

Devil's Advocacy and Dialectical Inquiry: Antidotes to Groupthink

Fred C. Lunenburg
Sam Houston State University

ABSTRACT

Today, many decisions in organizations are made by groups, teams, or committees. There are benefits of group decision making over individual decisions. Groups have the potential to generate and evaluate more ideas, and once a decision is made, acceptance will be easier. One common constraint of effective group decision making is groupthink. There are several ways in which an organization can counter the effects of groupthink and improve decision making. It can use devil's advocacy and dialectical inquiry to evaluate proposed solutions to problems.

Today, many decisions in organizations are made by groups, teams, or committees (Kamberg, 2012). In this article, I discuss the benefits of group decision making; a common constraint of effective group decision making, known as groupthink; and two specific group structures that can be used to overcome this constraint.

Benefits of Group Decision Making

It is believed that group decision making results in a number of benefits over individual decision making, including increased decision quality, creativity, acceptance, understanding, judgment, and accuracy. Experts advise leaders that a proven method to increase decision effectiveness is to involve employees in the decision-making process, particularly under conditions of uncertainty (Zhu, 2012). *Uncertainty* is the condition under which an individual does not have the necessary information to assign probabilities to the outcomes of alternative solutions (Nikolaidis, 2012). Decision making under the condition of certainty is the exception for most leaders (Yeo, 2012). With these generalizations in mind, the benefits of group decision making follow (Bonito, 2011).

Decision Quality

A greater sum of knowledge and information is accessible in a group than in any of its members. Members can often fill in each other's information gaps. Groups are more vigilant, can generate more ideas, and can evaluate ideas better than individuals.

Decision Creativity

Groups provide a greater number of approaches to a problem because individuals are more likely to be close minded in their thinking. Because group members do not have identical approaches, each can contribute by getting people to become more open minded in their thinking. Group participation increases performance. More participation leads to more creative thinking, which often results in more feasible solutions to problems.

Decision Acceptance

Participation in decision making increases acceptance of the decision or the solution to the problem. This idea is exemplified in the movement toward organizational learning. *Organizational learning* is the process through which managers seek to improve employees' desire and ability to understand and manage the organization so that they make decisions that continuously enhance organizational effectiveness (Senge, 2006). Organizational learning, however, is not viable in organizations that are highly centralized.

Decision Understanding

Group participation increases understanding of the decision. When group members have been involved in the decision-making process, further information about the decision does not have to be provided to them. Moreover, members comprehend the decision better because they were involved in the developmental stages of the decision process.

Decision Judgment

Groups are more effective at establishing objectives, identifying alternatives, and evaluating alternatives because of the increased knowledge and viewpoints available to them.

Decision Accuracy

Because group members evaluate each other's thinking, major errors, bloopers, and glitches tend to be avoided. Poor or non-feasible alternatives are more likely to be spotted.

Do groups actually make better decisions than individuals? The discussion here suggests that they do. Reviews of research on the benefits of shared decision making, however, are inconsistent. Research dealing specifically with the relationship between participative decision making and decision outcomes reveals ambiguity or nonsupport for the relationship (White, Dittrich, & Lang, 1980). Most research in this area assumes the

benefits of collaborative decision making as a given (Norris-Tirrell, 2010). The benefits of group decision making are probably not directly related to decision outcomes but instead are more associated with morale and job satisfaction (Scott-Ladd, Travaglione, & Marshall, 2006). One review of research concludes that groups usually produce more and better solutions to problems than do individuals working alone (Laughlin, 2012). The conclusions of the latter two works are qualified by the exact nature of the problem being solved and the composition of the group making the decision. More specifically, groups should perform better than individuals when (a) group members differ in relevant skills and abilities, as long as they don't differ so much that conflict occurs; (b) some division of labor can occur; (c) memory of facts is an important issue; and (d) individual judgments can be averaged to arrive at a group position (Isaksen, 2011; Jonassen, 2011).

Constraints on Group Decision Making

I have pointed out the potential benefits of group decision making over individual decisions; however, the social nature of group processes can negatively affect performance. More specifically, one common constraint of effective group decision making is groupthink.

Groupthink

Irving Janis (1982) coined the term *groupthink*, which happens when in-group pressures lead to deterioration in mental efficiency, poor testing of reality, and lax moral judgment. It tends to occur in highly cohesive groups in which the group members' desire for consensus becomes more important than evaluating problems and solutions realistically. An example would be the top executive cabinet (the president and vice presidents) of a firm, who have worked together for many years. They know each other well and think as a cohesive unit rather than as a collection of individuals. Janis identified eight symptoms of groupthink (Janis, 1982):

Invulnerability. Most or all group members develop an illusion of invulnerability, which causes them to become overly optimistic and take extreme risks.

