

The Educational Institute of Scotland

Groupthink and the EIS

Introduction

The following resolution was carried by the Council meeting in January 2014:

That this Council resolve to investigate and report on the phenomenon of 'Groupthink' and on how training and practices to detect and avoid it might be organised and deployed within the EIS.

The range of scholarly research on the phenomenon of Groupthink is extensive. A social psychologist, Irving Janis, coined the term in the early 1970s in his examination of US foreign policy fiascoes and disasters. Since then, it has been used to explain the group dynamics at play in disastrous situations and decisions as far-ranging as the shuttle disaster in the 1980s, to the organisational culture within the RBS leading up to the financial crash in 2008.

Janis's theory suggests that Groupthink is a state in which groups of key decision-makers do not properly test their shared attitudes and assumptions, or properly question and evaluate even their own reactions to situations, their own stances or perspectives or biases on an issue, in the lead-up to making crucial decisions.

Unwittingly, groups end up placing cohesiveness and consensus over deep critical analysis. They start to ignore or dismiss external or diverse viewpoints; they start to want to limit dissent and to believe in their own ethical correctness and in the folly of any opponents.

Despite much of the research focus being on high-level international events and decisions, it is clear that any group in any organisation can fall victim to Groupthink, especially an organisation relying on committee structures, and especially when the group in question is under considerable pressure. A fuller summary of the features of Groupthink can be found in Appendix 1.

Consequences of Groupthink

Janis lists several possible consequences of Groupthink which may in turn lead to defective decision-making and low probability of successful outcomes:

- Incomplete survey of alternatives.
- Incomplete survey of objectives.
- Failure to re-examine a preferred course of action e.g. by exploring possible unobvious risks or drawbacks.
- Failure to reappraise initially rejected alternatives.
- Poor information search.
- Selective bias in processing information at hand.
- Failure to work out contingency plans.

The recommended strategies to avoid Groupthink can be derived by imagining, or trying to create, the circumstances that would ensure the **opposite** of each of the

above situations. For a further summary of advice to avoid Groupthink, see Appendix 2.

Recognising Groupthink within Scottish Education

Having a grasp of Groupthink can perhaps best help the EIS in its work by providing it with a critical tool to use when analysing the performance of leadership groups within the Scottish Educational establishment where a culture of compliance can often be observed.

This culture can be a key driver of workload for our members as it can lead to a dismissal of the voice of the profession; for example EIS advice and lobbying on the need to delay the New Qualifications was ignored. An understanding of Groupthink can help the EIS analyse *why* that culture has taken hold, offer opportunities for original and incisive lines of discussion during negotiations and at key stakeholder meetings, and create a new lever for the EIS in its attempts to improve Scottish education. (Please see Appendix 3 for details of critiques of leadership by Walter Humes.) Care should be taken not to confuse consensus achieved through collegiate debate and common purpose, with the operation of Groupthink.

Groupthink within the EIS

It would be complacent to assume that the EIS is not itself sometimes in danger of making poor decisions because of Groupthink, and that it need not equip itself with the means to avoid those situations. The EIS is a major professional organisation with considerable influence in Scotland's civic life, led by members who elect representatives into committees, key groupings of decision makers. It makes sense for such an organisation to explore the dynamics by which groups and committees behave, and to create mechanisms and training opportunities to self-evaluate and examine those dynamics and to ensure mistakes and poor decisions are avoided.

There will also be occasions when small key leadership groups within the EIS will come under the kind of pressure in which Groupthink flourishes.

However, the danger of groupings within the EIS falling victim to Groupthink should not be overstated. The structure of Council and its committees creates effective layers of oversight and scrutiny that offer the kind of 'second-chance' suggested in point 5 of Appendix 2. It is essential, however, that the Institute ensures that members of Council and of Committees are supported, and given training, in fulfilling the scrutiny role which is fundamental to the democratic accountability process.

