The Big Brother Watching Us Today:

Groupthink

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Published over seventy years ago, George Orwell's *1984* has proven itself to be one of the most influential novels of the past century. Characters live under the constant watch of "Big Brother," mass conformity pervades society, and individual thought has been outlawed—all of which may seem unimaginable to readers of the modern world. After all, the novel's slogans such as "ignorance is strength" indisputably contradict today's universal aphorism that "knowledge is power." Nevertheless, the dichotomy between these beliefs represents a prevailing question: how to achieve the optimal.

Society has long taught people to optimize collective knowledge by encouraging diverse opinions. This practice dates back centuries to Aristotle, who stated that "when there are many who contribute to the process of deliberation, each can bring his share of goodness." Scientific research has corroborated the theory. For instance, a 1973 experiment examined test-taking in individual and collaborative environments, concluding that due to information sharing, the size of a group is positively correlated with its overall performance.

To this end, the world has become further integrated and diverse. However, studies have shown that our intrinsic behavioral patterns are still becoming more homogeneous than they initially appear. Behind this pernicious trend is a decision-making phenomenon: groupthink. Introduced in 1971 by psychologist Irving Janis, groupthink is the paradoxical deterioration of collective thought following the addition of contributors to a decision-making process.

There are various antecedent conditions that create an environment susceptible to groupthink. These are typically driven by improper leadership. Two factors are external, or influenced by those uninvolved in the decision-making: the presence of prior outlined expectations and the requirement for decisions to be unanimous. While differing opinions must eventually converge in order to achieve any tangible outcome, either of these antecedents can heighten pressure on individuals in early stages. Naturally, group members attempt to minimize turbulence by conforming with others. This results in the loss of valuable insight and overall, a decrease in productivity.

Additionally, there are two internal factors that proliferate groupthink. One is a lack of impartiality. As one may expect, a leader's clear bias towards one decision decreases the likelihood that group members question it. Another factor is power motivation, or an open display of desire for recognition or success. Excessive power motivation pressures others to conform with the general consensus, or else risk being viewed as a nuisance.

In his 1972 book titled *Victims of Groupthink*, Janis enumerated, among others, three repercussions of the phenomenon. The first is collective rationalization. Namely, members discount warnings and perceive each other's concurrence as the rationale for a suboptimal decision. The second is self-censorship, which occurs when the impression of a finalized consensus leads to an individual's conscious decision to set aside diverging opinions. The third is selective bias when evaluating information. Individuals ignore evidence that the chosen course of action is flawed or feel justified in downplaying its risks.

Together, these three consequences promote higher levels of cohesiveness in the group. This may seem desirable. Many are familiar with the idiom "go with the flow," which encourages nonresistance to one's surroundings. In a workplace setting, people typically prefer atmospheres of amiability over hostility. However, as a study by the International Journal of Social Behavior and Personality concluded, cohesion is a double-edged sword. While it may quicken a decision-making process, it may also fuel a positive feedback loop of diminished critical thinking. These are not mutually exclusive, but the latter case appears more frequently. Instead of encouraging dissent by minority members, cohesion-associated norms exert uniformity pressures upon others. A cascade effect quickly takes hold: the false illusion of group invulnerability perpetuates such pressures, worsening groupthink.

So how is it that this paradox exists in some cases yet not in others? An analysis of marginal benefits and costs offers a general explanation. In the realm of decision-making, contributors are inputs and ideal decisions are outputs. The insight brought by each new member comprises the marginal benefit. However, as more people join, it becomes more likely that existing and new members' skills overlap. Thus, in line with the law of diminishing returns, these marginal benefits will decrease as the group grows. Meanwhile, the implications of groupthink constitute the marginal cost—for example, the heightened pressure put on others to refrain from dissenting as the group expands. When marginal costs eventually exceed marginal benefits, the decision becomes suboptimal. In other words, passing a certain threshold of contributors induces groupthink and becomes counterproductive.

