



The New Groupthink: The Problem with Teams

Teamwork demands shared responsibility, but it also demands individual contributions. It fails if team members shelter behind the consensus.
~ Robert Heller, Founding Editor, *Management Today*

A recent survey found that 91 percent of high-level managers believe teams are the key to success. But the evidence doesn't always support this assertion. Many teamwork-related problems remain hidden from view.

Every team thinks it does its best work when the stakes are highest. On the contrary, pressures to perform drive people toward safe solutions that are justifiable, rather than innovative.

Corporations increasingly organize workforces into teams, a practice that gained popularity in the '90s. By 2000, roughly half of all U.S. organizations used teams; today, virtually all do.

Some teams work together from remote locations, relying on technical communication aids, such as web conferencing and email. Others demand a tremendous amount of face-to-face interaction, including team-building retreats, shared online calendars, meetings and physical workspaces that afford little privacy.

"Innovation – the heart of the knowledge economy – is fundamentally social," writes prominent journalist Malcolm Gladwell.

Management expert Peter Drucker, who coined the term "knowledge worker," points out that while people have always worked in tandem, "teams become the work unit rather than the individual himself" in knowledge work.

Working in teams has definite advantages:

- Improved information-sharing
- Better decisions, products and services

A Message from Nancy...

I have a couple of questions to ask you:

1. Is your business as successful as you think it should be?
2. Are you and your team able to pinpoint the solutions necessary to create positive changes to get where you need to go?



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There are, however, several barriers to achieving great work from teams:

- Some individuals are faster (or better) on key tasks.
- Developing and maintaining teams can prove costly.
- Some individuals do less work, relying on others to complete assigned tasks.

Most corporate leaders nonetheless believe the benefits of teamwork far outweigh the costs.

The Hidden Problem

There are also more insidious disadvantages to teamwork, notes Professor Heidi K. Gardner in her April 2012 *Harvard Business Review* article, “Coming Through When It Matters Most.”

“Just when teams most need to draw on the full range of their members’ knowledge to produce the high-quality, uniquely suitable outcomes they started out to deliver, they instead begin to revert to the tried and true,” she writes.

Under pressure, teams gravitate toward safe ground. While most start out highly engaged, inviting input from everyone, members become risk-averse as they push toward project completion. They maneuver toward consensus in a way that blocks paths to critical information.

This process occurs through subtle language cues that warn team members to avoid delays. Team leaders use their positional power to foster harmony and swift decision-making. Although discussions still appear to be open, in reality there’s an effort to move the project along by getting everyone to agree on the optimal course.

If this sounds like “groupthink,” it is. But it’s more nuanced and subtle—hence, more dangerous.

Groupthink

Groupthink, originally researched by Yale University psychologist Irving Janis, is a psychological phenomenon that occurs within groups. It’s a mode of thinking that occurs when a decision-making group’s desire for harmony overrides its realistic appraisal of alternatives.

Group members try to minimize conflict and reach a consensus, without critically evaluating additional ideas or viewpoints. Factors like group cohesiveness and situational context help determine whether groupthink will contaminate the decision-making process.

The negative cost cost of groupthink is loss of individual creativity, uniqueness and independent thinking. Organizationally, these consequences lead to costly errors in product launches, service policies and competitive strategies.

The New Groupthink

In “The Rise of the New Groupthink” (*The New York Times*, Jan.13, 2012), corporate attorney and author Susan Cain explains:

Solitude is out of fashion. Our companies, our schools and our culture are in thrall to an idea I call the New Groupthink, which holds that creativity and achievement come from an oddly gregarious place. Most of us now work in teams, in offices without walls, for managers who prize people skills above all. Lone geniuses are out. Collaboration is in.

There’s a problem with the view that all work should be conducted by teams. Research strongly suggests that people are more creative when they enjoy privacy and freedom from interruption. As Cain writes:

Anyone who has ever needed noise-canceling headphones in her own office or marked an online calendar with a fake meeting in order to escape yet another real one knows what I’m talking about.

