Teamthink: Beyond the groupthink syndrome in self-managing work teams

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ABSTRACT

Significant attention has been devoted to the actual benefits derived from self-managing teams (SMT). What is typically lacking is exploration of the road-blocks to self-managed team success. One important challenge to SMT success - the threats that groups face when making decisions - is examined. Notable evidence indicates that cohesive groups tend to create internal pressures towards conformity that interfere with constructive critical analysis and ultimately lead to dysfunctional decisions. A new effective group condition, called teamthink, is proposed. This group decision-making process enables groups to make effective decisions while avoiding the pitfalls of groupthink.

FULL TEXT

A troop of Boy Scouts gathered for their annual hike in the woods. Taking off at sunrise, they commenced a 15 mile trek through some of the most scenic grounds in the country. About midmorning, the Scouts came across an abandoned section of railroad track. Each, in turn, tried to walk the narrow rails, but after only a few unsteady steps, each lost his balance and tumbled off.

Two of the Scouts, after watching one after another fall off the iron rail, offered a bet to the rest of the troop. The two bet that they could both walk the entire length of the railroad track without falling off even once.

The other boys laughed and said, "No way?" Challenged to make good their boast, the two boys jumped up on opposite rails, simply reached out and held hands to balance each other, and steadily walked the entire section of track with no difficulty[1].

Work groups in which people come together and combine different skills and experiences to solve problems and perform work is a fundamental building-block of organizations. One type of work group -- self-managing teams (SMTs) -- has recently gained special notoriety as a powerful new human resource management tool. (For an extensive discussion of self-managing teams see [2-5].) Self-managing teams empower employees to have increased control over decisions and their own behaviour. The teams usually perform a relatively complete task and include members who possess a variety of work skills. Teams are responsible for many traditional management responsibilities such as assigning members to tasks, solving team quality problems and interpersonal conflicts, conducting team meetings, etc.

SMTs have largely emerged in response to challenges such as declining productivity and quality, and increases in employee dissatisfaction, absenteeism, turnover and counterproductive behaviour. In addition, work system designs are needed that are capable of succeeding in increasingly complex, interdependent, and uncertain organizational environments. Estimates indicate that hundreds of team systems have been tried in a variety of work settings. Some examples include parts manufacturing, a paper mill, coal mines, and a small independent insurance firm. (For descriptions of self-managing teams in these settings see for example [2,6].)

Self-managing teams have been credited with many positive payoffs. These include increased quality, productivity,

employee quality of work life, and decreases in absenteeism and turnover. Significant attention has been devoted to the actual benefits derived from these group applications. What is typically lacking is exploration of the road-blocks to self-managed team success. For example, the issue of leadership of self-managing employees has been particularly challenging. The question, "How does one go about leading employees who are expected increasingly to lead themselves?", captures the essence of this challenge. Recently, some significant attention has been devoted to overcoming this challenge[7,8].

Another important challenge to SMT success is posed by the threats groups face when making decisions. Notable evidence indicates that cohesive groups (such as self-managing teams) tend to create internal pressures towards conformity that interfere with constructive critical analysis and ultimately lead to dysfunctional decisions. The term groupthink has been coined for this process that threatens effective group decision making. We will address this challenge in some detail. In particular, we will propose a new effective group condition we call teamthink. It is important to note that for years management scholars have developed many techniques that attempt to enhance group performance in general (e.g. brainstorming, nominal group technique, Delphi method). Teamthink, however, differs from these approaches in that it is a more focused group decision-making process that enables groups to make effective decisions while avoiding the pitfalls of groupthink. (For an extensive discussion of teamthink, refer to [9].)

Groupthink: a road-block to effective self-managing teams

Groupthink focuses on negative aspects of team decision making. (For a more in-depth discussion of groupthink, see [10,11].) It refers to the tendency for group members striving to agree with one another to interfere with rational constructive decision-making processes. Groups that become contaminated by groupthink fail to analyse critically and discuss adequately alternative courses of action. This tends to result in defective decision making, increasing the probability of an unsuccessful outcome. One way teams can be examined for groupthink tendencies is by watching for the classic groupthink symptoms. These include:

* direct social pressure placed on a member who argues against the group's shared beliefs
* members' self-censorship of their own thoughts or concerns that deviate from the group consensus
* an illusion of the groups' invulnerability to failure
* a shared illusion of unanimity
* the emergence of self-appointed mind guards that screen out information from outside the group that does not agree with the general group consensus
* collective efforts to rationalize decisions stereotyped views of enemy or competing leaders as weak or incompetent
* an unquestioned belief in the group's inherent morality.