Rationalization. Group members collectively rationalize in order to discount warnings that might lead them to reconcile their assumptions before they recommit themselves to their past policy decisions.

Morality. Group members develop an unquestioned belief in the group's inherent morality, inclining the members to ignore ethical or moral consequences of their decisions.

Stereotyping. Group members develop stereotyped views of opposition leaders as too evil to warrant genuine attempts to negotiate or as too weak and stupid to counter whatever risky attempts are made to defeat their purposes.

Pressure. Group members apply direct pressure on any member who expresses strong arguments against any of the group's stereotypes, illusions, or commitments, making clear that this type of dissent is contrary to what is expected of all loyal members.

Self-Censorship. Group members censor themselves from any deviations from the apparent group consensus, reflecting each member's inclination to minimize the importance of his or her doubts and counterarguments.

Unanimity. Group members perceive a shared illusion of unanimity concerning judgments conforming to the majority view (partly resulting from self-censorship of deviations, augmented by the false assumption that silence means consent).

Mindguards. Some group members appoint themselves to protect the group from adverse information that might shatter their shared complacency about the effectiveness and morality of their decisions.

The likelihood that groupthink will emerge is greatest when: (a) the group is cohesive, (b) the group becomes insulated from qualified outsiders, and (c) the leader promotes his or her own favored solution. In suggesting ways of avoiding groupthink, Janis hopes to reduce cohesiveness and open decision activity in various ways. One way is to select ad hoc groups to solve problems; in this way, the members do not already belong to a cohesive group. Another approach is to have higher-level administrators set the parameters of the decision. Still another method is to assign different groups to work on the same problem. And, finally, different group decision-making techniques can be used to limit the effects of groupthink and other problems inherent in shared decision making. Nine suggestions for avoiding groupthink are as follows:

1. The leader of a policy-forming group should assign the role of critical evaluator to each member, encouraging the group to give high priority to airing objections and doubts.
2. The leaders in an organization's hierarchy, when assigning a policy-planning mission to a group, should be impartial instead of stating their preferences and expectations at the outset.
3. The organization should routinely follow the administrative practice of setting up several independent policy-planning and evaluation groups to work on the same policy question, each carrying out its deliberations under a different leader.
4. Through the period when the feasibility and effectiveness of policy alternatives are being surveyed, the policy-making group should from time to time divide into two or more subgroups to meet separately, under different chairpersons, and then come together to reconcile their differences.
5. Each member of the policy-making group should periodically discuss the group's deliberations with trusted associates in his or her own unit of the organization and report their transactions back to the group.
6. One or more outside experts or qualified colleagues within the organization who are not core members of the policy-making group should be invited to each meeting on a staggered basis and should be encouraged to challenge the views of the core members.

7. At each meeting devoted to evaluating policy alternatives, at least one member should be assigned the role of devil's advocate, expressing as many objections to each policy alternative as possible.
8. Whenever the policy issue involves relations with a rival organization, a sizable block of time should be spent surveying all warning signals from the rivals and constructing alternative scenarios of the rivals' intentions.
9. After reaching a preliminary consensus about what seems to be the best policy alternative, the policy-making group should hold a second-chance meeting at which the members are expected to express as vividly as they can all their residual doubts and to rethink the entire issue before making a definitive choice.

Structures Used to Overcome Groupthink.

Group structures can help to minimize the problems associated with groupthink described previously. Specifically, two group structures can serve as antidotes for groupthink: devil's advocacy and dialectical inquiry.

Devil's Advocacy

Devil's advocacy, a technique for improving the quality of group decisions, introduces conflict into the decision-making process. Janis suggests that this concept is an antidote for groupthink. Earlier, we noted that groupthink results in inhibitions and premature conformity to group norms. Devil's advocacy can nullify these and other group phenomena to which group members are subjected. After a planning group has developed alternative solutions to a problem, the plan is given to one or more staff members, with instructions to find fault with it (Schwenk, 1984). If the plan withstands the scrutiny of the devil's advocates, it can be presumed to be free of the effects of groupthink and thus viable (Corey, 2011). This procedure helps organizations avoid costly mistakes in decision making by identifying potential pitfalls in advance (Crosier & Schwenk, 1990).

Although devil's advocacy can be used as a critiquing technique after alternative solutions to a problem have been developed, it can also be used during the early stages of the decision-making process. For example, during a decision-making session one member could be assigned the role of devil's advocate, expressing as many objections to each alternative solution to a problem as possible (Schweiger & Finger, 1984). Furthermore, it is a good idea to rotate the job of devil's advocate so that no single person or group develops a strictly negative reputation. Moreover, periodic devil's advocacy role-playing is a good training technique for developing analytical and communication skills, as well as emotional intelligence (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2010). Other methods used by organizations to prevent groupthink include rotating in new group members, inviting attendance by outsiders, and announcing a temporary delay before the final decision is made to give organization members one last chance to identify and express their reservations (Newstrom, 2011).

