UK administrations. In all these cases, the line between misleading, lying and deceiving is perceived by many as a fine one. The social sciences provide a more benevolent view by interpreting these mechanisms as a plausible collective phenomenon. However, social explanation is not necessarily the same as political acceptance. The Bahia Pigs invasion of Cuba was a fiasco, a political disaster and geopolitical stupidity, no matter how many groupthink labels one allocates.

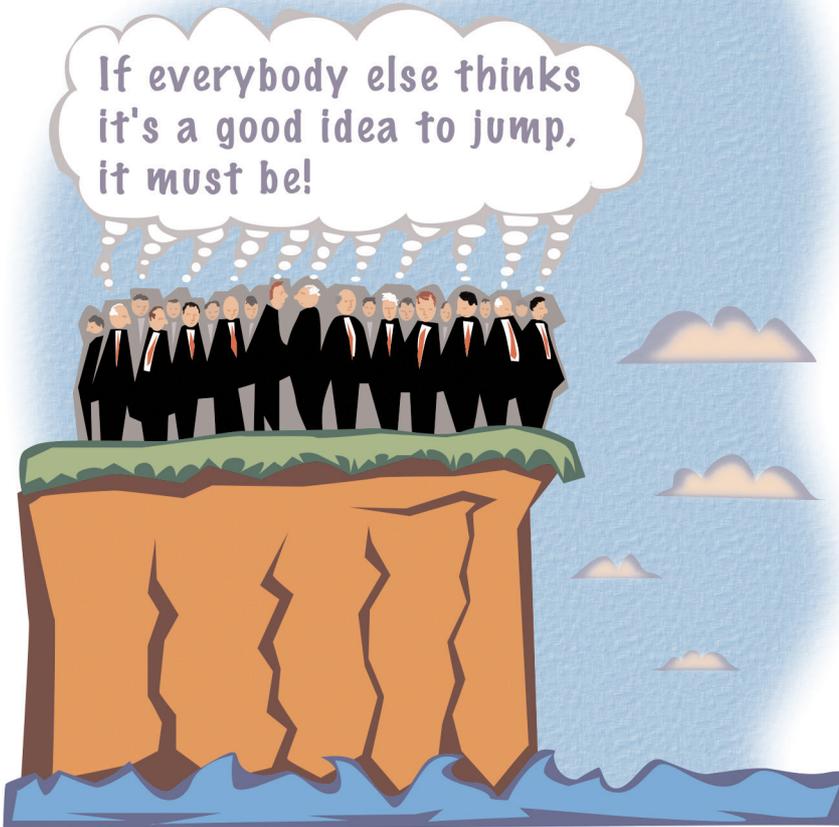
It is tempting to attribute many or all wrong decision-making to this phenomenon. And while the causation of events is usually more complex than the working of a single mechanism, there is little doubt groupthink plays an important role in how groups work.

Thinking along a linear path

According to social scientists, groupthink has some initial common features. For example, the group will tend to examine few alternatives. In my experience, data-driven scientific and technical groups do this a lot. When one set of data leads to a decision that produces another set of data that leads to another, people in these groups can easily find themselves in a rather linear thought path. The group is also selective in the way it gathers information (dismissing some sources or options too early, for example). And it can exert psychological pressure on its members to conform with rules, objectives or plans – suppressing healthy criticism.

Often these groups (or their leaders) can protect themselves against negative external input by creating all sorts of internal illusions such as their invulnerability, the high moral ground they take or even that they are in possession of the ‘truth’. In many teams, lack of decision-making is often seen as a pathology (and it may well be) so the team is sometimes geared towards making choices at all costs. Tolerance for debate or free-floating discussion that may not necessarily lead to a decision (often thought equal to ‘conclusion’) runs low in many organisations. The one, two, three, here-we-go bullet-point culture leads to action one, two, three, here-we-go follow-ups. That's all well and good when healthy but, in many cases, under this pristine look of efficiency lies a blind machinery

Illustration by Rob Wilcockson



that delivers efficient but stupid decisions.

