

# The Mind Tools Guide to Group Decision Making

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# The Mind Tools Guide to Group Decision Making

Introduced by Mind Tools CEO, James Manktelow



Welcome to the Mind Tools Guide to Group Decision Making!

Making a decision is often tough. Is it possible to get all of the data you need? Do you have “[blindspots](#)” when it comes to making decisions in certain

areas? When is the right time to get off the fence and make the decision? And, importantly, **who** needs to be involved in making the decision? Just you? Or a group?

When a group needs to make a decision, there are some particular dynamics that come into play, and some traps to beware of, no matter

how good the decision making skills are of the individual members of the group. That’s why we’ve pulled together all the Mind Tools articles on group decision making into this handy pdf.

Make sure you’re familiar with these tools and concepts before you next try to take a decision as a member of a group!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James Manktelow". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

James Manktelow, CEO,  
MindTools.com

# Organizing Team Decision-Making

## Reaching consensus for better decisions

While many of the decisions we make on a daily basis are quite simple, some are not. These decisions may involve assimilating a huge amount of information, exploring many different ideas, and drawing on many strands of experience. And the consequences of the right or wrong decision may be profound for the team and the organization.

So, should leaders be decisive, think the issues through on their own, and take firm action? In some cases, no.

There's a limit to how much information any one individual can process, and a limit on how many perspectives one person can see. Many decisions need full group participation to explore the situation, provide input and make a final choice. As you've probably seen, groups can often make better decisions than any one person operating on his or her own. This is one of the main reasons that good companies have boards, to which important decisions are taken.

What's more, many decisions need "buy-in" from the people affected by them if they're to be implemented successfully, and it's hard to get this buy-in if people haven't been involved in the decision-making process.

The problem is that when you bring other people into the decision-making process, you need to approach decisions differently. These approaches vary, depending on a number of different factors, including:

- The type of decision.
- The amount of time and resources available.
- The nature of the task being worked on.
- The environment the group wants to create.
- The amount of buy-in needed.

Understanding why and how best to organize decisions for your team is an important skill.

We'll show you some key tools to use when you want to involve your whole team in the decision-making process.

## The Challenge of Team Decisions

Using team input is challenging, and it takes a fair amount of preparation and time. As the saying goes, if you put three people together in a room, you'll often get four opinions. People can often see issues differently - and they all have different experiences, values, personalities, styles, and needs.

Trying to include all of these differences in one decision that satisfies everyone can be difficult, to say the least. Team decision-making strategies should therefore be used when needed, for example, when consensus and participation are necessary.

When time is of the essence, a good decision is one that's made quickly. That doesn't usually happen with full team decision-making. And when one or two people have the necessary expertise to make the decision, it doesn't make sense to involve the whole team - the experts provide most of the input and make the final choice anyway.

However, where the situation is complex, consequences are significant, commitment and buy-in are important, and where team members can work together maturely, team decision-making is often best.

### Tip:

If the right way forward isn't obvious, see our article on [The Vroom-Yetton-Jago Decision Model](#). While it's quite complex, it gives you a well-thought-through decision tree that you can use to work out the approach to use.

## Team Consensus Methods

When your whole group needs to be involved in the process, you need to explore consensus

decision-making models. With these, each team member has the opportunity to provide input and opinions. All members discuss alternatives until they agree on a solution.

With consensus, there's often compromise. Not everyone gets everything they want out of the final decision. However, because everyone has fair input, the decisions reached are often ones that can all live with.

Let's look at a few team decision-making strategies.

- **Ensuring Participation:** A consensus decision depends on hearing everyone's opinion. In a team situation, that doesn't always happen naturally: Assertive people can tend to get the most attention. Less assertive team members can often feel intimidated and don't always speak up, particularly when their ideas are very different from the popular view.

The [Stepladder Technique](#) can help manage these differences. Each team member thinks about the problem individually and, one at a time, introduces new ideas to the group leader - without knowing what ideas have already been discussed. After the first two people present their ideas, they discuss them together. Then the leader adds a third person, who presents his or her ideas before hearing the previous input. This cycle of presentation and discussion continues until the whole team has a chance to add their opinions.

The benefit of this process is that everyone feels heard and acknowledged. Once all the ideas are presented, the team can look at ways to narrow the options down, and make a decision.

- **Voting for Consensus:** Voting is a popular method for making decisions, and it's a good approach to use where opinions are strongly divided between two or three options.

