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WHEN CONSENSUS BECOMES A RISK: GROUPTHINK, DECISION QUALITY AND PROJECT EXECUTION

Abstract

Organisations frequently rely on groups to make decisions that individuals cannot or should not make alone. Complex projects require the integration of technical expertise, financial analysis, operational knowledge, stakeholder perspectives and strategic judgement. Yet the presence of multiple people does not automatically produce better decisions. Under certain conditions, groups can become excessively concerned with maintaining agreement, suppressing dissent and protecting an emerging consensus. This phenomenon is commonly described as *groupthink*.

Since Irving Janis introduced the concept, groupthink has become one of the most influential explanations of defective group decision-making. The theory proposes that highly cohesive groups operating under conditions such as structural insulation, directive leadership and stress may develop a strong concurrence-seeking tendency, producing symptoms such as self-censorship, pressure on dissenters and an illusion of unanimity (Janis, 1972, 1982). However, subsequent research has questioned the theoretical coherence and empirical robustness of the original model. Reviews by Aldag and Fuller (1993) and Esser (1998), for example, found that evidence for the full groupthink model was less conclusive than its widespread use in management literature might suggest.

More recent project research nevertheless provides evidence that concurrence-seeking behaviour can negatively affect project performance under particular conditions. Riccobono, Bruccoleri and Größler (2016), for instance, found such an effect in a longitudinal study of business-process-reengineering projects.

This literature review therefore approaches groupthink not as an inevitable consequence of cohesion or consensus, but as a potential failure mode in collective decision-making. It examines the mechanisms through which agreement can become dysfunctional, the organisational conditions that make dissent less likely, the relationship between groupthink and project execution, and the organisational practices that can preserve constructive disagreement without undermining coordination.

Keywords: groupthink, group decision-making, organisational behaviour, project management, decision quality, psychological safety, dissent, leadership, project governance, collective decision-making

1. Introduction

Organisations increasingly depend on collective decision-making. Strategic investments, technology choices, infrastructure projects, organisational transformations and market-entry decisions frequently involve teams rather than individual decision-makers. The rationale is straightforward: complex decisions require multiple forms of expertise and cannot always be evaluated adequately from a single perspective.

Yet the existence of a group creates a second problem. Individuals do not enter collective decision-making as independent analytical units. They interact with one another. They observe who supports which position, infer what others consider acceptable, respond to authority and reputation, and adjust what they say according to the social consequences of disagreement.

The group can consequently become more than a mechanism for aggregating information. It can become a mechanism for shaping what information is expressed in the first place.

This distinction is central to groupthink.

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The American Psychological Association defines groupthink as a strong concurrence-seeking tendency that interferes with effective group decision-making. Its recognised symptoms include apparent unanimity, self-censorship, pressure on dissenters and non-optimal decision strategies (APA, 2023).

The concept was developed by Irving Janis from analyses of high-profile policy decisions. Janis argued that cohesive groups facing stressful decisions could prioritise concurrence over critical evaluation, leading members to suppress doubts and discount alternatives (Janis, 1972, 1982).

The concept became highly influential because it offered an intuitive explanation for an otherwise puzzling organisational phenomenon: how intelligent and experienced people can collectively reach decisions that appear poorly considered in retrospect.

However, the popularity of the concept has sometimes exceeded the strength of the evidence supporting its original formulation. Aldag and Fuller (1993) concluded that research did not provide convincing support either for the validity of groupthink as originally formulated or for the proposition that its characteristic conditions necessarily produced negative outcomes. Esser's (1998) subsequent review similarly concluded that groupthink research had considerable heuristic value but identified substantial theoretical and methodological issues.

The question is therefore not simply whether an organisation "has groupthink". A more useful question is:

Under what conditions does the pursuit of consensus reduce the quality of collective decision-making?

This distinction matters particularly in projects. Projects operate under uncertainty, time pressure, incomplete information and interdependent decisions. They also frequently involve temporary teams in which participants must establish working relationships quickly. A premature consensus can therefore become embedded in a project before sufficient alternatives, risks or contradictory evidence have been examined.

The problem is not disagreement versus agreement. The problem is whether a group has genuinely examined alternatives before reaching agreement.

