What is Groupthink?

Dennis Sleigh

We know a lot about American President John F Kennedy but do we know about his greatest error and his greatest success: the Bay of Pigs fiasco and the Cuban Missile Crisis? The former, which occurred in the early stages of Kennedy's presidency (April 1961), has been described as the "worst decision he had ever made" (MT Hansen, 2013) and the latter, only 18 months later, as "one of the most definitive moments of the 20th century" (The Conversation 16 October 2012). How did the disaster differ from the triumph? The answer: decision-making.

Irving Janis, a Yale psychologist, researched both events and in 1972 published an authoritative explanation of why an almost identical group of decision-makers, facing comparable challenges, reached markedly different conclusions in each case. Janis' work impacted greatly on decision-making theory and remains relevant today.

While historians and politicians may argue about the real significance of any historical event, this discussion remains fascinating because of the light it shines on leadership processes. In the first instance, the protagonists were subject to 'groupthink' (Janis' term) while in the second, the same people engaged in independent critical thinking, using a totally different model. Let me put that a little differently to show the implications for our schools or other management structures.

In dealing with the proposed invasion of Cuba by expatriates, Kennedy's advisors were still experiencing the 'Camelot Effect', immersed in the afterglow of their election victory and mesmerised by their perception of their leader. In the second crisis, they were more willing to critique their own decision-making and to subject it to unemotional appraisal. Genuine concern about a nuclear war undoubtedly helped to sharpen their minds.

Lessons to be learned

When people make a decision, the result depends on the processes involved. We all know this, which is why we expect participants to prepare for the discussion and to take any steps (such as following an agenda) that lead to clarity. However, as leaders we sometimes impose a mental set on our group and could inadvertently be setting ourselves up for poor decisions. For example, if we are really serious about group cohesion, and spend time trying to achieve a united approach in our school, we could – if we succeed in that goal – give an impression that unity is more important than other outcomes and thus squash any tendency to challenge the status quo. If, in such a situation, the principal is wildly enthusiastic about introducing a new reading program, it might seem wrong, in the general pursuit of unity, to disagree with the proposal, even though you might have solid educational reservations about the chosen program. This, it is suggested, is where Kennedy's advisors erred in the first crisis – they prized unity above the optimum solution.

I'm labouring the idea of unity because it has several powerful causes and the group that wants to be united is vulnerable to groupthink. Perhaps everyone wants to please the boss; perhaps the group is recovering from a tragic split in recent history and is determined to work together; it might be that the dominant personality in the group (not always the official leader) has made clear their personal wishes on a topic and others are reluctant to challenge this – for example, if a dominant person has already expressed displeasure about individual creativity ('There is no I in team!') this might lead colleagues to engage in self-censorship in case they are seen as 'rocking the boat'. Finally, it might be that once a solution has been offered, group members think their work is completed and they simply sign on the dotted line.

The second right answer

This final suggestion certainly has links to Janis' theories, but perhaps it sits more comfortably

with the views of Dr Roger von Oech, an American writer on creativity and innovation. He has been saying for decades that one of the problems that we experience when we look for good decisions is our tendency to find a solution and then think our work is over. He suggests that we have allowed the 'one right answer' approach to become ingrained in our thinking. (*A Whack on the Side of the Head*, 1983, p21.) He tells us "This may be fine for some mathematical problems where there is in fact only one right answer. The difficulty is that most of life doesn't present in this way. Life is ambiguous; there are many right answers – all depending on what you are looking for. But if you think there is only one right answer, then you will stop looking as soon as you find one."

In keeping with the notion of a second or third answer, I should point out that von Oech has honoured his own advice and has produced subsequent issues of his first book, along with other resources, and if you are keen to 'try before you buy' you might like to visit http://courses.washington.edu/art166sp/documents/Spring2012/readings/week_3/AWhackOnTheSideOfTheHead.pdf. There you will find a large portion of his third edition – and I defy anyone to read it and not to want to buy their own (complete) copy.

The secret to creative thinking seems to be the openness to look for more than one solution to a problem. To encourage people to keep looking and to avoid that classic line repeated by so many students – "I was going to say what she just said" - stop asking people to find the answer and instead ask them to seek the answers. I think the last word on this point should be left to von Oech with this delightful tale about seeking second answers:

Several centuries ago, a curious but deadly plague appeared in a small village in Lithuania. What was curious about this disease was its grip on its victim; as soon as a person contracted it, he'd go into a deep almost deathlike coma. Most died within a day, but occasionally a hardy soul would make it back to the full bloom of health. The problem was that since 18th century medical technology wasn't very advanced, the unafflicted had quite a difficult time telling whether a victim was dead or alive.

Then one day it was discovered that someone had been buried alive. This alarmed the townspeople, so they called a town meeting to decide what should be done to prevent such a situation from happening again. After much discussion, most people agreed on the following solution. They decided to put food and water in every casket next to the body. They would even put an air hole from the casket up to the earth's surface. These procedures would be expensive, but they would be more than worthwhile if they would save people's lives.