Unfortunately, it becomes less useful where there are many options - imagine an election where people have only one vote to choose between eight candidates: It's possible that a candidate could win with as little as 13% of the vote. This would leave 87% of people feeling very dissatisfied with the result!

[Multi-voting](#) can address this problem. Proceeding through a number of rounds of voting, individuals are given a certain number of votes in each ballot, which they can allocate to the various options any way they want. Essentially, they provide a "weighting" to their choices. They can give one vote to each of several different choices, all of their votes to once choice, or any combination in between. After all the votes are placed, the choices with the highest number of votes are carried through to the next round, until a winner emerges.

This method allows more people to have input in the final decision. There may still be people who give the final choice no votes, but that number tends to be significantly reduced. This method is popular when time is an issue and full buy-in isn't essential for success.

- **Establishing Group Priorities:** A similar situation is where you need to prioritize a set of options, where everyone has different views, and there's no objective framework that people can use for decisions. (The classic situation in which this occurs is where people are allocating resources between competing projects.)

Here, [Nominal Group Technique](#) provides an effective framework for ranking priorities and choosing the option that best fits those priorities. First, the team discusses the problem, and they narrow down the issues to the key choices they must evaluate. From there, participants each rank their top choices. The team totals the rankings for each alternative,

and the options with the highest ranking emerge as the group's priorities.

- **Anonymous Contributions:** Sometimes, people with deep expertise that you need to draw on may dislike one-another so much that they have difficulties working together. In others, people may need to discuss issues which are real, but unpalatable or embarrassing. In still others, proposals may need to be developed and explored in tremendous detail, suiting individual scrutiny and analysis away from a meeting.

For these situations, managing the process in a way that allows anonymous and remote contributions can help you avoid destructive situations and reach a good, well-thought-through decision.

With the [Delphi Method](#), a facilitator helps participants individually brainstorm solutions and submit their ideas "anonymously" – other team members don't know who submitted which ideas. The facilitator collects and organizes the input, submits it to others for development, critique and refinement, then goes back and forth to all participants until everyone agrees to a final set of choices – and, eventually, a final decision.

Conducting these discussions is very time-consuming, and you need an experienced facilitator who can help individuals come together to find a solution. But the result is usually a robust final decision that has been fully explored, and is supported by each team member.

The other advantage of the Delphi Method is its ability to eliminate [groupthink](#).

In some situations, group cohesion and consensus can subconsciously become more important to people than reaching the right decision, with the result that the group may ignore anything that contradicts the newfound consensus. If groupthink isn't recognized and corrected, it can lead to very poor decision-making and severe negative consequences.

## Key Points

Team decision-making is often time-consuming, meaning that it makes sense to prepare for it properly. Before you organize full team participation, make sure that it's appropriate, and that you have the necessary time and resources for it.

However, teams can often commit more enthusiastically to decisions reached through consensus. Using a variety of techniques, you can do this in such a way that everyone has a chance to contribute to the final result.

## Multi-Voting

### Choosing fairly between many options

Have you ever felt short-changed because of the result of a traditional vote?

The democratic system of majority wins is usually a fair way to make a decision. So long as voters have sufficient information on which to make a choice, the system usually works well, just as long as there are only a few options from which to choose.

*Do we nominate Mary or Bill as the team representative?*

*Hands up of those in favor of Mary. 3 hands.*

*Those in favor of Bill? 12.*

*Great, Bill it is.*

But what happens when the choices expand and each vote is then dispersed over a wider range? A winner emerges but there are many more people who didn't vote for the winning option than people who did.

*Who should we nominate for employee of the month? Sara, Suzanne, Katherine, Joseph, or Charles?*

*Sara gets 3 votes.*

*Suzanne gets 4.*

*Katherine gets 3.*

*Joseph gets 5.*

*Charles gets 4.*

Here, Joseph is nominated by a hair, but only five people feel their opinions were taken into account. The remaining 14 people have had their choice cast aside like yesterday's news.

When there are many choices, simple majority rule voting is often not the best method for reaching decisions, if you want everyone to feel that they own the decision. Yet with idea sharing and brainstorming activities frequently taking place in workplaces today, voting is needed more and more. This is particularly the case where the decision is subjective, where different strong views are held, where many members of the group have power, or where strong commitment to the outcome is needed.