Recommendations

The Executive Committee should:

- 1) investigate what kinds of training are used by other unions on group-dynamics, committee decision-making, leadership and organisational self-evaluation and to incorporate best practice into EIS training through the work of the Working Group on training;
 - 2) through the working group ensure that training materials used within the EIS on Negotiating Skills take account of Groupthink analysis as a tool for understanding, and exploiting, the mindsets of 'opponents';
 - 3) organise training on Negotiating Skills, where required or requested, of EIS reps on the SNCT and Extended Joint Chairs, and of EIS reps involved in high-level stakeholder meetings, using the adapted materials; this training to include the importance of detailed debriefing, review and self-evaluation of lessons learned from previous negotiations;
 - 4) ensure that reports from officials encourage critical consideration of issues and seek to incorporate counterbalancing strategies to the consequences of Groupthink e.g. outlining alternative scenarios, challenging conventional thinking etc.
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Appendix 1

Recognising Groupthink

Quoted from an article by Lindy Ryan, Published May 1, 2012, on website www.business2community.com

Janis coined the term “groupthink” to describe the type of group decision-making problem which occurs when cohesive group members’ desire to maintain good relations and achieve unanimity become superior to reaching a good decision. As traditionally conceived, groupthink occurs when in-group pressures override a group’s ability to realistically and critically evaluate options, thus leading to poor judgment and decision-making. Some scholars believe so strongly in the destructive qualities of groupthink that they argue it is the most common hazard in teamwork.

Three main factors contribute to groupthink:

- Structural decision-making flaws, which include ignoring input from outside sources; a lack of diversity in viewpoints; acceptance of decisions without analysis; and a history of accepting leader decisions that impair the group decision-making process.
- Cohesiveness, which can unfortunately encourage groupthink by creating an environment that limits internal dissension, negotiation, and criticism.
- External pressures, which limit decision making time and encourage group members to accept the first plausible option.

These factors lead to a set of eight primary symptoms indicative of groupthink:

1. Pressure to conform, wherein group members who are viewed as dissenters are directly pressured to conform to the group consensus.
2. Collective rationalization, wherein group members insulate themselves from corrective feedback, ignoring information that may force them to reconsider their assumptions.
3. Belief in inherent morality, wherein group members believe unquestioningly in the morality of their group (or the rightness of their cause), causing them to ignore the ethical or moral consequences of decisions.
4. An illusion of invulnerability, wherein group members becoming overly-optimistic, resulting in the willingness to take unnecessary and/or extreme risks.
5. Stereotyped views of outsiders, wherein groups develop an “enemy” mindset that views leaders of opposing groups as evil or stupid, and discourages interaction or productive conflict resolution with outside groups.
6. Self-censorship, wherein group members begin to consciously avoid deviating from group consensus and censor their concerns or conflicting viewpoints.

7. An illusion of unanimity, wherein group members desire for consensus evolves into a reliance on consensual validation.
8. A desire to protect the group from opposition, wherein group members actively appoint themselves as "mindguards" to protect the group leader or other group members from adverse information that might disrupt group norms or past decisions.

[Avoiding Groupthink](#)

Quoted from an article by Lindy Ryan, Published May 1, 2012, on website www.business2community.com

Five Tips to Avoiding Groupthink

Groupthink conformity tends to increase in tandem with group cohesiveness. As group norms become established members become more motivated to suppress critical thought to avoid conflict and preserve group harmony, which may be interpreted as consensus. This condition is especially prevalent in groups that are isolated from conflicting opinions and insulated from corrective feedback. Problem-solving and task-oriented groups are particularly susceptible, or groups in which the leader is directive. Though it is not always dominant enough to influence final decisions, most cohesive groups experience even a mild tendency towards groupthink.

A leader can employ several tips to avoid or overcome the disruption caused by groupthink:

1. Welcome diversity by intentionally diversifying a group or inviting outsiders to meetings and leverage their opinions, feedback, and ideas to enhance the quality and impartiality of a decision.
2. Train group members to be critical thinkers and recognize the importance of critically analysing ideas and decisions.
3. Divide groups into subgroups to brainstorm and discuss solutions, and then converge as a whole to discuss and evaluate ideas.
4. Introduce a "Devil's Advocate" to purposely voice contrary opinion and force thoughtful discussion of alternatives, or analysis of the validity of a proposed decision.
5. Hold a "second-chance" meeting to offer a final opportunity to provide input or new information before acting on a decision, especially in instances where group decisions have been achieved quickly or without thoughtful discussion.

Appendix 3

Walter Humes, visiting professor of education at Stirling University, was quoted in a recent article written by Alex Wood, former Head Teacher of Wester Hailes Education Centre: "It is high time that the complacent rhetoric of Scottish education ("partnership", "consultation", "consensus", etc.) was exposed for the sham it is. For too long the teachers who have got on in the system have been deferential and conformist: we need challenging thinkers who ask hard questions." (<http://www.sec-ed.co.uk/news/curriculum-for-excellence-kicking-a-hornets-nest>). A full article on leadership by Humes can be found at <http://welcometoselmas.wordpress.com/2014/06/05/walter-humes-on-leadership-brainstrust2/>).
