



The Dangers of Group Think

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THE INSANITY OF IT ALL

In the 1970s in Jonestown, Guyana over 900 people belonged to a cult known as The People's Temple. The head of this cult was an American named Jim Jones. His congregation had unquestionable blind faith and devotion to him. They believed and followed whatever garbage spewed from his mouth.

One day in November in 1978, Jim Jones ordered his followers to drink a grape-flavoured drink laced with tranquilizers and cyanide. Those few who refused were forced to swallow the deadly concoction. In the end, 918 corpses were found littering the temple's compound and bloating in the cooking sun.

Why would this group of people do this? Were they all crazy? Were they all fanatics? Religious zealots? Perhaps the answer is a resounding 'yes' to all of these questions. But perhaps there is also a deeper reason to this madness.

There is a phenomenon known in the world of psychology and the social sciences called Group Think. The actions of cults and religious groups are the surest manifestation of group think.

WHAT IS GROUP THINK?

Group think is the phenomenon where people within the same group begin to behave in a coordinated way. There is a harmonising in the way they think. Team members all start to head down the same road of belief and support the same view. From the outside it seems the group acts and thinks as one, but in reality some of the individuals within the group will have views that don't resonate with the group think.

When individuals feel they can not speak up or disagree this is generally a strong indication of unhealthy dynamics in play within the group. This strong social pressure acts as a kind of unseen psychological gag that physically constrains individuals from sharing a dissenting opinion.

Why is there a strong tendency, when in the company of others, to make decisions that are contrary to our values and beliefs?

The major reason is the human tendency to submit to the will of the group.

I think most of us have felt this to some degree. It might have been sitting in a meeting where you wanted to share a differing opinion or to point out some information that had not yet been considered, but you felt the dynamics of the group prevented you.

Perhaps you found yourself in a social setting where friends wanted to dine somewhere or do something, but rather than voicing your opinion to do something else you clammed up and followed the group quietly and reluctantly.

In both examples, most of us usually feel it is too uncomfortable to speak our minds and it is simpler to just go along. We are willing to give into the group. We are willing to let information slide that could be critical to making the right decision. We are willing to dilute our values and bend our beliefs if it is best for the group. We are willing to hold our tongues instead of questioning the rhyme and reason behind a decision we know is awry. Welcome to group think!

THE DANGER OF GROUP THINK TO YOUR TEAM

When working with teams I always ask them if they can recall a major screw-up or fool-hardy decision made by the group. It's a loaded-question, because I always get numerous answers to this simple question.

Research shows when groups have an initial inclination to go in a certain direction a momentum builds at a speed where individual opinions become more unified. The groups members start to move toward an extreme point. Like an avalanche sweeping away everything in its path, the groups confidence and extreme belief about their initial inclination swallows any disagreement or differing opinion.

The danger lies in the fact that the momentum of group think buries any important information that might be pertinent to consider. Information that may suggest that the initial inclination may be wrong, but which never even had the remotest chance of being communicated.

THE EXTREMES OF THE SOCIAL BRAIN

In an earlier post I spoke of the importance of [social pain and social reward](#) in team cohesion. If specific Rules of Engagement are not in place the extremes of the social brain can insidiously creep into the dynamics of the team.

People have an overwhelming desire to feel secure, valued and connected to their group. If it is not openly communicated that differing and descending opinions are welcomed then the harmful effects of group think will take hold.

Since most people learn from each other, and when the majority of their group feels going a certain direction is a good idea, and individual may often think, “Maybe I am missing something and the others are correct. Perhaps I should hold my opinions to myself.”

THE ASCH TEST

In the 1950s the psychologist Solomon Asch developed an experiment to prove the strong desire with members to conform to their group. The simple [experiment](#) is made up of a deck of cards. On each card there are several lines. The subject’s task is straight forward. They look at the line on the left side of the card and determine which of the three lines on the right are equal to it in length.

The experiment was designed to present subjects with the task where the right answer was obvious, but would feel forced by social pressure to answer something different.

“Only one of the people in the group is a real subject, the other are confederates of the experimenter and have been told to give wrong answers on some of the trials. The experiment begins and the subjects give their judgements. By the time it comes to the real subject a whole list of people have said something plainly wrong and the subject is either going to have to fold and say I agree with them or they are going to have to uncomfortably say it is something else. Most of the people most of the time will tend to fold”.

HOW TO MITIGATE GROUP THINK

When working with groups I present a number of ways to help them mitigate the dangers of group think. One of these ways I’ve already mentioned in an earlier post on [Rules of Engagement](#).

As a normal course of action, I will always confer and agree with the team leader to have him or her to hold their opinion on a matter in order not to

sway the opinions of others. This goes a long way in combating group think.

Another way is to assign one of two people to the group the role of Devil's Advocate. Their sole job is to ask questions that test the validity and reasoning of suggestion, opinions or decisions. They act as the counter voice to group think.

Another way is to ask all team members to write down their initial thoughts and opinions on a piece of paper before the outset of the meeting. This way their ideas are submitted before group think has a chance to take hold and sway people to disregard their own doubts.

Yet, another way is to get teams members to anonymously submit their vote after the meeting. This process can mitigate most of the force of social pressure and people can feel more free to share a dissenting opinion.

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