When group consensus is needed, multivoting is a simple process that helps you whittle down a large list of options to a manageable number. It works by using several rounds of voting, in which the list of alternatives becomes shorter and shorter. If you start with 10 alternatives, the top five may move to the second round of voting, and so on.

An alternative but slightly more complex group decision making tool is the [Nominal Group Technique](#). With this, group members nominate options, and are ranked by group members according to priority.

The key difference between the techniques is that multivoting is easier to understand (and can therefore seem fairer), while Nominal Group Technique can be used in a single round rather than several rounds (and is therefore quicker to use.)

In addition, in all but the last round, each person has more than one vote, allowing them to indicate the strength of their support for each option. Everyone votes in each cycle, so more people are involved in approving the final outcome than if only one vote was held.

Multivoting helps group members narrow down a wide field of options so that the group decision is focused on the most popular alternatives. This makes reaching consensus possible, and gives an outcome that people can buy into.

### How to Use the Tool:

Multi-voting is really very straightforward once you get the general idea. The easiest way to understand how to conduct a multi-voting session is through an example.

#### Step 1: Generate options

Henry and his team have a difficult choice to make. Raw material prices for the textile factory they work in have just gone up significantly, but the company can't raise prices. Labor costs are going to have to be reduced if the plant is to survive.

He needs to decide how to do this, but he wants to bring his team along with the difficult decisions that have to be made. After a brainstorming session, his team comes up with a list that looks like this:

- Lower production employees' pay scales.
- Decrease break time.
- Make the lunch period unpaid.
- Purchase automated packing equipment and eliminate two full time positions.
- Implement a better forecasting model and eliminate overtime.
- Reduce benefits such as subsidized child daycare.
- Reduce administrative staff.
- Outsource machine maintenance.
- Outsource housekeeping/janitorial service.
- Eliminate the shift supervisor position and pay a "lead-hand" premium instead.

**Tip:**

Henry has to be confident that the option selected is valid and will deliver the savings needed – otherwise a weak choice will have the weight of everyone's approval.

He needs either to make sure that all options are good at this stage, or allow exploration, investigation and debate between voting rounds.

**Step 2: Clarify options**

Ensure that everyone understands what he or she is voting on.

**Step 3: Assign votes per person**

A "rule of thumb" is that the number of votes each person gets should be about half the total

number of options. In our example, each of the 11 people voting would be given five votes, because there are 10 options.

**Step 4: First round voting begins**

Each person is allowed to allocate his/her votes across the options as he/she sees fit. Each person can put more than one dot against an option if they want. A common method is to use sticky dots (or equivalent) and have the participants place a dot, or dots, beside each option they like.

**Tip:**

If decisions are contentious, you may want to conduct a secret ballot.

| Option   | Votes                   |
|--|-------------------------|
| 1. Lower production employees' pay scales.   |                         |
| 2. Decrease break time.  | ●                       |
| 3. Make the lunch period unpaid.   | ● ● ●                   |
| 4. Purchase automated packing equipment and eliminate two full time positions.     | ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●     |
| 5. Implement a better forecasting model and eliminate overtime.                    | ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●         |
| 6. Reduce benefits.  | ● ● ●                   |
| 7. Reduce administrative staff.  | ● ● ● ● ●               |
| 8. Outsource machine maintenance.  | ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●         |
| 9. Outsource housekeeping/janitorial service.                                      | ● ● ● ● ● ● ●           |
| 10. Eliminate the shift supervisor position and pay a "lead-hand" premium instead. | ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● |

**Tip:**

To avoid having people cast all their votes for a single option, you can restrict the maximum number of votes that people can allocate to each option.

**Step 5: Narrow the field**

The top 40%-50% of the original list is chosen to move onto the next round of voting. In our example the top four options are chosen.

- Purchase automated packing equipment and eliminate two full time positions.
- Implement a better forecasting model, and

- eliminate overtime.
- Outsource machine maintenance.
- Eliminate the shift supervisor position and pay a "lead-hand" premium instead.

### Step 6: Next Rounds of Voting

Repeat steps 3-5, for the next rounds of voting.

