

Category: Human Resources

Groupthink versus Groupshift

Brian R. King, P.Eng, PMP.

President of Millennium 3 Inc. Training and Consulting



To be a good team leader it is useful to understand some basics about group dynamics and its impact on the effectiveness of team decisions.

Two major aspects of group dynamics are *groupthink* and *groupshift*. These phenomena can affect a team's ability to appraise alternatives objectively and to arrive at quality decisions.

In groupthink, the norm for group consensus overrides an individual's propensity to appraise alternative courses of action.

Groupthink is similar to the expression of peer pressure in youth. A group may behave or take a position that is contrary to an individual member's beliefs, but the individual's need for affiliation is so strong that that he or she goes along with the group instead of asserting his or her beliefs.

You may notice these behaviors as symptoms of groupthink:

- Individuals' doubts decrease
- The group may make hasty, irrational decisions
- The group feels it is invulnerable

When groupthink occurs, team members withhold their ideas because they fear the consequence of being perceived as an outsider and not as a team player. In addition, the need for consensus prevents robust debate because individuals' disagreement with the status quo is viewed as a problem instead of as a strength.

What can team leaders do to limit groupthink? Leaders must gain participation from all team members and reject compliance when it comes too quickly. They must challenge the team to consider different viewpoints and examine their actions.

In groupshift, the initial position of individuals in the group exaggerates toward a more extreme position.

An example of groupshift is when the fans of a sports team celebrate the win of their team and their celebration turns to destruction of property.

When groupshift occurs, conservative individuals may become more cautious, while aggressive individuals may take more risks. Whether the shift is toward more caution or more risk depends on how individuals behave before they engage in group discussion or activities.

Individuals may undergo a dramatic behaviour change and fail to consider risks. They may display a negative attitude towards planning and development of proactive responses.

How can team leaders limit groupshift? Ensure that the focus of the team is maintained and that positive values and constructive behaviours are applied consistently to all decisions and planned actions.

Team leaders should understand the phenomena of groupthink and groupshift and know when and how to apply strategies to limit their impact. Strive for participation. Challenge the team to develop multiple strategies. Embed the requirement for positive behaviour in all team actions.

Focus not just on the goal but also on how the team achieves the goal.