Self-managing teams are especially vulnerable to groupthink because they tend to be cohesive and provide a breeding ground for conformity the two prime ingredients for groupthink. Thus, they are prone to exhibit these defective decision-making symptoms. Research has highlighted organizational cases in which groupthink was displayed within self-managing teams. (For more in-depth discussion of work team cases see, for example [12-15].) The following example was developed from a composite of several actual self-managing team cases:

The members of the self-managing team looked discouraged as they stared at the graphs at the front of the room. They had just been briefed by their team leader concerning the team's performance over the previous year in producing a diagnostic ultrasound device. Their product quality had recently suffered as evidenced by the fact that their product's MTBF (mean time between failure) had fallen far below the industry average in the highly competitive field of medical electronics. The team leader had let them know in no uncertain terms how disappointed he was with the team's performance and the way the members had been handling the situation. He went on to describe in some detail a plan he had developed for getting the team's product quality back on track. The members of the group were well trained and for the most part very experienced workers. A variety of well informed alternative ideas for meeting the division's current challenges were contained in the minds of these competent people. Nevertheless, the discussion was surprisingly narrow. After the team leader completed his

comments a couple of suggestions for minor modifications to their leader's ideas were made by team members. These suggestions were met, however, with mildly disapproving stares or comments from other members indicating that such modifications were not necessary. Most of the other reactions from the group echoed agreement and endorsement of the team leader's ideas. The minds of the engineers in this group were working as one because in reality only one mind was doing the real thinking. Several members appeared to disagree with the team leader's ideas. Most of them never spoke up. They groaned and shifted uncomfortably in their chairs, but they did not say a word. Finally, the team leader interrupted the limited discussion. Are there any other concerns about our course o: action? When no one said anything, the leader commented "I guess we're all in agreement then", and the meeting ended.

This self-managing team is engaging in groupthink. Several groupthink symptoms are readily displayed, especially direct pressure, self-censorship, and an illusion of unanimity. Verbs and non-verbal pressure towards conformity was applied to individuals who suggested changes. This contributed to the tendency for members to censor themselves even though they apparently disagreed with the leader's plan. Ultimately, an illusion of unanimous agreement was created and the team leader ended the meeting before any real constructive critical analysis and discussion had occurred. This concurrence-seeking process resulting from the collective thinking of this group is likely serving as a catalyst for poor team decisions and negative group outcomes.

Exploration of how the collective thinking within self-managing work teams can be made beneficial and help teams to realize positive group outcomes deserves special attention. In this article we argue that, when individuals come together to form a team, a group mind or a collective pattern of thinking does indeed exist. This notion of a "group mind" has been asserted by various researchers. For example, Freud observed that "individuals in groups tend to subjugate their individuality and act as though they were of one mind". Similarly, organizational scientists have remarked, "People can be seen as so immersed in the organizational context and its influence on their perception and thought that individual thinking cannot be usefully distinguished from organizational thinking"[16]. In this article we propose a group decision-making process we call "team. think" which offers promise in helping teams engage in effective synergistic thinking. As the opening boy scout story suggests, individuals who work together as a earn can conquer a multitude of problems. An effective "teamthink" process can lead to functional, positive group outcomes such as effective decision making and enhanced team performance.

Teamthink -- towards effective decision making in self-managing teams

A recent paradigm labelled "inner leadership" focuses on establishing and maintaining constructive desirable thought patterns [17,18]. This perspective suggests that, just as individuals tend to develop behavioural habits that are both functional and dysfunctional, individuals also develop habits (or patterns) in their thinking that influence their perceptions, the way they process information, and the choices they make, in an almost automatic way. Personal strategies for purposefully influencing these thought patterns include the analysis and management of:

* beliefs and assumptions,
* internal dialogues (self-talk), and
* mental images.