In the second round of our example, there are 4 options (40% of the original number of options) and each person receives 2 votes, and the voting might go like this:

| Option   | Votes           |
|--|-----------------|
| 1. Purchase automated packing equipment and eliminate two full time positions    | ● ● ●           |
| 2. Implement a better forecasting model and eliminate overtime                   | ● ● ● ● ●       |
| 3. Outsource machine maintenance   | ● ● ● ● ● ●     |
| 4. Eliminate the shift supervisor position and pay a "lead-hand" premium instead | ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● |

The top 2 options will be chosen for the next round, and then each person will have just a single vote. And so 11 votes, one per team

member, will be cast among the 2 favorite options:

| Option   | Votes       |
|--|-------------|
| 1. Outsource machine maintenance   | ● ● ● ●     |
| 2. Eliminate the shift supervisor position and pay a "lead-hand" premium instead | ● ● ● ● ● ● |

### Key Points

In a team setting, where consensus is an appropriate method for making a decision or narrowing down a field of options, multi-voting is a fair and inclusive process. It respects the opinions of all participants and allows everyone

to be fully involved in the decision. It works particularly well after a [brainstorming](#) session when you have a large number of options and need to narrow the field to those ideas that are most plausible and realistic.

## The Delphi Technique

Achieving well thought-through consensus among experts

It's a common observation to say that when you get three experts together, you'll often end up with four different opinions. This is particularly the case in areas (such as resource allocation and forecasting) where the conclusion reached

depends on a number of subjective assessments. Arguments can quickly become passionate, and disagreement can often become intensely personal and bitter.

More than this, in face-to-face discussion, situations of "groupthink" can occur. Here (for example) the eccentric views of early or charismatic speakers can achieve undue prominence as the group seeks to find consensus. This can lead to poor decision making.

This is where a technique like the Delphi Method is needed to reach a properly thought-through consensus among experts.

### How to Use the Tool

The Delphi Method works through a number of cycles of anonymous written discussion and argument, managed by a facilitator. Participants in the process do not meet, or even necessarily know who else is involved: The facilitator controls the process, and manages the flow and consolidation of information.

The anonymity and remoteness of the process helps to avoid issues of groupthink and personality conflict. More than this, it gives people time to think issues through properly, critique arguments rigorously and contribute fully.

The editing of responses by a facilitator means that inflammatory interventions can be toned down and input can be consolidated efficiently. And the iterative approach means that arguments can be refined and tested until they are robust and fully-considered.

To use the technique, use the following steps:

- Clearly define the problem to be solved.
- Appoint a facilitator or chairperson with the skills and integrity needed to manage the process properly and impartially (the rest of this process assumes you are this person).
- Select a panel of experts with the depth and breadth of knowledge, and proven good judgment needed for effective analysis of the problem.
- Get individual panel members to brainstorm high level approaches that might be used to solving the problem.
- Consolidate responses, and iteratively resubmit these to the panel until a stable and comprehensive list of approaches has been developed.
- Check with the process sponsor that all possible solutions to the problem have been identified and that no approaches have been missed.
- Work with individual panel members to develop each of the possible solutions to the problem.
- Consolidate these possible solutions, and send them out to all panel members.
- Panel members then critique solutions, and feed their comments back to the facilitator.
- The facilitator and panel members refine proposals or, if appropriate, discard them.
- This goes on (iterating back to step 7) until a stable analysis of options has been conducted and a final conclusion has been reached.

**Tip 1:**

This is a time consuming technique and a lengthy process, and as such should only be used for decisions with major consequences. However, techniques like this are needed for large-scale decisions: Without them there's firstly a real risk that the wrong decision will be made and, secondly, even good decisions can be undermined with misplaced criticism.

**Tip 2:**

As a facilitator, you'll speed the process by setting clear and appropriate deadlines for feedback. However take care not to give undue weight to early submissions – this is far too easy to do!

**Tip 3:**

Beware: The Delphi Technique puts a huge amount of power in the hands of the facilitator. A crooked or biased facilitator can manipulate the flow of information in such a way as to reach an outcome that an honest process would not reach.

See

<http://www.eagleforum.org/educate/1998/nov98/focus.html> for a highly-critical but useful article highlighting how the technique can be abused. Everyone about to engage in a Delphi exercise should understand the points in this article before the process starts, so that they can guard against these abuses.

**Key Points**

The Delphi Method is a structured approach to problem analysis which makes sure that problems and proposed solutions are thoroughly explored and examined.

By using a remote and anonymous approach, it avoids the problems of groupthink and personality conflict that can lead to poor group decision making. More than this, it allows the time for detailed analysis and careful criticism that so often is not possible within a group analysis and decision making process.

