What Missionaries Ought to Know about Groupthink

Suppose this happened to a missionary. After the fourth meeting about a new project which the long-time field director proposed and strongly supported, Pat was still troubled by misgivings. When she considered the cost of the project and the condition of the economy, proceeding with the project just did not seem wise. When another first term missionary began to raise questions, a veteran missionary quickly accused her of having too little faith. Certainly the project would help people, and it could be God's will, so Pat voted for it along with the others, but she still felt uneasy.

Later, after the project was abandoned and their agency had lost many thousands of dollars, Pat and several of the others who had voted for it talked about how they were like the man who began the tower but could not finish it (Luke 14:28-30). As they talked, they asked themselves, "How could we all have voted for it? It is so obvious now that it would not succeed." What happened to them was groupthink.

What is groupthink?

Irving Janis, the first person to study it in detail, defined groupthink as the kind of thinking people do when they are committed to a cohesive group and their striving for unanimity overcomes their ability to be realistic about which action to take. Individual uniqueness, creativity, and independent thinking are left behind in protecting the cohesiveness of the group. People do not want to appear foolish or to upset the group so they set their doubts aside and make irrational decisions.

Janis studied American foreign policy disasters such as Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961. Most missionaries today remember the American government's decision to attack Iraq in 2003 to destroy the weapons of mass destruction although many USA citizens and most of the rest of the world did not think it was wise. Groupthink is not only something that politicians may do, but also it is something missionaries may do.

Did groupthink happen in the Bible?

We do not have enough details to be sure but groupthink appears to have happened shortly after King Solomon died. His son, Rehoboam, became king and soon asked Solomon's advisors about how to respond to a difficult situation. Rehoboam rejected their good advice to serve the people, and then he consulted some young men with whom he had grown up. These young men gave him bad advice to treat the people harshly. He did so, lost many of his subjects, and barely escaped alive to Jerusalem (1 Kings 12:8-20).

Conditions leading to groupthink

Though nothing has been proven to cause groupthink, several conditions may make groupthink more likely. Here are several of these conditions relevant to missionaries on the field.

- Highly cohesive group. Missionaries value the closeness of their group because there are few people nearby with whom they can share deeply.
- Insulation of the group. Missionaries have few people to talk with because they are far from their passport countries.
- Directive leadership. Field directors may tell missionaries what they would like to see done rather than asking what should be done.
- Homogenous group. The selection process in choosing missionaries often results in people with similar values, ways of thinking, education, and so forth.
- External threats. Missionaries often live under difficult situations with political, safety, and health threats surrounding them.
- Difficult decisions. Differences with values in the host culture may make "simple" decisions very difficult.

Symptoms of groupthink

Some of the symptoms indicating that groupthink is in progress follow. Beware if you notice any of them as your group meets.

- Illusion of invulnerability, such as "This can't fail because God is on our side."
- Collective rationalization of warnings that challenge assumptions. For example, if a secular consultant says that money will not come in for the project, group members agree that she just does not understand faith promises.
- Unquestioned belief in the morality of the group, such as "Because we are God's children, what we are doing must be an ethical or good thing to do."
- Stereotyping people outside the group as weak, biased, stupid, or even evil. For example, nationals opposed to building a church in their neighborhood may be characterized as under demonic influence.
- Pressure on dissenting group members to conform by suggesting they lack faith if they do not support the decision.
- Illusion of unanimity among group members because the silence of others is taken as agreement even though most of the committee may think the idea is doomed to failure.
- Self-censorship in which members do not express doubts because of the apparent consensus among other group members. Because it looks like the whole field committee agrees, no one is willing to look like a Doubting Thomas.
- Self-appointed "mindguards" who shield the group from problematic information. Committee members who are in favor of the project may take it upon themselves to see that conflicting financial reports are suppressed or taking aside any missionary who expresses doubts and pleading for unity behind the field director's project.

Results of groupthink

Consensus-driven decisions lead to the following types of problems.

- The group does not completely study what needs to be accomplished. They begin planning the building before exploring whether or not it really needs to be built.
- The group does not explore all available alternative actions. Perhaps the agency could afford to rent or buy an existing building rather than building a new one.
- The group does not thoroughly study the risks of the preferred choice. Will the project be seen by supporters as low priority, too ostentatious, or a waste of money?
- The group selectively looks for confirming information. Committee members do not take time to ferret out facts that indicate it is a poor choice.

- The group does not formulate any contingency plan, Plan B. They are so sure they are right that they give no thought to what they might do if Plan A fails.

Preventing groupthink

Groupthink may be less likely if some of the following suggestions are followed.

- Leaders do not express their opinions or preferences when assigning the task.
- Leaders encourage each group member to express objections and doubts when the group meets.
- Members of the group routinely discuss plans or progress with trusted persons outside the group, such as nationals or those in other agencies.
- Outside experts should be invited to meetings on a staggered basis and encouraged to challenge views expressed.
- At each meeting a different member of the group should be the "Devil's advocate" assigned to point out possible flaws and suggest alternatives.
- Before final approval at least one meeting should be devoted to consider all warning signals members can think of.

Of course, in avoiding groupthink, people must not go to the opposite extreme and be so cautious that they get caught in gridlock and do not approve any solution.

Differences between unity of the Spirit and the unanimity of groupthink

Finally, the unanimity of groupthink must not be confused with the "unity of the Spirit" described in Ephesians 4:3. The

unanimity of groupthink comes from a set of assumptions that must not be questioned. Unity of the Spirit comes from a Christian set of assumptions and a common purpose of being united with Christ (Ephesians 2:1-5).

After the first term of Christian missionary service, a problem surfaced which illustrates the difference between the unity of the Spirit and the unanimity of groupthink. When they reached the church in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas met with the apostles, elders, and the church. They reported the results of their service, and some of the believers present stood up and said that the converts had to be circumcised and obey Moses' law. Then the apostles and elders met to consider this (Acts 15).

- There was much discussion (v. 7).
- Peter, not the leader of this group but someone with previous experience with this issue, addressed the group (v. 7).
- Barnabas and Paul reported what God had done among the Gentiles (v. 12).
- The group became silent as they listened to this report (v. 12).
- Only when they finished did James (leader of the group) give his opinion on what should be done (vv. 13-21).
- To implement their action we read that the apostles and elders, with the whole church decided…" (v. 22), and they wrote in their letter, "So we all agreed to…" (v. 25).

This was unity in the Spirit, quite different from the unanimity of groupthink. The leader did not express his opinion at the beginning; people from both sides of the issue spoke; people were quiet as they listened; there was much discussion; in the end a decision was reached that the Gentiles involved "read it and were glad for its encouraging message." Missionaries must be careful to distinguish between the unity of the Spirit and groupthink.

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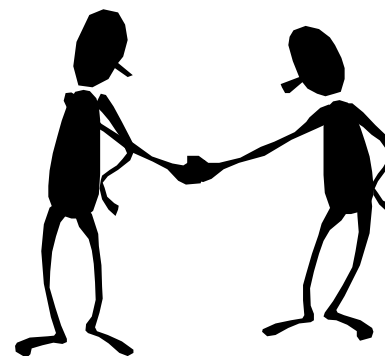
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