

MAJOR QUESTION

What are the pros and cons of group decision making and the various problem-solving tools?

THE BIGGER PICTURE

You've probably seen both good and bad come out of a group decision. OB confirms that group decisions can lead to mixed results. It identifies five potential advantages and four disadvantages. Knowing them arms you with information to help you maximize the advantages and minimize the disadvantages. In this section you will find contingency recommendations for involving groups in decision making and three helpful group problem-solving techniques: brainstorming, the nominal group technique, and computer-aided decision making.

The popular press and movies celebrate individual heroes like Robert Downey Jr. (aka Tony Stark) in *Iron Man*. Stark made his own decisions in saving the planet from ruin. Most managers, however, work with others and make decisions by involving others. Although groups don't generally make as effective decisions as the *best* individual acting alone, research reveals that groups make better decisions than *most* individuals acting alone.⁵⁸ It thus is valuable for you to learn about decision making in groups.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Group Decision Making

We often have to decide whether to make a decision alone or to consult with others. The following list of advantages and disadvantages can help you decide what to do.

Advantages The following five advantages are most likely to be found when the group has experience with the issue at hand and when it is diverse in terms of characteristics like personalities, gender, attitudes, and experience.⁵⁹

- **Greater pool of knowledge.** A group possesses more information and knowledge than one individual acting alone.
- **Different approaches to a problem.** Individuals with different backgrounds and experiences bring varied perspectives to diagnosing and solving problems.
- **Greater commitment to a decision.** Participation and a voice in decision making are more likely to result in commitment to a decision. This in turn leads group members to accept and feel responsible for implementing a proposed solution.
- **Better understanding of decision rationale.** Participating in a decision increases group members' understanding about why a decision is being made and what must occur to implement it. This in turn reduces miscommunication among people.
- **More visible role modeling.** Less experienced group members learn about group dynamics and how to solve problems.⁶⁰

Disadvantages The disadvantages of group-aided decision making involve group dynamics and interpersonal interactions.⁶¹

- **Social pressure.** The desire to remain in good standing within the group leads to conformity and stifles creativity.
- **A few people dominate.** The quality of a group's decision can be influenced by a few vocal people who dominate the discussion. This is particularly problematic when the vocal person is perceived as a powerful individual.
- **Goal displacement.** When evaluating alternatives, secondary considerations such as winning an argument, getting back at a rival, or trying to impress the boss can override the primary goal of solving a problem. **Goal displacement occurs when the primary goal is overridden by a secondary goal.**
- **Groupthink.** **Groupthink** is "a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action."⁶² Groupthink is thoroughly discussed in the next section.



Swissair (Schweizerische Luftverkehr) was the national airline for Switzerland and thrived for decades, but poor decisions sealed its doom in the economic downturn of 2001. Swissair went bankrupt, and most of its planes, routes, and personnel were taken over by Swiss International Air Lines. Which of the groupthink symptoms may have contributed to the company's demise?

Groupthink

The term *groupthink*, defined above, originated from an analysis of the decision-making processes underlying the war in Vietnam and other US foreign policy fiascos. Modern managers can all too easily become victims of groupthink (e.g., space shuttle *Challenger* disaster, Enron debacle, and Iraq war after 9/11) if they passively ignore the danger. Groupthink happens when members fail to exercise sufficient reality testing and moral judgment due to pressures from the group. Groupthink is more likely when there are high levels of **cohesiveness** or a **sense of "we-ness" that overrides individual differences and motives**. Members of groups tend to be cohesive for two fundamental reasons: (1) simply because they like and enjoy each other's company and (2) because they need each other to achieve a common goal. When described this way, you can easily see how cohesiveness is a double-edged sword and how it affects group-level outcomes in the Integrative Framework. It can help you and your team reduce conflict, but it can also reduce performance if it limits questioning and critical thinking and results in groupthink.⁶³ It therefore is important to be aware of groupthink.

Symptoms of Groupthink There are eight common symptoms of groupthink. The greater the number of symptoms, the higher the probability of groupthink:

1. *Invulnerability.* An illusion that breeds excessive optimism and risk taking.
2. *Inherent morality.* An assumption groups are prey to that encourages the group to ignore ethical implications.
3. *Rationalization.* Protects personal or "pet" ideas and assumptions.
4. *Stereotyped views of opposition.* Cause group to underestimate opponents.
5. *Self-censorship.* Stifles critical debate.
6. *Illusion of unanimity.* Silence of members interpreted to mean consent.
7. *Peer pressure.* Loyalty of dissenters is questioned.
8. *Mindguards.* Self-appointed protectors against adverse information.⁶⁴

Prevention Is Better than Treatment Prevention is better than treatment or cure when dealing with groupthink. Table 11.2 provides some excellent recommendations. Using the techniques shown in Table 11.2 should remove barriers to minority dissent. **Minority dissent** reflects the extent to which group members feel comfortable

Know for the exam -

TABLE 11.2 TECHNIQUES FOR PREVENTING GROUPTHINK

1. Each member of the group should be assigned the role of critical evaluator. This role involves actively voicing objections and doubts.
2. Top-level executives should not use policy committees to rubber-stamp decisions that have already been made.
3. Different groups with different leaders should explore the same policy questions.
4. Managers should encourage subgroup debates and bring in outside experts to introduce fresh perspectives.
5. Someone should be given the role of devil's advocate when discussing major alternatives. This person tries to uncover every conceivable negative factor.
6. Once a consensus has been reached, everyone should be encouraged to rethink his/her position to check for flaws.