The process works through a number of cycles of anonymous written discussion and argument, managed by a facilitator. The facilitator controls the process, and manages the flow and consolidation of information.

## Stepladder Technique

### Making better group decisions

Making decisions within a group can often be challenging. When things go well, they can go very well. However, when things go wrong, you can end up mired in conflict. Some people may fight for recognition and position, others may be over-critical or disruptive, while others may sit quietly and not contribute anything to the overall effort. Because of this, groups can often spin out of control and make worse decisions than individuals working on their own.

When this happens, it's easy to see why some people throw their hands up in frustration and give up. However, when a group works in the right way, it really WORKS. Groups that function effectively together can outperform individuals and make much better decisions.

But how do you make your group effective? How do you get all the members to contribute and inspire one another to create great ideas and solutions?

The Stepladder Technique is a useful method for encouraging individual participation in group decision making.

### What is the Stepladder Technique?

The Stepladder Technique is a simple tool that manages how members enter the decision-making group. Developed by Steven Rogelberg, Janet Barnes-Farrell and Charles Lowe in 1992, it encourages all members to contribute on an individual level BEFORE being influenced by anyone else. This results in a wider variety of ideas, it prevents people from "hiding" within the group, and it helps people avoid being "stepped on" or overpowered by stronger, louder group members.

All of this helps the group make better decisions.

### How to Use the Tool

The Stepladder Technique has five basic steps. Here's how it works.

**Step 1:** Before getting together as a group, present the task or problem to all members. Give everyone sufficient time to think about what needs to be done and to form their own opinions on how to best accomplish the task or solve the problem.

**Step 2:** Form a core group of two members. Have them discuss the problem.

**Step 3:** Add a third group member to the core group. The third member presents ideas to the first two members BEFORE hearing the ideas that have already been discussed. After all three members have laid out their solutions and ideas, they discuss their options together.

**Step 4:** Repeat the same process by adding a fourth member, and so on, to the group. Allow time for discussion after each additional member has presented his or her ideas.

**Step 5:** Reach a final decision only after all members have been brought in and presented their ideas.

The Stepladder Technique is similar to the [Delphi Method](#), another tool that's often used in groups to prevent [Groupthink](#) and to encourage participation. While both tools have the same objective, they differ in a few key ways:

- In the Delphi Method, an objective facilitator or leader manages the group. In the Stepladder Technique, all members are equal.
- The Delphi Method keeps members anonymous. The facilitator manages the flow of information, and members may have no idea who else is in the group. The Stepladder Technique involves face-to-face meetings, so everyone knows who the other members are.
- The Delphi Method is a lengthy process, while the Stepladder Technique is much quicker.

The Delphi Method is often used for major decisions that need input from a large number of people. The Stepladder Technique works best with smaller groups that make a wide range of decisions.

#### Tip:

Many groups can begin to lose their effectiveness and ability to make quality decisions if they have too many members. Keep your group small – four to six team members – to maximize effectiveness.

### Key Points

The Stepladder Technique is a step-by-step approach to help ensure that all members of a group participate and are heard. The technique allows shy, quiet people to present their ideas before other group members can influence them, and it allows everyone to hear many different viewpoints before reaching a final decision.

## Nominal Group Technique

### Prioritizing issues and projects to achieve consensus

When a group meets, it's often the case that people who shout loudest, or those with higher status in the organization, get their ideas heard more than others. So when it comes to gaining consensus on important decisions or priorities, how do you make sure you get true consensus and a fair decision for the group?

One technique to help with this is the Nominal Group Technique, a face-to-face group process technique for gaining consensus. A typical application is in organizational planning when a group needs to agree priorities in order to assign resources and funds.

The benefit of the technique is that the group shares and discusses all issues before evaluation, with each group member participating equally in evaluation. The evaluation works with each participant "nominating" his or her priority issues, and then ranking them on a scale of, say, 1 to 10.

Nominal Group Technique is just one group process for achieving consensus. Another group consensus technique is the Delphi Method, which is used among groups of experts to make complex decisions, usually without face-to-face meetings.

