

co·wonders



groupthink

groupthink

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What is it about:

- reflection over what happens when everyone has the same opinion
- group pressure influence on decision making
- ways to avoid groupthink

source: Groupthink by Irving Janis

domains: decision making, group processes, communication in a group

approach description:

Groupthink was described by Irving Janis (1972), research psychologist at Yale University. He pointed out that sometimes groups make faulty decisions, because group pressure leads to a deterioration of “mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment”. Janis studied group decisions inter alia around Pearl Harbor and the Bay of Pigs invasion and he found out those groups rejected critical opinions and outside information. He found out that groupthink may lead to ignoring alternatives and taking irrational actions that dehumanize other groups and ignore ethical or moral consequences. In the situation of groupthink individuals tend to refrain from expressing doubts and judgments or disagreeing with the consensus. In the group of like-minded people their members reassure themselves that they are right, their analysis is superior to that of the outsiders, and they look only for evidence confirming their objectives. They may also become radical in their decision making. Groups at risk of groupthink are especially the ones with members of similar backgrounds, high pressure to unanimity and making quality decisions, as well as lack of clear rules for decision making.

Janis suggested several steps for preventing groupthink:

- Giving high priority to expressing objections and doubts (encouraging all group members to speak, especially when opinion is unpopular)
- Dividing group in two and forming competing teams to study the same problem (and later to compare their results)



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- Assigning the role of “devil’s advocate” to one group member (different person for each meeting which may provide questions and insights which contradict the majority group)
- Assigning each person the role of “critical evaluator”, so that each group member can freely air objections and doubts
- Leader avoiding expressing expectations or opinions when assigning the task
- Inviting outside experts to the meetings and encouraging them to challenge the views. Each group members to be allowed to discuss with experts their opinions
- Leaders avoiding participation in group meetings to avoid influencing the outcome
- Examining alternative scenarios
- Each group member discussing group ideas with trusted people outside the group and reporting back to the group.

aim of use:

The activity can serve as an inspiration to reflect over communication in group processes and decision making. It can also be used to generate out of the box thinking ideas and welcome alternative ways of thinking within the groups.

educational method:

- **Step 1: Polarising topics**

Invite participants to brainstorm about the topics or narratives which are polarising communities they live in or the group they currently function in (you can give examples). Write down the polarising topics and ask participants to choose as a group the one they would like to discuss. When the choice is made, write down the chosen narrative on the flipchart and ask participants to react to this statement by positioning themselves on the line in the room (one side of the room represents “YES, I agree”, and the other “NO, I disagree”. Space in between is a spectrum on which participants can position themselves depending on the extent of agreement with the statement). Invite participants to share their opinions and reasons for standing where they are.



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- **Step 2: Group work**

After participants discuss their positions, divide them into 2 groups: group 1 which consists of people who were standing close to YES/NO position (on the extremes of the line), and group 2 will consist of the people in the middle (no strong position about the statement). Tell each of the groups that their task is to propose 3 solutions on how to decrease polarisation on the topic they discuss in Step 1.

In group 1 (only in group 1, not both groups) assign the following tasks to group members:

- All group members need to speak out.
- All group members are invited to voice their doubts and objections.
- Give secretly to one group member to have a role of “devil’s advocate” (this person may provide questions and insights which contradict the majority group).
- Give secretly to another group member to have a role of “alternative view” (this person proposes alternative solutions to the ideas of the group).

- **Step 3: Presentation of ideas**

After discussion in 2 groups, invite each group to present their ideas. Note if the ideas are similar or they vary in some ways.

- **Step 4: Debriefing**

Ask learners to reflect in the plenary over the following questions:

- How were you feeling when working in your group?
- How was the process of finding the 3 solutions?
- Have you noticed that any group members have any role? What roles could that be? [reveal the roles of the group 1]
- How do you think the assigned roles and group discussion rules influenced the decision making process?
- How did the processes in both groups vary?
- Were the outcomes (ideas) of each group different?
- How do you relate this activity to everyday life?

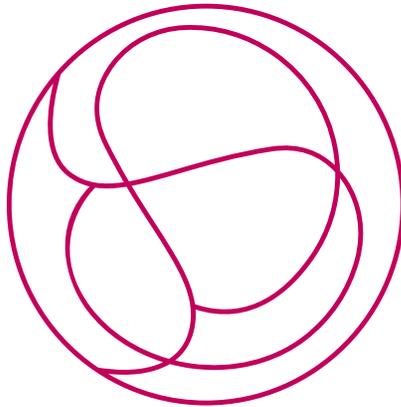
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- **Step 5: Groupthink**

Present to participants the concept of groupthink and the possible threats of it, as well as ways to prevent it. Open a discussion about how and if the groupthink concept was reflected in their group work. Conclude with gathering more ideas on how to prevent groupthink.

read more:

- **Book:** Irving Janis, Victims of Groupthink, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1972)
- **Article:** Psychology today about groupthink
- **Book:** Mikael Krogerus, Roman Tschäppeler, The communication book. 44 ideas for better conversations every day, (2019)



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