According to this approach, by effectively applying inner-leadership techniques, employees can enhance their performance, and thus organizational performance. Various research supports this theory. Many studies have indicated that what we covertly tell ourselves (self-talk), and our symbolic experience of imagined results of a behaviour before it is actually performed (mental imagery) can improve individual performance across a variety of tasks and activities.

For example, one study found that self-talk was one of the treatment components that helped smokers reduce their daily intake of cigarettes. Similarly, a study of aspiring psychological counsellors demonstrated that mental imagery can lead to successful performance on complex skills such as decision making and strategy formulation. Also, various researchers including David Burns and Albert Ellis have emphasized the usefulness of managing personal beliefs and assumptions to deal with a wide range of personal problems such as destructive habits, phobias, and depression. Overall, a variety of research does support the contention that inner-leadership strategies

can contribute to individual performance. (For a more extensive discussion of this research, see [19-22].) Similarly, we propose that positive "teamthink" can be established by combining constructive team self-management of self-talk (the team's internal dialogue), mental imagery (the team's common imagination and vision of the future), and beliefs and assumptions (the team's common belief system). These team self-management strategies can be combined to facilitate constructive thought patterns (the team's habitual patterns of thought) within self-managing teams. The resulting benefits of this process can be enhanced group effectiveness (e.g. decision-making quality and team performance) resulting from a movement beyond the limitations of groupthink to a synergistic combination of members' knowledge and cognitive abilities. In the following sections, we will discuss each of the main components that need to be addressed to create teamthink.

Team beliefs and assumptions

One current viewpoint suggests that many psychological problems stem from dysfunctional thinking. Specifically, cognitive distortions form the basis for ineffective thinking that can hinder personal effectiveness, and even lead to forms of depression. These distorted thoughts are based on some common dysfunctional beliefs and assumptions that are activated by potentially troubling situations. "All or nothing" thinking is an example of a dysfunctional assumption. According to Burns, this refers to the tendency to evaluate things in extreme, black or white categories[21]. Similarly, a group can develop an "all or nothing" belief. Cohesive decision-making groups have the tendency to examine risks in black and white terms -- that is, if a risk does not seem overwhelmingly dangerous, the group members are inclined to minimize its importance and proceed without further preparation rather than developing needed contingency plans in case the risk materializes. Another example of a dysfunctional team belief is an illusion of morality. Janis has argued that groups who succumb to groupthink sometimes believe unquestioningly in the inherent morality of their group predisposing the members to ignore the ethical or moral consequences of their decisions[10]. With teamthink, dominant group beliefs are identified and challenged. Group beliefs and assumptions are openly tested to help ensure that the group avoids being imprisoned by collective distortions and biases.

Team self-dialogue

Inner leadership suggests that self-talk (what individuals covertly tell themselves) can serve as a self-influence tool for improving the personal effectiveness of employees and managers. Similarly, the groupthink perspective argues that group verbalizations (the self-talk of the group) may affect group performance. More specifically, within a cohesive self-managing team, there is a tendency for members to put social pressure on other members who verbalize views that deviate from the dominant opinions expressed by the group. This pressure is exerted to assure that the deviant member does not disrupt the consensus of the group as a whole. This pressure towards conformity in the group's dialogue tends to undermine constructive critical analysis and may lead to defective decision making on the part of the group. The creation of teamthink requires constructive team dialogue that is conducive to the fuller contribution of the knowledge and expertise of each team member, and allows for challenge of the status quo.

Team mental imagery

"We can create and, in essence, symbolically experience imagined results of our behavior before we actually perform." From this perspective, mental imagery refers to imagining performance of a task prior to its actual physical completion. (For more in-depth discussion of mental imagery see [7,23].) For example, some service employees are required by their work to deal with irate customers. Employees can potentially enhance their effectiveness in serving irate customers by mentally visualizing a successful interaction before it actually occurs. Such visualization can help the employee rehearse and prepare to use effective behaviours as well as promote needed confidence. In the same manner, we believe that a work team can potentially enhance its performance through the utilization of group mental imagery to establish a common mental image of vision of how best to address an existing challenge. In fact, it has been suggested that the most successful groups consist of members who share a common vision[24]. Consequently, when faced with important decisions, an effective self-managing work team may interactively create a common view or vision regarding what and how it is going to accomplish. For

example, a self-managing cross-functional design team could combine the expertise and experience of its various members for creating a feasible image of a new technological advancement to an existing product.