2. From Cohesion to Concurrence-Seeking

Janis's original formulation placed group cohesion near the centre of the groupthink model. Cohesive groups, according to the theory, may develop strong pressures to maintain harmony, particularly when the group is insulated from external perspectives and led by a directive decision-maker.

This proposition is more subtle than the common interpretation that "close teams make bad decisions". Cohesion can produce substantial benefits. Trust, cooperation and interpersonal commitment can improve coordination and reduce transaction costs within teams.

The risk emerges when social cohesion becomes coupled with a strong motivation to preserve agreement.

In such circumstances, disagreement can acquire a social cost. A team member who challenges an emerging consensus may be perceived as obstructive, disloyal, pessimistic or insufficiently committed to the project. Other members may consequently moderate their own concerns before expressing them.

The resulting decision can appear unanimous while concealing significant private disagreement.

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This is why the *illusion of unanimity* is particularly important. Research on the detection of groupthink has attempted to operationalise this phenomenon through observable interaction patterns rather than treating it simply as an invisible psychological state (Cline, 1990).

The distinction between genuine consensus and apparent consensus is fundamental.

Genuine consensus means that alternatives have been considered, objections have been examined and participants converge after evaluating the available evidence.

Apparent consensus means that disagreement exists but is not expressed, explored or incorporated into the decision.

The two can produce identical meeting minutes:

"The team agreed to proceed."

The underlying decision process, however, may be completely different.

3. The Scientific Debate Around Groupthink

The intellectual history of groupthink is important because the concept is sometimes presented with greater certainty than the evidence permits.

Aldag and Fuller (1993) conducted a major reappraisal of the literature and argued that the empirical evidence did not convincingly establish Janis's complete causal model. They proposed a broader model of group problem-solving that incorporated antecedent conditions, group characteristics, decision processes and outcomes rather than assuming a single groupthink mechanism.

Fuller and Aldag (1998) went further, arguing that the groupthink literature had sometimes treated the concept as established despite limited empirical support.

Other research has provided more supportive evidence. Laboratory research demonstrated that some of the proposed groupthink dynamics could be experimentally examined, while research involving organisational teams has found relationships between decision processes and outcomes that are consistent with elements of Janis's framework (Courtright, 1978; Peterson et al., 1998).

This mixed evidence suggests that groupthink is better understood as a **family of related group decision processes** rather than as a single deterministic syndrome.

The distinction matters for organisational practice. If groupthink were deterministic, the solution would simply be to prevent cohesion, avoid strong leadership or increase group diversity. The evidence does not support such simplistic prescriptions.

The more defensible conclusion is that certain combinations of social pressure, leadership behaviour, decision structure, information asymmetry and environmental stress can make collective decisions vulnerable to premature convergence.

4. The Mechanism: How Consensus Can Reduce Decision Quality

The most important contribution of groupthink theory may therefore be its description of the mechanisms through which dissent can disappear.

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The first mechanism is **self-censorship**. Individuals with reservations may decide not to express them because they perceive the dominant position as already established.

The second is **social pressure**. Once a majority position becomes visible, dissent can become increasingly costly. The individual is no longer evaluating only the merits of an alternative; they are also evaluating the consequences of challenging colleagues.

The third is **shared rationalisation**. Once the group has invested psychologically or materially in a preferred option, information supporting the option can receive greater attention than information challenging it.

The fourth is **information convergence**. Groups can progressively discuss information that members already share while failing to surface unique information held by individual participants.

This last mechanism is especially important in complex projects.

Suppose a project team contains a financial specialist, an engineer, a local-market specialist and a legal expert. Each possesses information that the others do not. A productive decision process should cause these different information sets to be brought into the discussion.

If the group instead quickly converges around a preferred solution, members may disproportionately discuss information that confirms the emerging decision. The group then possesses more expertise than any individual but fails to use the full information available within the group.

Group decision-making consequently does not automatically improve information quality. It depends on the process through which information is surfaced, challenged and integrated.

5. Groupthink and Project Decisions

Projects provide a particularly relevant environment for studying these dynamics.