#### How to Use the Tool

To use the Nominal Group Technique, use the following steps:

- Select a group leader and group participants. (The rest of the steps assume you are the group leaders.)
- Present the topic and objectives, usually ahead of the group meeting. Typically the objective will be to identify issues or projects that are most important to the group or your organization.
- Ask the group members to discuss the topic, ask questions and seek clarifications.
- Allow participants time to consider the issues and projects they believe are the most important.
- Ask each participant to write down his or her priority issues or projects. If useful to do so, ask each group member to read aloud his or her responses, and give time to explain and elaborate on written responses.
- Record all the group's responses on a master list or a flipchart for the group to view.
- After all responses have been recorded, work through the responses together as a group and eliminate duplicates.
- Now ask participants to choose their top priorities: say 5 to 10, depending on the number of issues and projects that the group needs to agree on.
- Ask each participant to rank these in priority order.
- Collect the group members' rankings and combine these to form a collective response – this is the group's consensus on the ranking of important issues or projects.

#### Example

In its annual planning meeting, a parents' group must reach consensus on which school projects to support in the coming year. With limited time and resources, the group must choose just 5 projects.

The group's planning meeting follows the Nominal Group Techniques process to ensure a fair selection of priorities. The group members are asked to nominate and rank their 5 top projects. After de-duplicating the group members' responses, there are nine projects to rank. The highest priority is assigned "5" and the lowest is "1". The ranking grid below shows the projects that the group submitted and each member's priority ranking. The final column shows the group consensus on priorities, with

the "Family Link" program being the highest priority.

**Tip:**

By using the numbered ranking system with "5" high and "1" low, the group consensus can easily be found by adding up the rank scores of each group member. The highest priority is simply the highest score.

| Group Member Project    | Jay | Sue | Rik | Jina | Will | Gary | "Score" | Group consensus priorities |
|-------------------------|-----|-----|-----|------|------|------|---------|----------------------------|
| Family Link program     | 5   | 3   |     | 3    | 5    | 3    | 19      | 5 (high)                   |
| Literacy program        | 2   | 4   | 2   | 1    | 4    | 4    | 17      | 4                          |
| Community program       |     | 5   |     |      |      |      | 5       |                            |
| Annual fund raiser      | 1   |     | 1   | 2    | 3    | 2    | 9       | 1                          |
| Summer camp project     |     |     | 5   |      |      | 5    | 10      | 2                          |
| School bus fund raiser  | 3   |     |     |      | 2    |      | 5       |                            |
| Book fund               |     | 2   | 4   |      | 1    | 1    | 8       |                            |
| After school club       |     | 1   |     | 5    |      |      | 6       |                            |
| Work experience program | 4   |     | 3   | 4    |      |      | 11      | 3                          |

## Avoiding Groupthink

### Avoiding fatal flaws in group decision making

Have you ever thought about speaking up in a meeting or some other type of group setting and decided against it because you did not want to appear unsupportive of the group's efforts? Or led a team in which the team members were reluctant to express their own opinions? If so, you have probably been a victim of "Groupthink".

Groupthink is a phenomenon that occurs when the desire for group consensus overrides people's common sense desire to present alternatives, critique a position, or express an unpopular opinion. The desire for group

cohesion effectively drives out good decision-making and problem solving.

Two well-known examples of Groupthink in action are the Challenger Space Shuttle disaster and the Bay of Pigs invasion. Engineers of the space shuttle knew about some faulty parts months before takeoff, but they did not want negative press so they pushed ahead with the launch anyway. With the Bay of Pigs invasion, President Kennedy made a decision and the people around him supported it despite their own concerns.

The term "Groupthink" was coined by Irving Janis in 1972 when he was researching why a

team reaches an excellent decision one time, and a disastrous one the next. What he found was that a lack of conflict or opposing viewpoints led to poor decisions, because alternatives were not fully analyzed, and therefore groups did not gather enough information to make an informed decision.

## How to spot Groupthink

Janis suggested that Groupthink happens when there is:

- A strong, persuasive group leader.
- A high level of group cohesion.
- Intense pressure from the outside to make a good decision.

In fact, it is now widely recognized that Groupthink-like behavior is found in many situations and across many types of groups and team settings. So it's important to look out for the key symptoms, which are listed below.

## Symptoms of Groupthink

### Rationalization:

This is when team members convince themselves that despite evidence to the contrary, the decision or alternative being presented is the best one.

*"Those other people don't agree with us because they haven't researched the problem as extensively as we have."*

### Peer Pressure:

When a team member expresses an opposing opinion or questions the rationale behind a decision, the rest of the team members work together to pressure or penalize that person into compliance.

*"Well if you really feel that we're making a mistake you can always leave the team."*

### Complacency:

After a few successes, the group begins to feel like any decision they make is the right one because there is no disagreement from any source.

