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Understanding Groupthink and How It Impacts Us

Learn from History

As believers of the Christian faith, we can see from the gospels, an example of how Groupthink led to the mob mentality of demanding Jesus' crucifixion. In situations like these, people may remain silent in order to avoid risky outcomes of being reprimanded, ostracised or of losing the right to belong to a group. After Jesus' arrest, Peter's denial of knowing Jesus when questioned was thus an example of going along with Groupthink for his self-preservation.

Groupthink is an illusion of unanimous thinking as the collective thinking has resulted from a bias rather than from an objective forum where people come together to exchange ideas and discuss issues before arriving at a conclusion. Just because several people believe about something does not necessarily mean there is truth to the belief. In fact, if the belief was based on selectively considering only information that confirms it, then confirmation bias or a fallacy would have resulted, such as when the chief priests focused on Jesus' claim to be king, which they then used to accuse Him of treason against Caesar – a charge which even Pilate the governor found groundless.

In the days of the New Testament, Groupthink led to Jesus' death on the Cross; in this day and age, the violence inflicted on Jesus still rears its ugly head, such as when Singaporean student Johnathan Mok was severely assaulted in London by "passersby who were making comments about his race and COVID-19" (Ang, 2020, Mar 3). In the long run, the ripple effects of widespread public sentiment against any occupational or racial group would only lead us as a community towards stereotyping, unfounded mistrust and divisiveness between people.

Nobody is a winner in a climate of hostility between people groups at the end of the day. We have seen from history, how such hostility has led to disastrous outcomes of genocides and of World Wars in which groupthink assumed one's superiority over others. Mark Kelly, a NASA astronaut, has learnt for example that NASA teams that consisted of intelligent people had also shown themselves to be capable of Groupthink which discouraged creativity or, worse still, individual responsibility for decision-making, leading to everyone in the team agreeing to launch a damaged space shuttle in February 2003 (Concert Technologies, n.d.). It turned out to be a really bad decision that cost lives.

What is Groupthink?

Groupthink is what happens when people conform to a pattern of thinking and maintain group loyalty without first checking to see if the group consensus is valid or even ethical, at times deceiving themselves into making choices that are not necessarily the best or beneficial at all (Yanis, 1972 as cited by Lassila, 2008, Jan/Feb and Schmidt, 2016, May 26).

Groupthink happens when people get locked into a collective mindset such as what has happened during this time of the COVID-19 situation, when Chinese nationals or medical frontline workers are shunned for fear of viral transmissions from them. Without questioning the rationality of such beliefs, one may continue on the path of least resistance, especially when the social norm of the workplace or group culture exerts pressure to act a certain way.
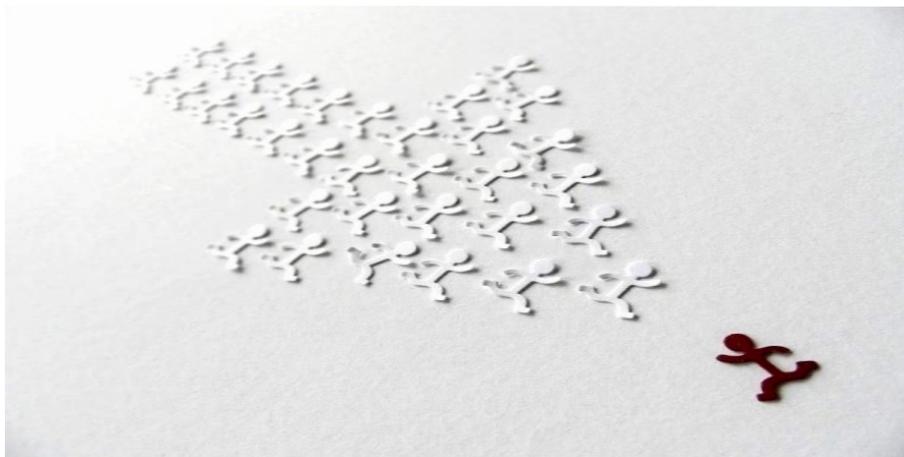
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What can we do About Groupthink?

How then, could we respond to occurrences of Groupthink, especially when a certain belief leads to specific individuals being ostracised or prevents rational decision making? We could first of all, intentionally seek out the opinions of individuals from diverse backgrounds.

When we engage with such individuals, we encourage an atmosphere of mutual respect and enable positive group processes as well as cohesiveness to take place as opposed to Groupthink. More importantly, engaging with diverse groups of people helps to moderate our extreme views or fixations in thinking.

At a corporate level, including members from outside the group in meetings and decision-making is a recommended best practice; training team members in group decision making is another recommendation to consider (Concert Technologies, n.d.).

If our own ideas are not accepted or get disputed, we can learn to accept negative feedback without needing to feel pressured into adopting another person's way of thinking. Remaining open to criticism and maintaining a curious mind can be an enriching experience for both parties to continue finding out more about an issue of interest.

At the same time, while we have a right to our independent ways of thinking, we do not have to exclude or dismiss people who do not agree with us. Allowing the time and space to discuss disputing ideas is a healthy way to relate with people who think differently from ourselves.

Jesus' measured responses to the accusers of the woman caught in adultery, demonstrate that we do not necessarily have to jump on the bandwagon of behaving and responding a certain way to issues. Let us bear this scriptural example in mind whenever the temptation arises for us to give in to Groupthink.