As history has shown, groupthink can become catastrophic. An oft-cited example is the 2003 Iraqi invasion. The Bush administration exaggerated threat assessments of Iraq's nuclear arsenal, disregarding the blatant lack of evidence to substantiate their claims. Yet groupthink further proliferated across the country. News outlets rallied around government officials to convince the American public that preemptive offensive measures were paramount. Absent sufficient opposition, the United States government was given free rein to invade Iraq. The resulting violent conflict endures today, nearly two decades later.

Groupthink has further permeated the world of economic policymaking. For instance, in the last one hundred Federal Reserve decisions, there has only been a singular case where a governor dissented against the chairperson. A similar pattern appears among members of the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England. As David Blanchflower observed from his term on the committee, members rarely dissented for a multitude of issues including asset purchases and interest rate changes. Such decisions of policymakers can undoubtedly have widespread implications, spanning from investor confidence in the stock market to consumer behavior in the global economy.

Furthermore, studies indicate that within firms, flawed decision-making procedures lead to suboptimal outcomes. Corporations may pursue projects while underestimating the cost of capital, thereby decreasing revenue, productivity, and worker satisfaction. Such consequences are prolonged when groupthink leaves employees reluctant to question poor decisions. The notorious 2002 WorldCom accounting scandal was not simply an individual miscalculation. Instead, the passivity of the board of directors exacerbated the top executives' mismanagement. Meanwhile, employees felt pressured to avoid presenting unfavorable information to their superiors, so the company's asset inflation went largely unchecked. When the fraud was finally revealed by an internal audit committee, WorldCom's accounting errors had reached $11 billion. Tens of thousands of employees lost their jobs in the following years until the company's collapse in 2006. WorldCom's scandal remains one of the worst of all time.

Breaking the cycle of groupthink may prove difficult, but it is possible. Our society is dominated by a hierarchy of money and power, which means group leaders bear much of the responsibility for facilitating ideal decision-making procedures. Leaders, rather than punishing mediocre performance, should incentivize thinking beyond the conventional train of thought. This is especially true when the objective requires creativity, such as a search for innovative solutions. A series of experiments by Turner et al. in 1992 found that even under the same groupthink conditions, groups that are shown leniency earlier on end up producing markedly higher quality results. IDEO, an international design agency, is a paragon of collaborative innovation; its flat hierarchy and loose governance allow project teams a high degree of autonomy. In the absence of a rigid management structure, employees seek gratification in creative expression rather than in material rewards like promotions.

As a further step, leaders should incorporate the role of devil's advocate, responsible for challenging the assumptions of the group. Systematically rotating members into the position may help individuals overcome the fear of dissenting, simultaneously giving everyone the opportunity to voice their concerns. When contributors pay special attention to discourse, the group's focus shifts from unanimous decisions to quality ones instead.

In the meantime, governments, firms, and markets can mitigate the repercussions of poorly made decisions. Contributors should regularly evaluate previous decisions with a focus on those that were noticeably quick or uncontested. Audit committees, such as the one that ultimately uncovered WorldCom's scandal, can oversee various stages of decision-making processes. Thus, making efforts to escape the echo chamber of groupthink helps to prevent a mistake from prolonging and becoming a crisis.

The key takeaway is easier said than done, yet simple: be brave and receptive. In a world of competition and social comparison, we naturally wish to avoid ostracization. This translates into the tendency to silence ourselves even at the cost of suppressing rational judgment. However, it is those who deviate from intrinsic norms that have historically become catalysts for growth and change. Whether it be in a dimly lit conference meeting or under the flashing lights of the world stage, the courage to be resolute can only benefit all of society.

After all, our world is unlike that of the novel *1984*. We have no obligation to be governed by overpowering conformity pressures, just as there is little reason to allow groupthink to dictate us. In reality, the existence of "Big Brother" is ostensible in both *1984* and our modern society. While groupthink may seem to come close, there is no “Big Brother” watching our decisions—only our perception of him.

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