

Groupthink

The psychologist Irving Janis has coined the term *groupthink* to refer to the tendency of cohesive groups to get increasingly out of touch with reality. Janis studied how numerous political leaders and their close advisors made decisions that were spectacularly out of touch with reality, including (1) the Japanese decision to attack the United States at Pearl Harbor, (2) President Truman's decision to escalate the Korean War, (3) President Kennedy's decision to invade Cuba at the Bay of Pigs, (4) President Johnson's decision to escalate the Vietnam War, and (5) President Nixon's decision to launch a cover-up of the Watergate break-in. Janis found that "the social pressures that develop in cohesive groups," particularly the desire "to preserve friendly intragroup relations," lead such groups to develop an "us-versus-them" mentality that gradually distorts their ability to evaluate their situation realistically. Symptoms of such groupthink include an "illusion of the group's invulnerability"; a "belief in the inherent morality of the group" and its activities; "collective rationalization" that discounts any outside information that might conflict with the group's assumptions; "stereotypes" of outsiders and critics as weak, stupid, or evil; "direct pressure on dissenters"

within the group; "self-censorship" that leads each member to discount his or her own doubts about the group's beliefs and assumptions; the "illusion of unanimity" within the group; and the emergence of "self-appointed mind-guards" who protect the group from any contrary outside information that might shatter their comfortable assumptions.

QUESTIONS

1. What aspects of Plato's Myth of the Cave can be interpreted as groupthink?
2. Do you see any of the symptoms of groupthink in any groups within our society? In any of the groups to which you belong?
3. Is it possible for an entire nation or society to suffer from groupthink? For the entire human race? Explain your answers.
4. What are the cures, if any, for groupthink? Can such cures work in "the Cave"?

Source: I. L. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972).