

TEAMS SUFFER WHEN GROUPTHINK LEADS TO BAD DECISIONS.

How often have you held back from stating your views in a meeting, agreed to someone else's position when it really seemed wrong, or gone along with a boss's suggestions even though you disagreed?⁴⁹ If and when you do these things, you are likely trapped by **groupthink**, the tendency for members of highly cohesive groups to lose their critical evaluative capabilities.⁵⁰ It occurs when teams strive so hard to reach agreement and avoid disagreement that they end up making bad decisions.⁵¹

Psychologist Irving Janis says that teams suffering groupthink often fit the description shown in **Table 13.1**.⁵² They engage in things like rationalizing disconfirming data, stereotyping competitors as weak, and assuming the team is too good for criticism. They do this because members are trying to hold the group together and maintain harmony at all costs. They avoid doing anything that might detract from feelings of goodwill, such as expressing disagreement or pointing out that the team is moving too fast and needs to deliberate more. Each of these tendencies raises the risk of making bad decisions.

When you are leading or are part of team heading toward groupthink, don't assume there's no way out. Janis notes, for example, that leaders can absent themselves from meetings and allow group members to discuss and debate without them. With the leader absent, members may talk more openly and engage in more frank discussions.

Janis has other advice on how to get a team that is moving toward groupthink back on track.⁵³ You can assign one member to act as a critical evaluator or "devil's advocate" during each meeting. Subgroups can be assigned to work on issues and then share their findings with the team as a whole. Outsiders can be brought in to observe and participate in team meetings and offer their thoughts on both team processes and tentative decisions. And, the team can hold a "second chance" meeting after an initial decision is made to review, change, and even cancel it. Actions like these encourage helpful conflict and reduce pressures toward premature agreement. With good leadership, there's no reason to let groupthink take a team down the wrong pathway.

TEAMS BENEFIT WHEN CONFLICTS ARE WELL MANAGED.

The ability to deal with conflicts in interpersonal relationships and on a team is critical. When constructive, conflict adds to creativity and reduces tendencies toward groupthink. But when destructive, it breaks down team processes and hurts performance.

At its core, **conflict** involves disagreements among people. And in our experiences, it appears in two quite different forms.⁵⁴ **Substantive conflict** involves disagreements

Groupthink is a tendency for highly cohesive teams to lose their evaluative capabilities.

Conflict is a disagreement over issues of substance or clashing emotions.

Substantive conflict involves disagreements over things like goals, tasks, and resources.

TABLE 13.1 Symptoms of Groupthink

Illusions of invulnerability—Members assume that the team is too good for criticism or is beyond attack.

Rationalizing unpleasant and disconfirming data—Members refuse to accept contradictory data or to thoroughly consider alternatives.

Belief in inherent group morality—Members act as though the group is inherently right and above reproach.

Stereotyping competitors as weak, evil, and stupid—Members refuse to look realistically at other groups.

Applying direct pressure to deviants to conform to group wishes—Members refuse to tolerate anyone who suggests the team may be wrong.

Self-censorship by members—Members refuse to communicate personal concerns to the whole team.

Illusions of unanimity—Members accept consensus prematurely, without testing its completeness.

Mind guarding—Members protect the team from hearing disturbing ideas or outside viewpoints.