Team thought patterns

The combination of beliefs; mental imagery and self-talk produce overall thought patterns. Thought patterns can be described as integrated patterns of thinking that tend to be repeated when triggered by situational events, or as habitual ways of thinking. Sometimes individuals engage in negative or positive chains of thoughts (habitual ways of thinking) that affect emotional and behavioural reactions. Opportunity thinking vs. obstacle thinking is an example of different types of thought patterns. (For a more extensive discussion of thought patterns see [17,18,23, 25].) Opportunity thinking involves a pattern of thoughts that focus on opportunities, worthwhile challenges, and constructive ways of dealing with challenging situations. It tends to promote a realistic appraisal of difficult situations that leads to the necessary preparation and application of skills to overcome existing challenges. Opportunity thinkers view challenging/difficult situations a temporary occurrences that can be overcome. Obstacle thinking, on the other hand, involves a focus on the negative aspects (the obstacles) involved in challenging situations, e.g. reasons to give up and retreat from problems. Obstacle thinkers view troubling occurrences as permanent events that happen repeatedly and can rarely be conquered. Research suggests that the nature of one's thought pattern may be directly related to personal performance. In other words, if the thought patterns are constructive -- i.e. focused on opportunities and potential ways of overcoming challenges, rather than obstacles and the futility of trying -- subsequent performance should be enhanced. On the other hand, obstacle thinking tends to interfere with confidence and constructive preparation and consequently can contribute to performance failures.

Thought patterns should also affect performance in groups (e.g. self-managing teams). If a team is faced with major repercussions in making a decision, it can view this as an "opportunity" to focus the group's energies and to utilize the decision-making skills of the group to make a significant contribution or as a high risk "obstacle" that increases the likelihood of a major team failure. If the team views the importance of the issue as an "opportunity" to overcome a challenge, rather than an "obstacle" that could lead to serious failure, its energies and talents will tend to be more positively focused and performance should be enhanced.

In practice, organizations do a number of things to foster constructive thought patterns that are conducive to teamthink[2]. For example, in preparing a warehouse operation for a transition to teams a company relied on an external consultant to help managers and supervisors openly to address the new facilitator role that would soon be expected of them. In their discussions they frequently addressed -- ways of getting team members to open up and express their ideas rather than waiting around a for a supervisor to direct them. The manager meetings were themselves an impressive example of teamthink in which participants openly expressed their views and challenged one another.

A financial service firm used several group structures -- a steering committee, a design team, and a pilot team -- to prepare for its move to a self-managed team structure. The design team, for example, consisted of representatives from all key parts of the workforce as well as representatives of management. They met for several weeks to combine their knowledge to create a work design that would foster constructive open involvement of all employees. Again, constructive critical mutual challenge of one another characterized their deliberations. Impressive increases in performance resulted from the teamthink-oriented work environment that they eventually designed and helped to implement.

Many fascinating additional examples exist. A parts-manufacturing plant extensively involved team members in the selection process to help ensure that new employees were open to teamwork and the views of others. An independent power-producing company required all executive officers to spend one week a year alongside employees doing whatever "dirty work" one of their power plants wanted them to do -- consequently communicating the importance of teamwork between all members at all levels of the organization. Examples such as these illustrate the variety of steps organizations can take in encouraging teamthink within their self-managed team work structure. Consequently they help to ensure development of team belief systems, self-dialogues, and

collective images of the future that help build thought patterns consistent with teamthink.

Creating teamthink to prepare SMT effectiveness

Teamthink suggests that the collective thinking of self-managing teams can lead not only to negative outcomes (such as groupthink); but also to positive group outcomes.