Numerous organizations use some form of devil's advocacy (Ivancevich, Konopaske, & Matteson, 2011). For example, Royal Dutch Petroleum regularly uses a

devil's advocacy approach. Before making a major decision, such as entering a market or building a plant, Anheuser-Busch assigns some group the role of critic with the purpose of uncovering all possible problems with a particular proposal and making a case for each side of the question. IBM has a system that encourages employees to disagree with their bosses. The thinking is that a devil's advocate who challenges the CEO and top management team can help sustain the vitality and performance of the upper echelon of the organization (Nelson & Quick, 2011). All of these companies have the same goal: improve organizational performance by institutionalizing dissent.

Tom Peters and Robert Waterman, in their book *In Search of Excellence: Lesson's from America's Best Run Companies* (2006), discuss how some of America's best run companies encourage "bootlegging" (experimenting to create new product lines) and stimulating programmed conflict to increase creativity and innovation. They define programmed conflict as conflict that is deliberately and systematically created even when no real differences appear to exist. It is conflict that raises different opinions about an issue regardless of the beliefs of the managers concerning the issue. Here the authors are speaking of devil's advocacy. These two concepts when connected may result in innovation and organizational effectiveness.

3M, for example, makes excellent use of both "bootlegging" and devil's advocacy according to Peters and Waterman. At 3M, product managers engage in "bootlegging," which may result in a new product line. Such was the case with laser discs, which were developed in 1982 to compete with the Japanese market. (3M was the first American company to enter the laser disc market.) Product managers submit proposals for a new product, such as laser discs, to a product development committee composed of top-level managers from throughout the organization. The committee acts as a devil's advocate. It critiques the proposal and challenges assumptions (size of the market, cost of production, etc.) with the purpose of improving the plan and verifying its commercial viability. 3M attributes its product development successes to the use of "bootlegging" and devil's advocacy (Jones, 2010).

Dialectical Inquiry

Like devil's advocacy, *dialectical inquiry* is another approach for controlling group phenomena, such as groupthink in decision making. The approach can be traced back to the dialectic school of philosophy in ancient Greece. Plato and his followers attempted to synthesize truths by exploring opposite positions, called *thesis* and *antithesis* (Brooke, 2012; Recco, 2012). Court systems in America and elsewhere rely on opposing arguments in determining guilt or innocence (Calvi, 2012). Essentially, dialectical inquiry is a debate between two opposing sets of viewpoints (Katzenstein, 1996). Although it stimulates programmed conflict, it is a constructive approach, because it elicits the benefits and limitations of opposing sets of ideas (Schweiger, Sanburg, & Ragan, 1986).

Organizations that use dialectical inquiry create teams of decision makers. Each team is instructed to generate and evaluate alternative courses of action and then recommend the best one. Then after hearing each team's alternative courses of action, the team's and the organization's top managers meet together and select the best parts of

each plan and synthesize a final plan that provides the best opportunity for success (Jones, 2010). The process can be described as follows (Barabba, 1983):

1. The process begins with the formation of two or more divergent groups to represent the full range of views on a specific problem. Each group is made as internally homogeneous as possible; the groups, however, are as different from one another as possible. Collectively they cover all positions that might have an impact on the ultimate solution to a problem.
2. Each group meets separately, identifies the assumptions behind its position, and rates them on their importance and feasibility. Each group then presents a “for” and an “against” position to the other groups.
3. Each group debates the other groups’ position and defends its own. The goal is not to convince others but to confirm that what each group expresses as its position is not necessarily accepted by others.
4. Information, provided by all groups, is analyzed. This results in the identification of information gaps and establishes guidelines for further research on the problem.
5. An attempt to achieve consensus among the positions occurs. Strategies are sought that will best meet the requirements of all positions that remain viable. This final step permits further refinement of information needed to solve the problem.

Although agreement on an administrative plan is a goal of this approach, a full consensus does not always follow. It is important to guard against a win-lose attitude and instead concentrate on reaching the most effective solution for all concerned (Nelson & Quick, 2011). The outcome of a decision can be viewed as a gain or a loss, depending on the way the decision is framed. Therefore, the way a decision is framed (that is, win-win versus win-lose) is very important (Whyte, 1991). Nevertheless, the dialectical inquiry approach can produce useful indicators of the organization’s planning needs.

Conclusion

Today, many decisions in organizations are made by groups, teams, or committees. There are benefits of group decision making over individual decisions. Groups have the potential to generate and evaluate more ideas, and once a decision is made, acceptance will be easier. One common constraint of effective group decision making is groupthink. There are several ways in which an organization can counter the effects of groupthink and improve decision making. It can use devil’s advocacy and dialectical inquiry to evaluate proposed solutions to a problem.

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