Safety is a TEAM SPORT

Is Groupthink a Bad Thing or a Good Thing?

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Safety matters

Last month, we discussed the power of a team when it comes to developing a sustainable safety culture. This month, we explore the concept of groupthink and how it can affect teams – negatively or positively – and how to harness the power of a group for good.

Groupthink can be described as a way of thinking in which members of cohesive groups accept a viewpoint of conclusion that represents a perceived group consensus, whether the members actually believe it to be valid or correct. Groupthink can be observed when the desire to avoid conflict makes group members overly compliant and can artificially reinforce a decision through peer pressure. Groupthink can appear to be efficient because other ideas and opinions are shut down.

The concept of groupthink was introduced by social psychologist Irving Janis in 1972 to describe a flawed group process that limits alternatives and overly uses peer pressure to accomplish agreement. Groupthink is typically viewed as something negative because it short-circuits the decision-making process, causes groups to be closed to new ideas, and can prevent organizational learning. An example from history was President John Kennedy and his cabinet's decision to invade the Cuban Bay of Pigs in April 1961. Some of his top aides, including, Arthur Schlesinger and his brother Robert Kennedy, privately disagreed with the flawed CIA plan to invade, but failed to speak up or raise their concerns during crucial cabinet meetings. Ultimately, the invasion was deemed the "perfect failure" – largely because dissenting opinions were not sought out or voiced.

Janis' and other's research found that "groupthink attitudes" can be identified. Take a look at the following statements to see if you can identify groupthink in your organization.

☑ "No one can defeat us": Illusions of invulnerability.
☑ "We can do no wrong.": Belief in the group's inherent morality.
☑ "Danger signs? We've done this before with no problems!": Rationalizing away serious problems:
☑ "We don't need to worry about them –they don't know what they are talking about.": Stereotyping other group –managers, employees, unions, for example.

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We can all think of at least one or two examples of a time when groupthink dominated the decision-making or the actions of a team that we are or were a part of either as a member or as a leader. Groupthink can cause workers to avoid adopting a new safety rule, agreeing with management decisions, and keep workers from speaking up in dangerous situations.

DISCUSSION QUESTION:
What are some examples where you recognize that groupthink was detrimental to the safety of an individual or group? What was the outcome?

As leaders, it's is important for you to be able to recognize the pitfalls of groupthink and address the issue. How? First, observe the groups around you. How are they making decisions? What are they saying – with their words and actions? Work to engage people in conversation, dialog and debate. Ask people what other ideas they have regarding a specific problem, seek out dissenting ideas, make it safe for people to speak up, and ask the silent people to speak up – either in the group or in one-on-one discussions. You may remember the title of this article asks the question "is groupthink a bad thing or a good thing?" Most researchers I've read will seem to say "it's a bad thing." Well, to avoid yet another case of groupthink – I'll offer a dissenting opinion for you to consider. It can be a positive thing. How, you may ask. Groupthink indicates the cohesion or strength of a group. Once a strong group adopts a new idea or convinces their leaders of the 'best' approach to solve a problem, that group can be "all in." And that can help you when you make necessary changes in your organization such as implementing a new rule, new work practice, or change in safety equipment.

How can you leverage group think to accomplish a sustainable safety culture? One way is to identify the group's formal or informal leader or leaders. Spend time with them to share the change you are trying to make, give them information, seek out their opinions and ideas, and above all, be willing to consider what you are hearing. When I work with my clients to help guide them through a culture change or major safety implementation, I often discuss what researcher Jeffrey Kotter calls a "guiding coalition" or individuals within the organization who are willing to speak up to their peer groups to help them adapt to a change. Imagine working with the informal leaders in strong, cohesive teams – they will help you spread the word, they will help make the change and groupthink can help you make a strong and lasting change.

Is this easy? No, it takes time and a dose of patience. But it can be highly effective and will help you ensure that you have a workplace where it's difficult to get hurt.

Be Safe! *Carl Potter, CSP*

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