*"Our track record speaks for itself. We are unstoppable!"*

### Moral High Ground:

Each member of the group views him or herself as moral: The combination of moral minds is therefore thought not to be likely to make a poor or immoral decision. When morality is used as a basis for decision-making, the pressure to conform is even greater because no individual wants to be perceived as immoral.

*"We all know what is right and wrong, and this is definitely right."*

### Stereotyping:

As the group becomes more uniform in their views, they begin to see outsiders as possessing a different and inferior set of morals and characteristics from themselves. These perceived negative characteristics are then used to discredit the opposition.

*"Lawyers will find any excuse to argue, even when the facts are clearly against them."*

### Censorship:

Members censor their opinions in order to conform.

*"If everyone else agrees then my thoughts to the contrary must be wrong."*

Information that is gathered is censored so that it also conforms to, or supports the chosen decision or alternative.

*"Don't listen to that nonsense, they don't have a clue about what is really going on."*

### Illusion of Unanimity:

Because no one speaks out, everyone in the group feels the group's decision is unanimous. This is what feeds the Groupthink and causes it to spiral out of control.

*"I see we all agree so it's decided then."*

## How to Avoid Groupthink

The challenge for any team or group leader is to create a working environment in which Groupthink is unlikely to happen. It is important also to understand the risks of Groupthink – if the stakes are high, so must be the effort to ensure good decision-making and group outcome.

To avoid Groupthink, it is important to have a process in place for checking the fundamental assumptions behind important decisions, for validating the decision-making process, and for evaluating the risks involved. For significant decisions, make sure your team does the following in their decision-making process:

- Explores objectives.
- Explores alternatives.
- Encourages ideas to be challenged without reprisal.
- Examines the risks if the preferred choice is chosen.
- Tests assumptions.
- If necessary, goes back and re-examines initial alternatives that were rejected.
- Gathers relevant information from outside sources.
- Processes this information objectively.
- Has at least one [contingency plan](#).

There are many group techniques that can help with this, including the "Mind Tools" listed below. By using one or more of these techniques to accomplish aspects of the group's work, you will vary the group's ways of working, and so guard against Groupthink and help make better decisions.

#### Tools That Help You Avoid Groupthink:

[Brainstorming](#): Helps ideas flow freely without criticism.

[Nominal Group Technique](#): Allows each group member to contribute individually, so mitigating the risk that stronger and more persuasive group members dominate the decision making process.

[Six Thinking Hats](#): Helps the team look at a problem from many different perspectives, allowing people to play "Devil's Advocate".

[The Delphi Technique](#): Allows team members to contribute individually, with no knowledge of a group view, and with little penalty for disagreement.

[Risk Analysis](#): Ensures that the consequences of a decision are thoroughly explored.

[The Ladder of Inference](#): Helps people check and validate the individual steps of a decision-making process.

## How to Overcome Groupthink

However, if Groupthink does set in, it's important that you recognize and acknowledge it quickly, so that you can overcome it and quickly get back to functioning effectively.

Follow these steps to do this:

- Even with good group decision-making processes in place, be on the look out for signs of Groupthink, so you can deal with them swiftly.
- If there are signs of Groupthink, discuss these in the group. Once acknowledged, the group as a whole can consciously free up its decision making.
- Assess the immediate risks of any decision, and the consequences for the group and its customers. If risks are high (for example risk of personal safety), make sure you take steps to fully validate any decision before it is ratified.
- If appropriate, seek external validation, get more information from outside, and test assumptions. Use the bullets above as a starting point in diagnosing things that needs to change.
- Introduce group techniques and decision-making tools, such as the ones in Figure 2, to avoid Groupthink in the future.

## Key Points

Groupthink can severely undermine the value of a group's work and, at its worst, it can cost people their lives.

On a lesser scale, it can stifle teamwork, and leave all but the most vocal team members disillusioned and dissatisfied. If you're on a team that makes a decision you don't really support but feel you can't say or do anything about it, your enthusiasm will quickly fade.

Teams are capable of being much more effective than the individual but, when Groupthink sets in, the opposite can be true. By creating a healthy group-working environment, you can help ensure the group makes good decisions and manages any associated risks.

Group techniques such as Brainstorming, the Nominal Group Technique and Six Thinking

Hats can help with this, as can other decision making and thinking tools.

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