A systematic review by Stingl and Geraldi (2017) identifies behavioural decision-making as an important area of project research and notes that actual project decision behaviour frequently deviates from the rational models implied by formal project-management processes. Their review places groupthink alongside other behavioural mechanisms including escalation of commitment, optimism bias, risk-perception differences and sensemaking.

This is significant because project governance often assumes that formal decision structures will produce rational decisions.

A project may have a steering committee, risk register, stage-gate process, business case and approval matrix. Yet these mechanisms only work if participants are willing to challenge assumptions and introduce contradictory information.

A risk register does not protect a project if nobody wants to record a politically inconvenient risk.

A steering committee does not create independent oversight if all members have already aligned around the project sponsor's preferred solution.

A stage gate does not constitute genuine challenge if passing the gate has become an organisational expectation.

The problem is therefore not necessarily the absence of governance. It can be the social dynamics operating *inside* governance mechanisms.

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Research specifically examining project performance provides empirical support for this concern. Riccobono, Bruccoleri and Gröbler (2016) studied 18 business-process-reengineering projects involving 18 teams and 71 MBA participants in a longitudinal controlled field experiment. Their findings indicated that groupthink concurrence-seeking behaviour negatively affected project performance. They also found that perceived control, conscientiousness and interpersonal evaluation could mitigate the negative effect, while confidence and previous relationships could amplify it.

The study is not sufficient to establish a universal causal law across all project environments. Its participants and project setting impose clear limits on generalisation. Nevertheless, it demonstrates that concurrence-seeking can be operationalised and associated with project outcomes under controlled conditions.

This is an important evolution beyond the original case-based formulation of groupthink.

6. Leadership: When Authority Shapes What Can Be Said

Leadership is one of the most important variables in collective decision-making because leaders influence both the content of decisions and the social conditions under which information is expressed.

A directive leader can unintentionally narrow the decision space. Once the leader communicates a preferred solution early in the process, other participants may interpret the meeting as an exercise in validation rather than exploration.

The issue is not that leaders should avoid having opinions. Leaders possess expertise, accountability and legitimate decision rights. The issue is the timing and manner in which those preferences enter the deliberation.

A leader who states a preferred solution before asking for independent assessments may change the informational environment of the meeting.

Participants now know what the person with the greatest authority wants.

This can affect what they choose to say.

The effect can be particularly strong where organisational hierarchy is pronounced or where participants depend on the leader for promotion, project allocation or future opportunities.

Consequently, decision quality can depend on whether leaders create a distinction between **expressing a position** and **closing the discussion**.

A leader can say:

"This is my current view. Before we discuss implementation, I want each of you to identify the strongest argument against it."

Such a structure does not eliminate hierarchy. Instead, it temporarily protects the analytical function of dissent.

7. Psychological Safety: The Organisational Infrastructure of Dissent

The concept of psychological safety provides an important complementary perspective.

Edmondson (1999) defines team psychological safety as a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. In a study of 51 work teams, psychological safety was associated with learning behaviour, which in turn mediated team performance.

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This concept is directly relevant to groupthink because dissent is an interpersonal risk.

A person who says "I think this project assumption is wrong" is not merely transmitting information. They are challenging a proposition that may have been developed by colleagues, endorsed by a senior manager or embedded in a strategic commitment.

If the organisational environment punishes such challenges, the rational individual may remain silent.

Psychological safety therefore does not mean creating an environment in which everyone agrees or where criticism disappears. Its function is almost the opposite: it creates conditions in which disagreement can be expressed without disproportionate interpersonal consequences.

This distinction is particularly important because organisations sometimes confuse harmony with psychological safety.

A harmonious meeting may indicate strong trust.

It may also indicate that nobody feels safe enough to disagree.

The observable behaviour is identical. The underlying process is not.

8. The Paradox of Expertise

Expertise presents another potential groupthink problem.

Expert groups can make better decisions because they possess specialised knowledge. Yet expertise can also increase confidence in the group's existing mental model.

A team composed exclusively of highly experienced specialists may therefore become less sensitive to information outside its established frame of reference.

This does not mean expertise causes groupthink. Rather, expertise can reinforce an existing consensus when the group lacks mechanisms for external challenge.

This is particularly relevant in technically complex projects.

