2008 ISM Workshop

Building Mission Success

Groupthink and the Pressure for Consensus

Promoting and Strengthening an Effective Safety Culture through Promoting Honesty

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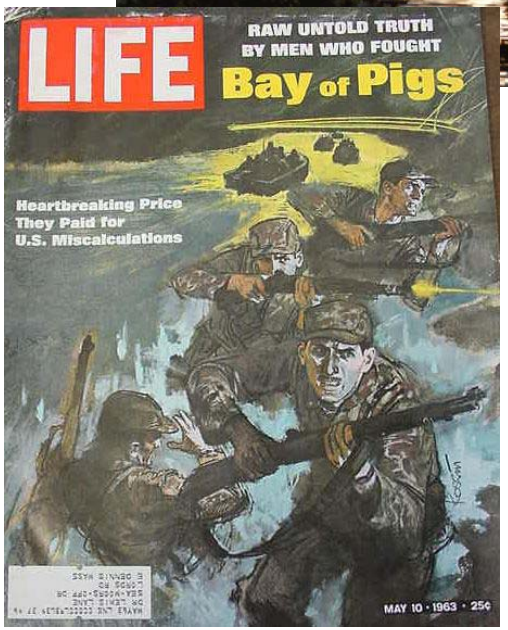
“Groupthink is a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action.”

Irving Janis, Ph.D. (1972)

Examples of Groupthink

Top NASA executive who made the decision to launch never heard the engineers' objections.



Following the Bay of Pigs invasion Arthur Schlesinger said, "my feelings of guilt were tempered by the knowledge that any objection would have accomplished nothing but gain me a name as a nuisance."

Military commanders received information about Japanese plans to attack Pearl Harbor but disregarded.

Symptoms of Groupthink

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

Conditions that breed Groupthink

- Highly cohesive groups
  - Members know each other well and like each other
  - Members have similar norms, attitudes, shared experiences
  - Small team size, close physical proximity of members
  - Group membership provides heightened status for members
  - Rewards for team performance
- Strong directive leadership
- Time pressure
- Important and complex decisions to be made

Leadership Antidotes for Groupthink

- Appoint devil's advocate/critical evaluator
- Make sure all group members are heard from
- Avoid being a dominant, directive leader
- Leadership remains impartial and is open to criticism
- Seek outside opinions/Bring in outside experts
- Allow for private expression of opinions (secret ballot)
- Small, then large groups
- Allow time for decision to be made
- Resist making an early decision

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Questions?

Comments

Answers

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