Earlier, we discussed the classic symptoms that groups display when they fall prey to the groupthink syndrome. Teams that experience teamthink will tend to display a different, more constructive set of symptoms. These include:

* encouragement of divergent views
* open expression of concerns/ideas
* awareness of limitations/threats
* recognition of each member's unique value
* recognition of views outside of the group
* discussion of collective doubts
* adoption/utilization of non-stereotypical views
* recognition of ethical and moral consequences of decisions.

Table I shows that these teamthink symptoms generally represent group processes that counter the dysfunctional groupthink symptoms. (Table I omitted) Together, these symptoms reflect constructive critical synergistic thinking as opposed to the detrimental conformity-seeking thought process of groupthink.

Teamthink and groupthink are two separate and distinct phenomena. Groupthink involves a condition in which a group succumbs to a dysfunctional, unrealistic view of a challenging situation. This process tends to create excessive concurrence seeking and an inadequate appraisal of alternative courses of action. Teamthink, on the other hand, depicts a process in which the groups' realistic appraisal of challenging events leads to constructive thought patterns that stimulate the required preparation and skill application necessary to overcome obstacles and to pursue opportunities. Overall, teamthink is characterized by effective synergistic thinking within the group.

Figure 1 suggests a continuum ranging from a complete organization focus on the individual at one extreme to groupthink at the other. (Figure 1 omitted) Groupthink might be thought of as a situation in which the group has become so much the focus that the value, identity and capability of each person has been lost in the overemphasis on the group. More specifically, the group members striving to agree with one another and to maintain cohesiveness overrides independent thinking, creativity, and uniqueness. Consequently, the original group advantage of combining multiple sources of ideas and knowledge and experience is displaced in favour of preserving group conformity and cohesiveness.

This suggests that the challenge for creating teamthink is to balance a focus on cohesiveness and the team with a focus and value placed on each individual. Creation of teams does not require that the identity and value of each individual be entirely put aside in favour of the group. To do so is to invite the risk of groupthink and group ineffectiveness. Rather, each individual should be helped to find their own personal identity and mode of contribution in establishing a team that produces synergy in performance. Note that a potentially interesting counter example is posed by the Japanese. It has been widely recognized that in Japan the self is often subordinated to the whole (e.g. the organization, the nation). Does this imply that the Japanese invite the potential for groupthink? Could this be a potential competitive
advantage of the American culture which has long placed considerable value on the individual? More specifically, if US organizations can establish a significant team emphasis, do they have the potential to reach higher levels of performance than the Japanese because they do so while preserving the uniqueness in perspective and contribution of each individual?

The preceding discussion implies that self-managing teams experiencing teamthink will perform better than those teams that do not. Thus, the question that arises is what can be done to ensure that self-managing teams experience the synergistic thinking process of teamthink? One answer is to take specific concrete steps (such as the examples cited earlier) to design it into the work system. Another is to provide self-managing teams with

teamthink training in order to increase the probability that the collective thinking of the group results in positive outcomes (teamthink) rather than negative outcomes (groupthink). More specifically, self-managing teams can be trained in a teamthink process adapted from a recently proposed inner leadership training method. (For a more detailed discussion of inner leadership training see [17,18,26].) The training consists of several sessions focusing on different aspects of team think such as group self-talk and group mental imagery. See Table II for an example of the breakdown of topics for each training session. (Table II omitted) The self-managing teams are trained to:

* observe and record their existing beliefs and assumptions; self-verbalizations, and mental imagery patterns
* analyse the functionality and constructiveness of their beliefs, self-talk and imagery patterns
* identify and develop more functional and constructive team beliefs and assumptions, self-verbalizations, and mental images components that can be used to substitute for dysfunctional ones
* substitute these more functional thinking components for dysfunctional thoughts when faced by actual situations calling for effective collective thinking
* maintain these new thinking skills while addressing challenging situations in the future. Specifically, the self-managing teams are trained to execute the following prescriptions.

Prescriptions for establishing constructive beliefs and assumptions

An initial step that self-managing work teams can undertake to foster teamthink thought patterns and symptoms is for members to identify and confront the team's dysfunctional beliefs and replace them with more rational beliefs. For example, as stated earlier, groups can adopt the "all or nothing" belief of minimizing the importance of various risks. This dysfunction can be corrected by identifying and then altering the beliefs in order to establish a more rational problem-solving approach. For example, the group could correct this all or nothing thinking by establishing a decisionmaking sequence that ensures that risks related to the decision at hand are examined and that contingency plans are developed in case the risk materializes.

