GUIDELINES

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from
WILD GUYde Adventures, LLC

Groupthink in Outdoor Adventure Settings

Definition: "*A deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures.*" (Janis, 1972, 9). From this premise, Janis identified 8 symptoms of groupthink:

1. Illusion of invulnerability
2. Collective rationalization
3. Belief in inherent morality
4. Stereotyped views of out-groups
5. Direct pressures on dissenters
6. Self censorship
7. Illusion of unanimity
8. Self-appointed "mind-guards"

A Case in Point: "*A legendary accident in Alaska involved a ten-man team of British soldiers, who set out to climb 20,320 foot Mount McKinley on June 4, 1998. At their mandatory briefing, the rangers at Talkeetna recommended the easiest route, called the West Buttress, because some of the team members had very little experience with the glacier crossings and ice climbing that would be necessary on other routes. Nevertheless, the army team ignored the advice and decided to climb the West Rib, which is Grade 4. As they proceeded in three rope teams, one man fell, dragging the others on his rope down with him. All three people on the rope were injured, but one, Steve Brown, suffered head injuries, went into shock, and became delirious. In all, the group split up a total of seven times, as various members tried to climb down or rescue one another. The expedition descended into chaos as several others fell and were injured. The final rescue wasn't completed until June 22, nearly three weeks after the soldiers had set out, by which time two climbers had spent four nights partially exposed in bivouac bags during bad weather. ... The military uses groupness deliberately to create strong bonds among its members from the squad level right up through the entire organization.*

Groupness is used specifically to reinforce self-confidence in the group's abilities. That can-do attitude, along with the tendency to reject information from the outside, no doubt contributed to the British team's decisions throughout the incident, from selecting the harder route to attempting various descending routes, despite having no practical knowledge of them." (Gonzales, 2008, 30)

An Additional Variable – the Leader: Ahlfinger and Esser (2001) noted the presence on many outings of "promotional leaders" (leaders who promote their own preferred solutions, or strongly advocate one particular course of action). They found that groups with this kind of leader produce more symptoms of groupthink, discuss fewer facts, reach decisions more quickly, and hence practice poorer decision-making processes and produce lower quality decisions than groups with non-promotional leaders.

Taken together, I would offer a few observations:

1. Reinforcing group norms is not just a matter of a few exerting their will on a group – it is about reinforcing group identity – something, incidentally, that we tend to give considerable time and attention to early on in our program groups and expeditions. Are we sowing the seeds of destructive decision-making?
2. "Tightly coupled to a weak chain." "*Any mountaineering party can only accomplish what its weakest member is capable of*" (Fredston, Fesler, and Tremper, 2000, 4). By reinforcing group identity, we have more tightly coupled ourselves to the weak link in the chain, making escape even more difficult.
3. Let's not forget about "risk shift" – that well researched phenomenon in which being in a group impels people to take riskier decisions than when they are alone.

Some Thoughts for Leading beyond Groupthink: What are some strategies that we as outdoor leaders can employ to bring our groups to better decisions, and ultimately, to provide safer and more rewarding outdoor experiences?

1. *Group formation*: Instead of fashioning a group identity based upon our ability to achieve --- to overcome the obstacles we will encounter, early on, we should fashion an identity based upon our responsiveness, flexibility, willingness to listen, and group ability to learn.
2. *Personal and group relationships*: Edmondson's (2003) study of surgical teams found that higher performing teams intentionally:
   - Fostered inclusiveness; encouraged active participation by each team member.
   - Minimized power differences; emphasized teaming over individual ability.
   - Had leaders who communicated humility; *the leader can still learn*.
3. *Diagnosing Toxic Goals:* Some characteristics of these are:
   - Narrowly defined goal; only one measure of success.
   - Public expectation; elevating the stakes
   - Face-saving behavior; maintaining status; avoiding admitting something embarrassing
   - Idealized future; fulfillment; the ultimate achievement; success will fill in personal gaps
   - Goal-driven justification; "*I can endure present hardships because once I achieve my goal, these hardships will go away…*" (Kayes, 2006, 75)
   - Achieving destiny; my only meaning in life
4. *Fostering multiple goals:* balancing the importance of making the summit with the necessity of a safe descent. This more closely reflects reality out in the field, and it can force "judgment-call conversations among group members.
5. *Functioning in the field:* Several of Janis' suggestions for minimizing the negative expressions of group-think:
   - Each group member has permission to be a critical evaluator. The leader must model acceptance of critique, even of his or her own judgment.
   - Leaders should withhold their own preferences and judgments early in the decision-making process. Kathryn Dant, in Groupthink – the Dark Side of Teaming and How to Counteract it, suggests limiting the early influence of a senior leader.

- Several groups can be assigned to work independently, and then bring their own conclusions about the question or problem. Dant again calls this, "creating constructive conflict within the group."
- Outside input can be sought, and then reflected back into the group decision-making process (not particularly workable in an expedition context).
- A group member can be assigned the role of "devil's advocate," both the question prevailing ideas, and to be a partner for any indigenous group member who wants to challenge the majority perspective.
- A session can be spent "thinking like the enemy," and devising concomitant scenarios or strategies. In a backcountry expedition setting, time can be spent brainstorming about alternative weather, logistical, or injury scenarios.
- When a preliminary consensus has been reached a "second chance" meeting can be held in which members are encouraged to express any residual doubts and rethink the issue before committing to a definitive plan.

When we recognize the potential that groups have for producing poor quality decisions, we can intervene. Moreover, if we know that certain experiences on our trip are going to produce anxiety (discomfort, fear, deprivation, etc.), we can begin to give attention early on to becoming the kind of group that will make good decisions, ultimately creating more fun and safety in the outdoors!

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