



## HOW TO AVOID A GROUPTHINK CULTURE

### Actions to reduce the risk of a groupthink culture

1. Recruit for contribution, not fit.

Identify the gender, backgrounds and skills in short supply and actively seek these when hiring.

2. Conduct interviews on entry, as well as exit.

Don't wait until people leave to get their insights. Seek the views of new hires when they're still fresh and objective.

3. Ask for problems, not solutions.

Set up a system to encourage flagging problems people have noted. Review them monthly and decide which ones are worth solving.

4. Welcome criticism, don't punish dissent.

Invite criticism and encourage people to communicate broadly, even if their ideas aren't popular.

5. Encourage inquiry, not advocacy.

Encourage people to arrive at meetings without a complete view at the ready. Stress that you don't want them to miss out on learning from other perspectives.

### *Do you remember the Polaroid camera?*

Edwin Land, the founder of Polaroid, was one of Steve Jobs's heroes. Land was a creative thinker with vision, flair and a passion for science. He is credited with a stream of inventions, beyond instant cameras. In fact, he held 535 patents – more than any American before him, except Thomas Edison.

But here's the irony. He led his company to greatness and also oversaw its fall. He was an innovative thinker who failed to instil innovative thinking in the company's culture. Despite all the awards the company won for technical excellence, it floundered when the digital age disrupted the market status quo. Polaroid is now cited as a text book case of groupthink. People in key roles failed to question the company's assumption that the so-called 'digital age' would prove to be no more than a fad.

The more the company faced challenges, the more Land surrounded himself with devoted followers who supported his views. It's true he could think differently – he just couldn't build a company that did that too. Dissenters were marginalised and supporters reinforced. Carl Yankowski, a VP at Polaroid, tried speaking out. He urged the company to get into electronic imaging technology and join the digital age. But his voice was consistently dismissed and, in the end, he left. The rest, as they say, is history.

Yankowski went on to Sony where he launched the Play Station and doubled revenues in four years. He then led the turnaround at Reebok and became CEO of Palm. But he looked back with regret at his Polaroid days, "I could never conquer the cultural paradigm prevalent in Polaroid." He cited the closed-minded culture where everyone stuck rigidly to the 'party line', even when the context had shifted.

### *How can you build a strong culture that welcomes dissent?*

What causes groupthink? What can leaders do to prevent it? Why do some cohesive cultures make bad decisions but others don't? How can you develop a strong culture where people genuinely commit to shared principles and a common purpose, without that culture becoming a cult?

First, it turns out cohesion isn't necessarily a bad thing. Early studies on cohesion argued that strong, cohesive groups foster the dangers of groupthink. But more recent researchers have pointed out that those 1970s studies examined only the bad decisions made by cohesive groups – such as the Bay of Pigs disaster during the Kennedy presidency in the US. But cohesive groups can make good choices, as well as bad ones. Cohesive groups which share underlying values can demonstrate enhanced communication skills and members can feel sufficiently secure to be able to challenge each other effectively. So, if

cohesion isn't always bad, let's look at some other aspects of organisational life.

### *What do you recruit for?*

Do you hire for skills or potential? In other words, do you look for people with a strong professional track record or do you look for bright people with great potential? It turns out, commitment delivers more than either skills or stars. Finding people who (all other things being equal) match your organisation's norms and values delivers better performance. Belonging to an organisation that provides work that is meaningful is known to help with attracting and retaining good people. For most of us, there is a desire to be part of something we sincerely believe in.

### *But organisations become more homogenous over time*

It seems this 'norming' effect is particularly noticeable in organisations with a strong commitment culture. Over time, a pressure to fit in emerges, at first imperceptibly and then more resolutely. The upside seems to be that commitment to shared values and goals supports performance in predictable contexts. But problems arise in more dynamic, shifting contexts, characterised by change and the competing demands of multiple stakeholders. In such contexts, strong commitment cultures can become insular. They're more likely to resist listening to the insights of those who think and see things differently. After all, consensus is comfortable. Difference and dissent can be uncomfortable for many people.

### *Dissenting voices are useful even when they're wrong!*

Diversity doesn't necessarily deliver greater insight. Someone can be different from those around them but perhaps have less expertise, for instance. It isn't diversity *per se* that matters. It is dissent. Even a minority view can stimulate divergent thinking. Dissent opens people's minds and forces them to search for evidence, consider options and reach better quality decisions as a result. Dissenters provoke innovation and provide value, even if, in the end, they turn out to be wrong.

But those dissenting voices do need to be heard, if they are to deliver value. Just signing up to the 'diversity is good' mantra won't give you what you want, if your culture doesn't support inquiry and challenge. In our UGM research, we've filmed problem-solving teams where, despite diversity of gender and culture, there was no questioning of the team's cognitive biases. We found that speaking up was seen as risky and often people lacked the skills to do so. You need inclusive leadership, if you want a culture where the best ideas win. What about where you work? Is there a culture committed to inquiry, challenge and dissent? Inclusion isn't always easy or comfortable. But it does deliver.