Prescriptions for establishing constructive team self-dialogue and mental imagery

Through teamthink, we hypothesize that group self-statements and mental imagery can affect the effectiveness of decision making. Self-managing teams that bring self-defeating internal verbalizations to a level of awareness, and who re-think and replace these inner dialogues, may be able to enhance their performance. Specifically, team members should examine the group's dialogue patterns to ensure that social pressure is not placed on members who express verbalizations that deviate from the dominant focus of the group.

Furthermore, a work team could enhance its performance through the utilization of group mental imagery to establish a common vision. For example, a technical design group could combine the expertise and experience of its various members for creating a feasible image of a new technology advancement to an existing product. This collective vision could increase the team's ability to make effective decisions because they will have already viewed the outcome of their performance in their minds. Caution must be taken, however, to ensure that the vision does not become another source of pressure towards conformity. The vision should reflect the combination of member views on the team.

Prescriptions for establishing constructive thought patterns

Teamthink suggests a direct relationship between a group's thought patterns and team decision making and performance. Consequently, a primary way to enhance a team's overall performance is to alter its thought patterns. First, an examination of the group's current thought patterns must occur. If the group tends to focus excessively on the negative aspects (the obstacles)? rather than the positive aspects (the opportunities) involved in challenging situations the team could benefit from changing its perspective in future decisionmaking situations. If the team succeeds in consistently reversing destructive to constructive patterns of thought, over time, this new constructive way of group thinking should become a habitual pattern. Ultimately the potential for improvement in the group's overall performance could be established.

Eventually, a self-managing team can learn to replace a thinking pattern or habit of dwelling on the debilitating obstacles contained in difficulties or challenges or in new ideas with a pattern that enables the discovery of the often hidden opportunities nested within. In summary, the self-managing team's existing belief, self-talk, and

imagery patterns are viewed as three interrelated components of a relatively stable, but changeable pattern of thinking. By observing, analysing and influencing these thought components, a self-managing team can facilitate the development of a teamthink process. Consequently, more effective decision making and team performance are fostered.

Consider the following continuation of the composite team case presented earlier one year later after the team of engineers had undergone several sessions of teamthink training:

Once again, the engineers had just been briefed by their team leader concerning the team's performance over the previous year. Their product's MTBF (mean time between failure) was still down and the team leader once again expressed disappointment concerning the team's poor performance and stated that he held each of them personally responsible. However, unlike the previous year; team members began to discuss openly and critically the situation after the manager's briefing. First, one of the engineers raised specific concerns about the team leader's proposed solution for turning things around. Then several other team members constructively challenged the views of the team leader as well as one another. This open exchange generated a variety of alternative solutions that combined pieces of several suggestions. An atmosphere of constructive challenge developed. During the course of the meeting, each team member, at least once, discussed his/her ideas about how to increase the group's performance. In the end the team selected a solution that was very different from the one the team leader had originally proposed; but one that the group had worked out together. Even the team leader was pleased, recognizing the superiority of the new solution. Since, the engineers had naturally executed the teamthink process (due to their training), they now believed that they could make their adopted solution work. They focused on the challenges of implementation, encouraging one another and collectively imagining the team's ultimate successful performance.

Many teamthink symptoms are readily displayed in this example, especially encouragement of divergent views and open expression of ideas. This effective synergistic team thinking, if maintained, is likely to serve as a catalyst for effective decision making and enhanced team performance well into the future.

Conclusion

Management of group thought in organizations is perhaps the ultimate frontier to be explored in the pursuit of self-managing team and organizational effectiveness. In this article we proposed a new effective group condition called teamthink which enables teams to make effective decisions while avoiding the pitfalls of groupthink. Increasing our understanding of the cognitions of teams, especially the teamthink process, might be described as the ultimate key to self-managing team and organizational effectiveness.

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The authors
Charles C. Manz is an Associate Professor in the Department of Management at Arizona State University, USA.
Christopher P. Neck is an Associate Professor of Management at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia, USA

DETAILS

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