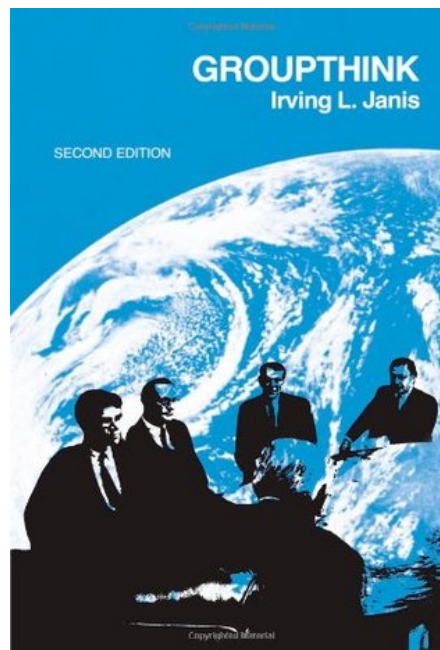




Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes

Irving L. Janis

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Author : Irving L. Janis

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From Reader Review Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes for online ebook

Alan says

Reread for applications to credit crisis.

Laura Lartigue says

I recommend this book for anyone who has or might have to work in a group situation...duh, every professional should pick up this book! It offers great insights into group dynamics, and had made me rethink many group work situations I have been in, and why some "dissonant" groups I've been in have in the end produced some really great stuff.

Rayrumtum says

A study of the phenomenon and dangers of Groupthink. The author assesses decision making in several policy fiascoes including Bay of Pigs, Pearl Harbor, Korean War, and VietNam to understand why that happened. As a controlled experiment, he looks at two reputed successes: the Marshall Plan and Cuban Missile Crisis. Subsequently he tests his model on Watergate. I enjoyed the case studies but felt that the book had considerable repetition. The intended audience is clearly an academic one and not to interest a general reader.

Aaron says

This and Tuchman's "March of Folly" should be required reading for all peoples of earth. The immense damage done by the faulty decision making laid out in both books can and should be avoided in the future. As a psychologist, Janis is also able to clarify the warning signs and dynamics that lead to dangerous decisions and how best to avoid them. Such a vital work.

Steven Peterson says

When you fill a room with smart, capable people, why do decisions sometimes go so wrong? Janis has one hypothesis: They can become victims of "groupthink." Groupthink refers to (Page 9) ". . .deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures." Janis describes the dynamic thus (Page 5):

"In studies of social clubs and other small groups, conformity pressures have frequently been observed. Whenever a member says something that sounds out of line with the group's norms, the other members at first increase their communication with the deviant. . .But if they fail after repeated attempts, the amount of communication they direct toward the deviant decreases markedly. The members begin to exclude him. . . .

[T:]he more cohesive the group and the more relevant the issues to the goals of the group, the greater is the inclination of the members to reject a nonconformist." In short, groups will tend to reinforce their own views and reject the words of those who disagree. In this case, members of the group become "conformist to some conformity."

Janis uses several case studies of what he considers to be "groupthink"--The Bay of Pigs invasion, the escalation of the Korean War in 1950, the attack on Pearl Harbor while the "fortress slept," and escalation of the Viet Nam War. In each instance, according to Janis, top decision-makers walled themselves off from dissenting voices and tended to reinforce one another's preexisting positions. In counterpoint are two successes, where groupthink did not triumph--the Cuban Missile Crisis and the development of the Marshall Plan.

The thesis may be a bit simplistic, but it is abundantly clear from this book and from what we see around us that groupthink can be problematic. I suspect that one could argue that decisions such as the following, which appear to be one poor decision on top of another, may be examples of this phenomenon at work: Jimmy Carter's failed effort at a rescue mission to liberate the hostages in Iran; the plan to attack Iraq without any serious planning for what would happen afterwards; the dividing up of the Middle East into artificial countries after World War I. Readers can try to think of other examples, too--whether in politics, in their workplace, or in any other location where group decision-making takes place.

What to do? Some point out Franklin Roosevelt's style of getting input from many different advisors, this hearing an array of voices (although in the run up to Pearl Harbor, one doesn't find much of this in the President's Inner Circle). In the last chapter, Janis provides a number of suggestions as to how decision-making can be structured so as to reduce the odds of groupthink occurring (e.g., don't have the leader express preferences until all voices have been heard; have the leader encourage questions to be raised and then pay attention to those who dissent and take their arguments seriously). These may not be earth shaking ideas, but they would, in Janis' view, at least reduce the odds of dire consequences coming from groupthink.

The first version of this book came out in the early 1970s, but it is still timely today.

Matthew says

This is fantastic. At first, it sounds (and is priced) like a bland textbook written by an academic. Actually, it's a set of stories about various White House successes and debacles, told from the perspective of a group psychologist. Janis pinpoints the moments where presidential advisers, on the verge of voicing their reservations about strategic decisions, were ultimately too timid to speak up. It gives a very unique perspective on executive decisionmaking and teaches the value of speaking your conscience, admitting your faults, and changing your mind when necessary.