SOURCE: Adapted from discussion in I. L. Janis, *Groupthink*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), ch. 12.

disagreeing with other group members. Research reveals that minority dissent is positively related to participation in decision making and job satisfaction.⁶⁵

Are you working on any project teams at school or work? If yes, you may be interested in assessing the level of minority dissent and participation in decision making. Results from the following Self-Assessment can help you to improve your effectiveness within these teams.

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SELF-ASSESSMENT 11.3 What Is the Level of Minority Dissent and Participation in Group Decision Making in One of My Work Groups?

Go to connect.mheducation.com and complete Self-Assessment 11.3. Then answer the following questions:

1. What is your level of minority dissent and participation in decision making?
2. Are you happy with these results?
3. How might you increase the level of minority dissent and participation in this group? Consider the ideas in Table 11.2.

The items in the survey were developed from C. K. W. De Dreu and M. A. West, "Minority Dissent and Team Innovation: The Importance of Participation in Decision Making," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 86(6), December 2001, 1191–1201.

Practical Contingency Recommendations about Group Decision Making

Routine and Frequent If the decision occurs frequently and is of a routine nature—such as deciding on promotions or who qualifies for a loan—use groups because they tend to produce more consistent decisions than do individuals.

Time Constraints Given time constraints, let the most competent individual, rather than a group, make the decision.

Information and Communication In the face of environmental threats such as time pressure and potential serious effects of a decision, groups use less information and fewer communication channels. This increases the probability of a bad decision.

Recommendation With complex tasks, managers should devise mechanisms to enhance communication effectiveness. (The quality of communication strongly affects a group's productivity.)

Reaching Consensus: The Goal of Group Problem-Solving Techniques

Using groups to make decisions generally requires that they reach a consensus. According to a decision-making expert, a **consensus** “is reached when all members can say they either agree with the decision or have had their ‘day in court’ and were unable to convince the others of their viewpoint. In the final analysis, everyone agrees to support the outcome.”⁶⁶ This definition indicates that consensus does not require unanimous agreement because group members may still disagree with the final decision but are willing to work toward its success. It is important that group members honestly and accurately communicate with each other when trying to reach a consensus.

Practical Problem-Solving Techniques

Decision-making experts have developed a host of problem-solving techniques to aid in problem solving. Three we discuss here are (1) brainstorming, (2) the Delphi technique, and (3) decision support systems.

Brainstorming: A Tool for Generating Ideas **Brainstorming** is used to help groups generate multiple ideas and alternatives for solving problems. Developed by advertising executive A. F. Osborn, the technique is used in a variety of contexts.⁶⁷ Applications include solving problems, developing creative ideas for new products or removing performance roadblocks, and developing action plans to achieve goals. Brainstorming sessions begin by asking participants to silently generate ideas or solutions, which then are collected either in public or anonymously and summarized in some fashion (e.g., on a white board or a flip chart).

TIP It’s good to collect the ideas/solutions anonymously if the issue is emotional, political, or highly salient/sensitive to some group members.⁶⁸

A second session is generally used to critique and evaluate the alternatives. Today, many brainstorming sessions are conducted electronically. **Electronic brainstorming, sometimes called brainwriting, allows participants to submit their ideas and alternatives over a computer network.** Webinars are a good tool to use for this purpose.⁶⁹

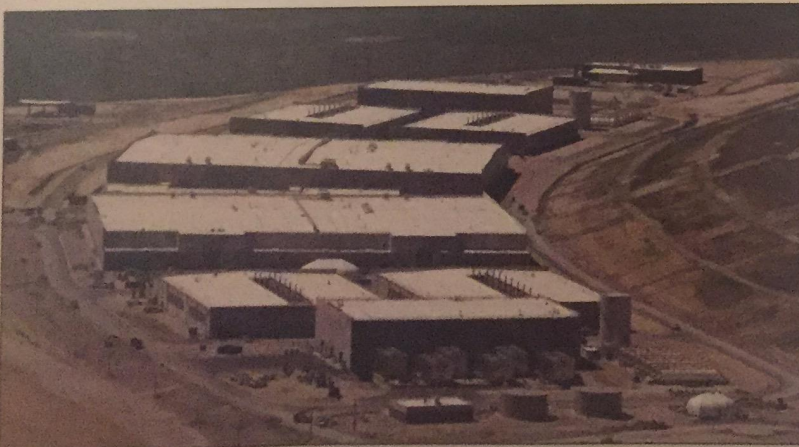
Managers are advised to follow the seven rules for brainstorming used by IDEO, a product design company (see Table 11.3).

Brainstorming is an effective technique for generating new ideas/alternatives, and research reveals that people can be trained to improve their brainstorming skills.

The Delphi Technique This problem-solving method was originally developed by the RAND Corporation for technological forecasting.⁷⁰ It now is used as a multipurpose planning tool. **The Delphi technique is a group process that anonymously generates ideas or judgments from physically dispersed experts.**

This technique is useful when face-to-face discussions are impractical, when disagreements and conflict are likely to impair communication, when certain individuals might severely dominate group discussion, and when groupthink is a probable outcome of the group process.⁷¹

Decision Support Systems The increased globalization of organizations, the existence of big data, and the advancement of information technology have led to the development of decision support systems. **Decision support systems (DSS)** are “computer-based interactive systems that help decision makers to use data and models to solve unstructured



Imagine the amount of brainstorming and decision support systems being used in large data centers like this one.