Another group came up with a second, less expensive, right answer. They proposed implanting a 12-inch long stake in every coffin lid directly above where the victim's heart would be. Then whatever doubts there were about whether the person was dead or alive would be eliminated as soon the coffin lid was closed. What differentiated the two solutions were the questions used to find them. Whereas the first group asked, "What should we do if we bury somebody alive?" the second group wondered, "How can we make sure everyone we bury is dead?" (p25)

Challenge comfortable thinking

There is a clear link between the 'second right answer' and my next suggestion, but I must warn you that heading this way may endanger your future promotion. I am suggesting that in order to avoid sloppy thinking, it might be necessary to challenge corporate thinking. I am advocating that we must not allow ourselves to think that something must be done in a certain way just because it has always been done that way. I'd like to back this up with two stories, one that tells of the progress made by a good friend of mine, and the other that appears in many good texts on decision making. First, the local story.

My friend John was principal of an inner-suburban school where finance was always a problem. As he viewed the money spent on water each year, he thought of the two-button flush he had seen in a new home only recently. (This was several years ago). He asked himself why such a system couldn't be used in school toilets and then approached the relevant person

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in Head Office. His view was not only dismissed as impractical (though no-one could tell him why) but he was made to feel foolish for suggesting the idea. Fifteen years later when all schools in his system fitted the twin flush systems, he resisted the urge to say "Told you so!"

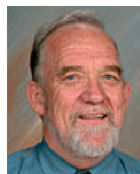
Now for the international tale. While we all know about the polluting effect of motor cars in modern cities, do we spare a thought for the cities of the late 19th century? If you are a data-collector, search Google for the Horse-manure Crisis of New York City. There you will learn about the quantities of horse manure being deposited daily in the street by over 100,000 horses, the city's primary transport. Nor was the problem limited to one place – indeed, the same year, the *Times of London* predicted that "In 50 years, every street in London will be buried under nine feet of manure." It is recorded that at an international conference in New York, delegates tried in vain to solve the problem. As it turned out, the problem was solved by entrepreneurs, not urban planners: Henry Ford and others saw the possibilities of producing motor cars cheap enough to appeal to ordinary people. The lesson for us is that if we want to make the right decisions, we must be willing to look at unfamiliar ideas, and from these may come useful solutions.

Engage the decision makers

Today there is a developed habit of employing experts to solve our problems, paying them large sums of money, and then wondering why they didn't predict the flaws that later emerged in their solutions. I suggest that part of the reason for their inadequate reports lies in the fact that many consultants – thankfully, not all – never really embraced the full scope of their brief. I am sure they addressed the details of their contract, but that is not quite the same thing. Imagine employing consultants to assess the economic viability of a country town and then accepting their findings, only to learn later that none of the experts actually bothered to talk to the ordinary person in the street. The report might be full of sociological data, economic statistics, even ecological theories but it would be based on a theoretical model quite removed from the actual sweat and blood of the locals. I suggest that such a report – and they are not rare, I assure you – wouldn't be worth the paper it was printed on.

I have no problem with experts but we also need to make sure these experts have no problem with us. They need to engage with us, to see how we operate, to feel our emotions, to share our dreams – and from this sharing they can start to develop a more realistic vision of our future. Above all, let us never forget that, despite their impressive list of post-nominals and their extensive project record, these consultants are not the decision-makers. They are there to suggest to us – the people on the ground – ways to meet our needs so that we can do what is needed in order to achieve our goals. Too often (especially in education, it seems to me) clever people who have never supervised a class on a wet Friday lunch duty or had to deal with 25 individuals as individuals in an algebra lesson convince our superiors that their latest theories will raise our PISA scores but they never speak to, let alone engage with, the teachers who are at the front of the classroom. Small wonder their advice rarely inspires our decision-making. Perhaps I can sum the matter up this way: There are many ways to reach at conclusions but if you want effective decisions, I suggest you heed at least some of the warnings here.

ET



Dennis Sleigh, a retired principal, now acts as a leadership consultant. He has been awarded Fellowships by both ACE and ACEL and is a successful writer, with four books (two co-authored) and over 250 articles to his credit. Contact him at dwsleigh@tpg.com.au.

