

Luis Cruz

WFED578

Professor Park

October 21, 2023

Lesson #8: Groupthink Paper

Bibliographic citation:

Griffin, E. (1991). Chapter 18: Groupthink of Irving Janis. In E. Griffin (Ed). *A first look at communication theory*, pp, 235-246.

The article, Groupthink of Irving Janis, spends most of the article portraying how issues in communication within a group contributed to the Challenger rocket debacle. This catastrophe, which resulted in the death of several astronauts which also resulted in the loss of billions of dollars was publicly on television. Janis identifies and attributes the primary factor of the Challenger tragedy to poor decision making of NASA team members due to groupthink. Although the article also references and exemplifies groupthink in other scenarios, the majority of the article is centered around how groupthink at NASA contributed to the Challenger tragedy.

Groupthink occurs when a group's ability to assess a situation accurately and objectively is compromised to keep the groups existing relationship dynamics intact. Janis believed that as cohesiveness for a group increased the groups susceptibility to group think also increased which could result in poor and dangerous decisions among group members. Within the article, Janis identifies eight different signs of groupthink and goes on to explain how the Challenger incident exemplifies them.

The first sign of groupthink as explained by Janis is misconception that the group is immune to disasters occurring. Janis states that NASA believed that, although legitimate concerns were brought up by engineering regarding the launch, the team dismissed the issues pointed out by engineering as a risk with every launch. The disregard and dismissal for the issues brought up by engineering demonstrated the groups misconception that because previous launches were successful, it was unlikely an issue would happen during the Challenger launch.

Janis states that another characteristic of groupthink is the groups belief that they are doing what is right. The group disregarded the very basic principles of safety within the mission and to protect the lives of those involved in the mission because NASA was so focused on the success of the Challenger mission. The engineers that worked with the NASA group felt that they needed to provide distinct evidence and data exemplifying the dangers of proceeding with the Challenger mission for them to be taken seriously. The warnings of the engineers were not taken seriously by NASA, resulting in the historic catastrophe.

The third characteristic of groupthink pointed out by Janis is a groups combined beliefs and decisions are correct, despite conflicting evidence. Janis explains within the article that despite documents presented to NASA staff regarding failure of the O-ring seal could result in catastrophe, the NASA group believed that the second O-ring would work without issue. NASA management explained that there was no objection regarding this rationale which contributed to the demise of the Challenger.

The fourth sign of groupthink is outsider stereotyping. Janis explains that were responsible for raising the flag to NASA regarding the O-ring issues belonged to Thiokol. Since Thiokol engineers were not within the NASA social group, the contributions and observations

raised by Thiokol engineers were ridiculed. Within the article, Janis explains in brevity the hostile environment which was brought on between Thiokol engineers and the NASA group.

Factor five which Janis states contributes to groupthink is the self-censorship of ideas. Janis explains within the article that despite Thiokol engineers' beliefs that the Challenger launch should be cancelled due to the cold temperatures, Thiokol engineers minimized their true beliefs, based on experience and knowledge, and simply stated the launch should at least be delayed until temperatures improved. Thiokol engineers knew that the existing conditions for the Challenger launch were dangerous. The Thiokol engineers minimized their beliefs by expressing that they could wait and see if temperatures to improve for launch when the Challenger launch should have been aborted. Thiokol engineers were still ridiculed by NASA employees for their expressed concerns.

The sixth characteristic of groupthink was the belief and guise of uniformity. Janis explains within the article that NASA group members portrayed to superiors that everyone agreed that the Challenger mission was safe to continue. Despite Thiokol engineers on several occasions stating observations which contradicted what was portrayed, the group within NASA led management to believe a uniform belief with a safe and successful launch.

Characteristic seven which exist in groupthink is direct pressure from other individuals to stay in order to dissuade thinking and beliefs that goes against the group. As expressed in the article, Thiokol engineers were pressured by management to change their original expressions of concern for launch of the Challenger to align with the NASA group. Janis explains that because the Challenger launch was delayed several times and that there was fear that NASA would lose future contract bids, pressure was placed from Thiokol's senior vice president pressured Thiokol engineers to change to align with the NASA Group.

The last trait apparent in groupthink is the self-appointing of “mindguards”. Mindguards, as explained by Janis are individuals which serve to protect someone from detrimental ideas that may not align with the group. Janis points out that management at NASA used mindguards to keep Jesse Moore from having to answer to conversations regarding the condition of the O-ring seals within the Challenger.

I think that this was a very interesting article and topic to learn about within WFED578. I think it is important for trainers to be aware and understand what groupthink it is and understand how it can affect teams and organizations. The article does a good job at illustrating several catastrophes related to groupthink, with the largest, resulting in the loss of human life. I think that after reading the article, organization development professionals will be able to identify and associate these traits with groupthink behavior. After reading this article, organization development individuals can also choose to read more information on Irving Janis, the father of groupthink theory. This article was my first look into groupthink theory. I think that one of the article’s weaknesses is that I believe that the verbiage or terminology used to express each one of the traits was a little difficult to comprehend, especially coming from by educational background that is not related to psychology in any way. I decided to purchase *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* by Irving Janis to expand my understanding of groupthink within organizations. There are no occasions I can think of currently where the author’s ideas will not work.