

“Groupthink”

Groupthink is the *illusion* of agreement—a type of thinking that occurs when a group strives to minimize conflict and reach a consensus *without* critically thinking, testing, analyzing, and evaluating ideas. This is to say that, when a group reaches decisions too quickly, it does not properly consider the implications of its decisions. Groupthink results in an ineffective consensus; too little conflict often lowers the quality of group decisions. When a group does not take time to examine the positive and negative consequences of *alternative* decisions—or counterarguments—the quality of the group’s decision is likely to suffer.

Groups with too-highly esteemed leaders are most prone to groupthink. Because these leaders’ ideas are often viewed as “untouchable,” few members disagree with them. Additionally, groupthink is likely to occur when the group is apathetic about the task; the group members have low expectations about their ability to be successful; there is at least one highly qualified, credible group member; one group member is exceptionally persuasive; and there is a norm that group members should conform to, rather than debate or express negative opinions.



Can you identify groupthink when it occurs in a group to which you belong? Here are some of the common symptoms of groupthink...

CRITICAL THINKING IS NEITHER ENCOURAGED NOR REWARDED

If you are working in a group that considers disagreement or controversy counterproductive, chances are that group think is alive and well.

MEMBERS BELIEVE THAT THEIR GROUP CAN DO NO WRONG

This happens when a group's members think their group is invulnerable. Members dismiss potential threats to the group as minor problems. If your group is consistently overconfident in dealing with problems that may interfere with its goals, it may suffer from groupthink.

MEMBERS ARE TOO CONCERNED ABOUT JUSTIFYING THEIR ACTIONS

Members of highly cohesive groups like to feel that they are acting in the group's best interests. Therefore, groups that experience groupthink is too concerned about convincing itself that it has made proper decisions in the past and will make good decisions in the future.