How can groupthink be avoided? The answers are rather obvious and, as with many obvious things, surprisingly rare. One is to try to ensure the windows to the external world are always open. Encouraging dissent is another measure. If this doesn't happen naturally, designated members could play this role on a temporary or rotating basis, which may encourage other members to disagree or raise alternative views.

Periodical, internal anonymous mini-surveys on topics such as how well the team is doing, and if it is doing what it should, are also useful. There is a significant amount of data in the social sciences that tells us that when people are asked to express opinions anonymously they do so more freely. Again, this may not be a breakthrough insight but something that tends to be forgotten in day-to-day management – employee-opinion surveys tend to be linked only with large organisations.

The Abilene Paradox

There are also many subtypes of groupthink but they all refer to a similar phenomenon. One of these subtypes has been called the 'Abilene Paradox'. According to its author Herry Harvey, this happens when the apparent limits of a particular situation force a group of people to act in a way that is the direct opposite of their actual preferences. The name comes from an anecdote from Harvey's book of the same title. He describes it thus: "A sunny afternoon, a family playing cards on a terrace. One of them thinks they should move – not that he cares, on the contrary, but he thinks the others want to – so he proposes a trip to Abilene. No fun, hot, bad food. Back home one of

them admits that he had preferred to stay home. Everybody would have liked that, only they did not admit to it when it was still time to enjoy the afternoon."

How many trips to Abilene have you made? How many times have you found yourself doing something because it seemed to be what everybody else wanted to do, to find later in the corridor that everybody thought it a stupid idea? Abilene groupthink is a common phenomenon, only exacerbated by the climate of many organisations where the space and time for debate is limited or non-existent. Time pressure, group pressure or cultural pressure may force the individual to 'conform' (to use social sciences terminology), to comply or to raise few objections. In many cases, to ask questions, challenge or seek alternatives is seen as 'being difficult', a label few people like. Consequently, the group or team engages itself in 'single-track traps' as I call them.

What is a good team player?

One, for example, is to continuously stress how important it is to be a good team player (have you ever come across an organisation that doesn't want team players?) Since in many teams and groups 'team player' is associated with supporting everyone else, or the group's decisions, this is a single-track trap. The group could easily decide that being a good team player means to dissent, for example, but this is not usually the norm.

Incidentally, the Abilene Paradox has significant consequences in political science, in what has been called tactical voting. One wants to vote for candidate A but realises he will never win over B or C. He therefore votes for B because he or she is a better prospect than C. Since both B and C are worse than A, the voter effectively votes in direct contradiction to his beliefs. The effect is usually multiplied by thousands thinking in a similar way.

Groupthink is an omnipresent and pervasive phenomenon in the daily life of teams and groups. The team cult has its liabilities that are not always obvious and are not necessarily welcomed by managers. Business cultures that are proud of their team approach are zealous, and have antibodies against any questioning of the universal health of teams. I am not talking here about simple efficiency or efficacy. A team may apparently be both and still be pathological.

Abilene mechanisms are more frequent than you think but you have to go to the corridors, not to the meeting rooms, to find them. Abilene is apparently a hot, boring place, like many organisations. The decision to go or not to go is yours. SM

•Dr Leandro Herrero writes on a management topic each month in Scrip Magazine. He is CEO and founder of The Chalfont Project, an international consulting firm focusing on organisational innovation and behavioural change management.

Conditions of supply

Scrip Magazine is supplied on the following conditions: – 1. All rights reserved; no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without either the written permission of the publisher or under the terms of a licence issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency (90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1P 9HE, UK) or rights organisations in other countries that have reciprocal agreements with the copyright Licensing Agency. – 2. All abstracting of the data for republication and sale must have prior permission from the publisher. – 3. That it will not be circulated without prior agreement with the publisher outside the staff who work at the address to which it is sent. – 4. An order for additional copies at reduced rates constitutes an undertaking by the subscriber that such copies will not be exported or distributed so as to avoid taking full price subscriptions elsewhere without prior agreement with PJB Publications. – 5. While information is compiled with all due care, PJB Publications Ltd will not be liable for the consequences of anyone acting or refraining from acting in reliance on any information. Full terms and conditions available on request.