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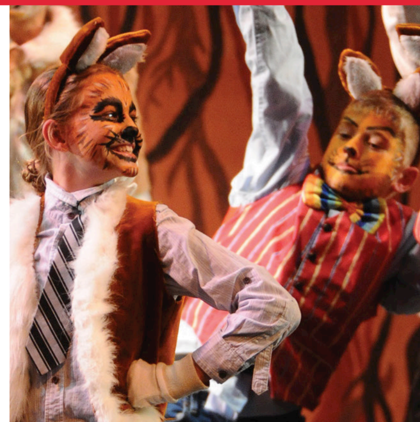

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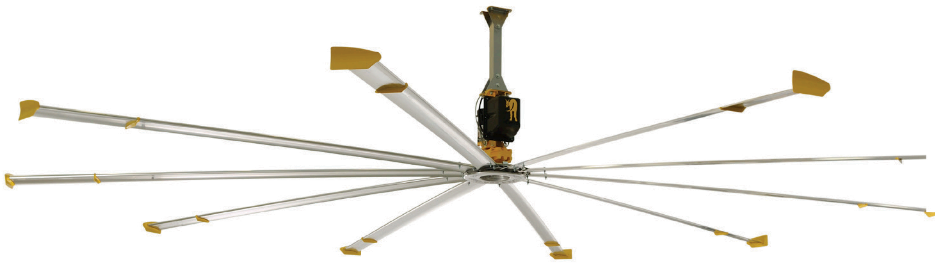

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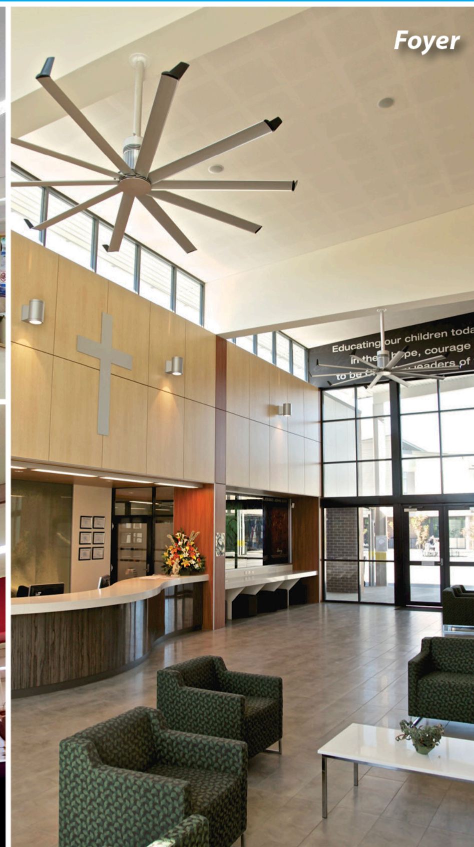

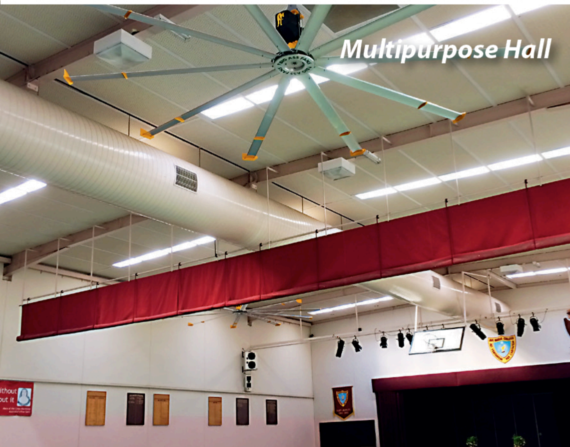

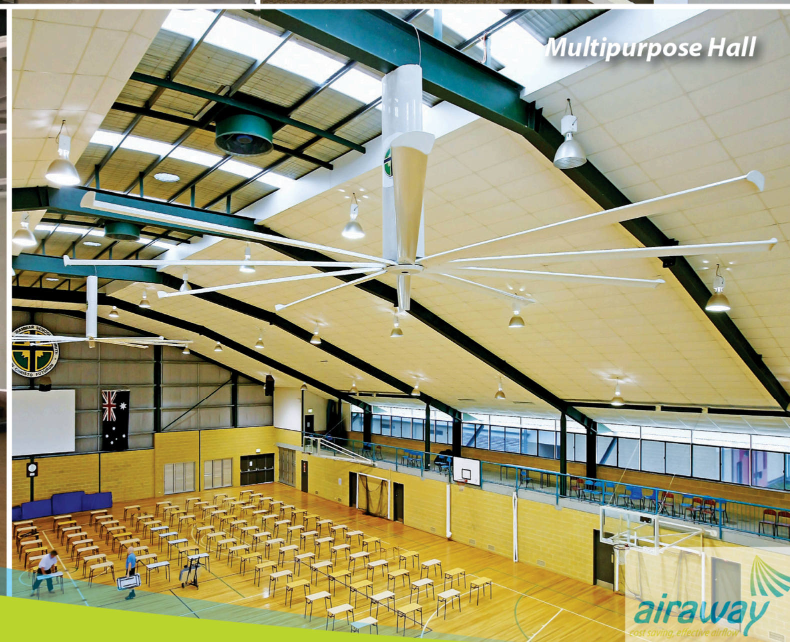

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