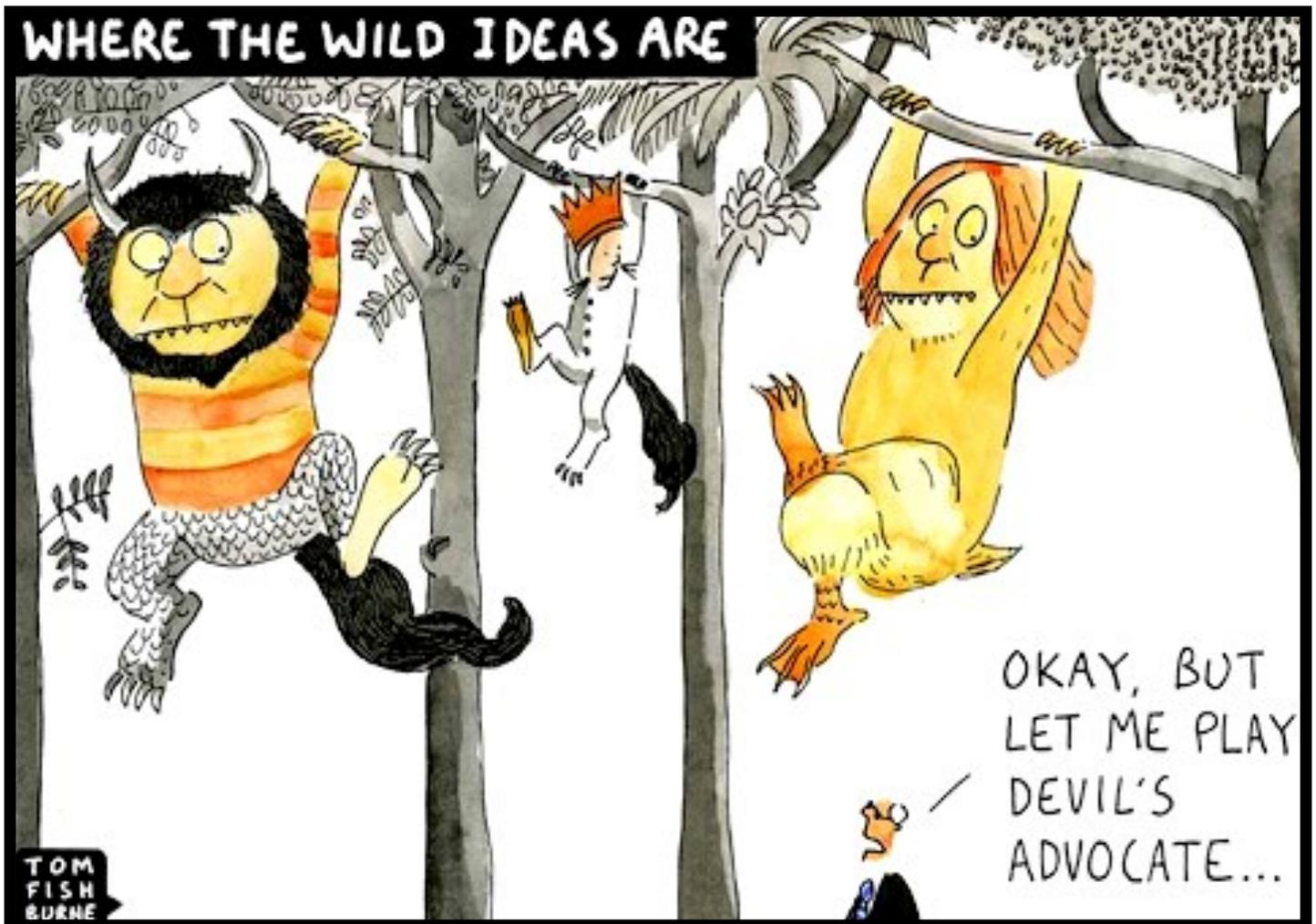
MEMBERS APPLY PRESSURE TO THOSE WHO DO NOT SUPPORT THE GROUP

Have you ever voiced an opinion contrary to the majority opinion and quickly realized that other group members were trying to pressure you into going along with the rest of the group. Groups prone to groupthink have a low tolerance for members who do not "go along." They see controversy and conflict injected by a dissenting member as a threat. Therefore, a person voicing an idea different from the group's position is often punished. Of course, if a group member is simply being stubborn, others should try to *reason* with the dissenter. Do not be too quick to label someone as a troublemaker simply because she or he has an opinion different from that of other group members.

MEMBERS ARE TOO CONCERNED ABOUT REINFORCING THE LEADER'S BELIEFS

Yes, leaders of small groups often emerge because they suggest some of the best ideas, motivate other group members, or devote themselves to the group's goals more than others do. But if group members place *too much* emphasis on the credibility or infallibility of their leader, groupthink may occur. Leaders who like to be surrounded by “yes people” (who always agree with their ideas) lose the advantage of having their ideas tested. Most people do not like criticism and do not like to be told that their ideas are inept or inappropriate. Therefore, group leaders are understandably attracted to those who agree with them. Leaders sensitive to the problem of groupthink will solicit and tolerate all viewpoints, because testing the quality of solutions *requires* different opinions.





How to Avoid Groupthink

Encourage critical, independent thinking. The leader should make clear that he or she does not want the group to reach agreement until each member has critically evaluated the issues. Most group leaders want to command the respect of their groups. But a leader's insistence that the group always agree with her or him does not encourage respect. Instead, it demonstrates a fear of disagreement. Thus, if you find yourself a leader in a small group, encourage *disagreement*—not just for the sake of argument, but to eliminate groupthink.

If no disagreement develops in a group, members may enjoy getting along and never realize that their group suffers from groupthink. If you find yourself in a group of pacifists, play "devil's advocate" by raising objections and potential problems. Assign someone to consider the negative aspects of a suggestion before it is implemented. It can save the group from groupthink and enhance the quality of the decision.



Organize your contributions; rambling, disorganized, disjointed ideas increase the likelihood that the group will get sidetracked. Speak when your contribution is relevant; before you make a comment, listen to the person who speaks before you. Is your comment useful or helpful? Groups are easily distracted by irrelevant contributions. Moreover, make one point at a time; you may be bursting with good ideas and suggestions, but your colleagues will be more likely to listen to your ideas if you present them one at a time rather than as a string of unrelated points. Speak clearly and forcefully. This does *not* mean that you speak aggressively or dominate the conversation. Nonetheless, unassertive mumbling gets lost in the shuffle. Additionally, support your ideas with evidence. Everyone has an opinion; however, facts, statistics, and well selected examples help keep the group focused and on-task. Above all else: Actively listen to all aspects of a discussion. When several people attempt to debate points and make counterarguments, you will have to concentrate and *listen*. Checking your understanding by summarizing or paraphrasing what another group member says can dramatically improve communication and decrease misunderstanding.