An engineering team may be highly capable of determining whether a system can be built while being less capable of identifying whether the proposed system will be accepted by users.

A financial team may determine whether a project satisfies a financial model while overlooking institutional constraints.

A market-development team may identify commercial demand while underestimating regulatory or political barriers.

The problem is not insufficient expertise. It is **incomplete expertise combined with excessive confidence in the existing frame**.

This is one reason multidisciplinary project teams are potentially valuable. However, diversity alone does not guarantee better decisions. A 2024 meta-analysis examining demographic diversity and team processes found no overall effect of demographic diversity on information-elaboration processes, while showing that contextual factors influence whether diversity produces information benefits or social-categorisation effects (Traylor et al., 2024).

Diversity therefore creates *potential* for broader information processing. Organisational processes determine whether that potential is realised.

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9. Groupthink Is Not the Same as Consensus

One of the most important conceptual distinctions is between **consensus** and **concurrence-seeking**.

Consensus is an outcome.

Groupthink is a process.

A group may legitimately reach unanimous agreement because the evidence strongly supports one option. Unanimity alone therefore cannot demonstrate groupthink.

Similarly, disagreement does not automatically imply good decision-making. A group can engage in extensive conflict without producing better analysis.

The relevant question is whether the group has adequately examined the decision space.

A robust decision process should therefore distinguish between:

agreement after challenge

and

agreement before challenge.

This distinction has implications for project governance. The objective should not be to maximise dissent. It should be to ensure that important alternatives, assumptions, uncertainties and risks have an opportunity to be examined before the decision becomes difficult to reverse.

This is why structured dissent can be more valuable than simply encouraging people to "speak up".

10. Designing Dissent into the Decision Process

Research on decision-making techniques provides evidence that structured disagreement can improve decision quality.

Schwenk's (1990) meta-analysis examined *devil's advocacy* and *dialectical inquiry*, two approaches designed to introduce cognitive conflict into decision processes. The analysis found that devil's advocacy was more effective than a simple expert-based approach overall, although neither technique consistently dominated across all conditions.

This suggests that disagreement can be deliberately incorporated into decision architecture.

The practical implication is not that every project meeting should become adversarial. Rather, critical challenge can be separated from personal disagreement.

A project team can assign one participant or subgroup to test the preferred solution.

It can require an explicit discussion of disconfirming evidence.

It can ask participants to independently formulate assessments before seeing the group's position.

It can invite an external expert to challenge assumptions.

It can separate the person proposing an option from the person responsible for testing it.

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These mechanisms change the social meaning of disagreement. Instead of asking an individual to personally oppose the group, the organisation creates a formal role for critical examination.

The distinction is powerful.

If dissent depends entirely on individual courage, the organisation has outsourced decision quality to personality.

If dissent is incorporated into the process, critical examination becomes part of governance.

11. Groupthink and the Front End of Projects

The consequences of groupthink may be particularly severe during the early stages of a project.

At project initiation, information is incomplete and uncertainty is high. Teams must define the problem, identify options, estimate costs, assess stakeholders and determine whether the opportunity is worth pursuing.

These decisions establish the assumptions on which later stages depend.

Once significant resources have been committed, challenging the original assumptions becomes increasingly difficult. Psychological commitment, sunk costs, organisational reputation and stakeholder expectations can all reinforce the original direction.

This creates a potential feedback loop:

initial consensus → resource commitment → organisational commitment → reduced willingness to challenge → stronger consensus.

The danger is therefore not simply that a group makes a bad decision.

The greater danger is that the group makes an early decision that becomes progressively harder to question.

Research on organisational decision-making has documented related escalation effects. Moon et al. (2003), for example, found that the structure of group decision processes affected escalation of commitment in resource-allocation decisions.

This connects groupthink with a broader behavioural phenomenon in projects: the tendency for decisions made under uncertainty to become increasingly difficult to reverse once resources and identities have become attached to them.

12. Groupthink in Temporary and Cross-Organisational Projects

Projects are also distinctive because many project teams are temporary organisations.

Participants may come from different companies, disciplines or institutional environments. They may have different incentives, reporting structures and definitions of success.

This can create two opposing risks.