It’s one thing when each member works autonomously on his piece of the puzzle; it’s another to be corralled into endless meetings or conference calls conducted in offices that afford no respite from coworkers’ conversations or gazes.

The False Benefits of Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a creative technique through which group members form solutions to specific problems by spontaneously shouting out ideas, without censoring themselves or criticizing others. The term was popularized by marketing expert Alex Faickney Osborn in the 1953 book *Applied Imagination*.

But decades of research show that individuals almost always perform better than groups in both quality and quantity, and performance worsens as group size increases. Groups of nine generate fewer and poorer ideas compared to groups of six, which function worse than groups of four.

The “evidence from science suggests that businesspeople must be insane to use brainstorming groups,” writes organizational psychologist Adrian Furnham. “If you have talented and motivated people, they should be encouraged to work alone when creativity or efficiency is the highest priority.”

The one exception is online brainstorming. When properly managed, groups that brainstorm online perform better than individuals—and the larger the group, the better it performs. The same holds true for academic research: Professors who collaborate electronically tend to produce more influential research.

What we fail to realize is that participating in an online working group is a form of solitude unto itself. Nevertheless, brainstorming continues to be a popular method within organizations.

Participants in brainstorming sessions usually believe their group performed much better than it actually did. Brainstorming makes people feel attached, but social glue is far different from genuine creativity.

Psychologists usually offer three explanations for the failure of group brainstorming:

1. **Social loafing.** Some individuals sit back and let others do all the work.
2. **Production blocking.** Only one person can talk or produce an idea at a time, so the others are forced to sit passively.
3. **Evaluation apprehension.** Even when group members agree to welcome all ideas, people fear they’ll look stupid in front of their peers.

Introverts vs. Extroverts

One’s attraction to working in social groups may be culturally influenced. In the United States, for example, we tend to idealize charismatic extroverts. (Think celebrities and media-savvy CEOs.) Because extroverts usually talk the most (and often the loudest), their ideas are heard and often implemented.

Psychologists agree that introverts and extroverts work differently. Extroverts tend to tackle assignments quickly. They make fast and sometimes rash decisions. They are comfortable with multitasking and risk-taking.

Introverts often work more slowly and deliberately. They prefer to focus on one task at a time, and they dislike interruptions and noisy environments that interfere with concentration.



Extroverts think out loud and on their feet; they prefer talking to listening and are comfortable with conflict, but not with solitude.

Introverts, in contrast, may have strong social skills and enjoy some parties and business meetings, but after a while they wish they were at home with a good book. They prefer to devote their social energies to close friends, colleagues and family. They listen more than they talk, think before they speak and often express themselves better in writing than in conversation. They tend to dislike conflict.

Leaders must understand each team member’s strengths and temperament. The most effective teams are composed of a healthy mix of introverts and extroverts.

Evaluate Your Workspaces

More than 70 percent of today’s employees work in open office spaces. The amount of space per employee shrank from 500 square feet in the 1970s to 200 square feet in 2010.

Excessive stimulation seems to impede learning, as do interruptions. The simple act of being interrupted is one of the greatest barriers to productivity.

Create office settings that are more conducive to getting work done. People should be free to circulate and interact, yet also free to disappear into their own private workspaces.

Some companies are starting to understand the value of silence and solitude by creating open plans that offer a mix of solo workspaces, quiet zones and casual meeting areas. Flextime and work-from-home schedules offer other ways to encourage focus and concentration.

Better Ways to Work in Teams

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has. ~ Anthropologist Margaret Mead

Teams are not inherently bad, but they can be refined and adjusted to provide better results. The way forward is not to stop collaborating, but to do it better.

- To guard against groupthink, use checklists or ask certain team members to play devil's advocates.
- If you need to stimulate creativity, ask people to come up with ideas alone before sharing them with the team. If you seek the wisdom of the crowd, gather it electronically or in writing first.
- Face-to-face contact is important because it builds trust, but group dynamics contain unavoidable impediments to creative thinking. Don't mistake assertiveness or eloquence for good ideas.



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