The first is fragmentation: stakeholders fail to develop enough shared understanding to coordinate effectively.

The second is premature convergence: stakeholders develop a shared narrative too quickly because maintaining the coalition is considered more important than challenging its assumptions.

The second risk can be particularly difficult to identify because it may appear as successful stakeholder alignment.

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A project team that says "everyone is aligned" may indeed have achieved meaningful consensus.

But it may also have achieved alignment by excluding uncomfortable information.

The distinction becomes particularly relevant in complex projects involving public and private stakeholders. Different actors may have different definitions of project success, different risk tolerances and different institutional responsibilities. Suppressing these differences does not eliminate them. It can simply delay their emergence until they become more expensive to resolve.

Behavioural decision-making research in projects therefore increasingly treats decisions as contextual and socially embedded rather than purely analytical processes (Stingl and Geraldi, 2017).

13. Beyond "Avoiding Groupthink"

The conventional management response to groupthink is often framed as prevention: identify the symptoms and stop the group from falling into the trap.

A more useful organisational approach is to design systems in which premature consensus is less likely to survive unnoticed.

This involves treating decision quality as a property of the **process**, rather than the personality of individual decision-makers.

A robust process creates opportunities for independent assessment before collective discussion. It distinguishes evidence from assumptions. It makes uncertainty explicit. It gives dissent a legitimate role. It prevents the most senior participant from automatically becoming the first and strongest voice. It revisits major assumptions when new information appears. It creates mechanisms for external challenge when the internal group becomes too homogeneous.

The objective is not permanent disagreement.

The objective is **informed convergence**.

This distinction is particularly important for project managers. Effective project governance requires decisions to be made. Excessive deliberation can itself become dysfunctional. A project cannot remain permanently in analysis.

The challenge is therefore to establish an appropriate sequence:

independent thinking → information exchange → challenge → synthesis → decision → review.

When the sequence becomes:

leader preference → group alignment → confirmation → decision,

the organisation may be structurally encouraging concurrence before analysis.

14. A Broader Interpretation: Groupthink as an Information Problem

The literature ultimately suggests that groupthink can be interpreted not simply as a psychological phenomenon but as an **information-governance problem**.

Every organisation possesses more information than its decision-makers can simultaneously process. The challenge is therefore not merely to gather information but to ensure that relevant information reaches the decision process.

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Groupthink becomes particularly problematic when social dynamics determine which information is allowed into the decision.

The most dangerous information is not necessarily the information nobody possesses.

It can be information that **someone possesses but does not express**.

This reframes the role of leadership, project governance and organisational culture.

A project team does not necessarily need more meetings, more reports or more data. It may need better mechanisms for ensuring that contradictory knowledge reaches the people making the decision.

The question becomes:

What information exists outside the current consensus, who possesses it, and what would make them willing to bring it into the room?

This question connects groupthink with stakeholder management, organisational design and project execution.

15. Conclusion

Groupthink remains one of the most recognisable concepts in organisational decision-making, but its scientific status is more nuanced than its popular use suggests. The original Janis model has faced substantial theoretical and empirical criticism, and subsequent research has not established a simple causal relationship between group cohesion, groupthink symptoms and poor outcomes.

Nevertheless, the underlying organisational problem remains highly relevant.

Groups can become more concerned with maintaining agreement than testing assumptions. Individuals can withhold information because disagreement carries social or hierarchical costs. Leaders can unintentionally narrow the decision space by signalling preferred answers too early. Teams can mistake cohesion for psychological safety and unanimity for analytical robustness.

Project environments make these dynamics particularly consequential because decisions are often made under uncertainty, time pressure and incomplete information. Early consensus can become embedded in business cases, budgets, schedules and stakeholder commitments, making later correction increasingly costly.

The appropriate response is therefore not to eliminate consensus, cohesion or strong leadership. It is to create decision processes in which **consensus is earned through challenge rather than produced through silence**.

For organisations and project teams, the relevant capability is not simply the ability to agree.

It is the ability to **disagree productively before it becomes expensive not to**.

A well-functioning project does not require everyone to think alike. It requires enough independent thinking to ensure that the group knows what it is agreeing to—and what it may be missing.

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