



THE POWER OF GROUP INFLUENCE

WHY, WHEN INTELLIGENT people get together do they sometimes make terrible decisions? Psychologist Irving Janis believed that groups can develop a false sense of invulnerability and optimism, which deters members from voicing dissent for fear of lowering group morale.

According to Janis, 'groupthink' usually occurs within highly cohesive groups, led by charismatic and powerful leaders, whose members seal themselves off from outside opinions. Under these conditions, individuals would rather go along with the group than voice their disagreement, and can convince themselves that their doubts – however valid – are trivial. Although groupthink can lead to successful outcomes, Janis argued that it frequently led to bad decisions. It's been said both the UK and US intelligence services suffered from groupthink when estimating the presence of Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq.

Groupthink doesn't just occur among senior politicians – work groups or groups of friends are equally likely to succumb. An effective countermeasure is to play devil's advocate – if one voice speaks up, chances are that others will be encouraged to follow.

THINK FOR YOURSELF

Forming your own opinions and speaking your mind can be harder than it seems. We like to say that we think for ourselves, but how often do we actually challenge conventional wisdom? By Temma Ehrenfeld

Illustrations by Alan Baker

You're at a dinner party and someone asks for your opinion on the death penalty. Chances are you're opposed to it. Of course it's wrong, isn't it? It's inhumane, intolerant and at odds with the values of a democratic society. Well, yes. But have you really concluded that for yourself or have you absorbed the views, values and received wisdom of those around you? Crucially, how can you tell the difference?

Independent thinking relies on self-confidence; the ability to challenge a group viewpoint rather than passively accept the status quo. It also has less to do with intelligence and more to do with

authenticity; being in tune with what you truly think and feel.

And, challenging though it can be, independent thinking brings its rewards. Far from just leading to more stimulating conversations, thinking for yourself also enables you to challenge assumptions that others – such as your parents or friends, perhaps – may have made about you, and which could be holding you back. It lends you the conviction to explain to a boss or a friend that their demands can't always be met immediately, and to be able to show how they can be dealt with later, or differently. It means you no longer have to feel overwhelmed by people in power,

or to assume that those in authority are always right. You bring more to your relationships, because you don't always feel the need to agree – if a partner is upset, you can sympathise, but disagree, and thereby help to find a new way forward. And it can help you with your family and friends by broadening your collective resources. If you're problem-solving or decision-making, you get the benefit of each other's independent thinking. You have more to give because you're different.

Eloise, a 43-year-old TV producer, surprised her liberal family and friends when she admitted her support for pro-life

campaigners. 'I've always held liberal views about most things,' she says. 'But when a colleague had an abortion, I was surprised how upset I felt. I brooded on it for weeks and eventually concluded that I just couldn't support abortion – to me it seems like taking someone else's life. It was a really hard decision; everyone I knew tried to convince me otherwise and I felt as though I'd betrayed my colleague and all women who believe in the right to choose. But knowing I'd had the strength of mind to question what everyone close to me supported was liberating. It boosted my confidence.'

Be original

The ability to think independently doesn't require an outstanding IQ score. Darwin understood that intelligence and mental freedom are not the same. He wrote to his son, 'Many men who are very clever – much cleverer than the discoverers – never originate anything.' The price of too much conformity, for many of us, feels stale, stuck, false and timid.

But thinking for yourself isn't necessarily automatic, or easy. Authoritarian figures at home or in school may well have squashed your first expressions of creativity or independent thought. (Consider that many of the most successful entrepreneurs, such as Richard Branson, Bill Gates and Debbie Moore, the founder of Pineapple Dance and the first chairwoman of a listed company to walk the Stock Exchange floor, were school or college dropouts.)

Society needs our ideas. These days it only takes a mouse click to hear a profusion of voices from around the globe. For better or

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worse, news, opinions, rumours and ideas spread more quickly than they once did, which makes being able to think independently more important than ever. Reading online blogs and messageboards gives us access to a hoard of information that is unfiltered by schools, government agencies and the media – and that's not a bad thing. But it does put more of a burden on individuals to judge the logic and the source. As the problems of the day seem to grow ever more urgent and complex, the danger of the wired age is that we may

casually jump from one intellectual fad to the next.

Throughout history, self-belief has been the bedrock of independent thought. From Galileo, to Freud and Darwin, society needs to have its free thinkers – and sometimes, though not always, it rewards them. Democracies need informed and engaged voters. Justice depends on the juror who cares more about the evidence than beating the traffic home. Unless we think for ourselves, we are only as enlightened as the societies we live in. Remember the joyful crowds that cheered



Form your own ideas

1 Find time alone and relax.

Creativity needs room to germinate, says Lisa Cohen, a psychologist at Beth Israel Medical Center in New York. Our brains tend to agree first – it takes an extra mental step to decide whether to disagree. We need to select our battles, decide what's important and choose to think about it later, or over time – and make sure we do so. If you rush yourself, you're more likely to end up reacting, rather than thinking proactively. Even if there are events you have to respond to fast, it will be worthwhile trying to approach them from a new angle.

2 Talk to the oddballs in the office. Philip Evans, a director of the Boston Consulting Group, says that most offices have a fellow such as Sherlock Holmes' brother Mycroft who is even cleverer than Holmes. Listen to the questions they raise and try to come up with your own more people-friendly solutions.

3 Seek opportunities to draw out people of different backgrounds. Talk to people such as the cleaning lady, and the CEO you bump into in the lift.

4 Pretend you are someone who holds a completely opposite opinion to your own.

Argue as if you were that person.

5 Deliberately look for the mistakes in your own thinking and in what you've heard and read.

6 When information is cited as coming from experts, ask whom, and if that source is truly reliable and relevant. Look for biases.

7 Read in unfamiliar disciplines. If you like psychology, try history or philosophy.

8 What words are you using to describe the problem? Change the vocabulary and see if that changes the problem.

9 Listen to your instincts. Is this REALLY what you think? Does it feel true?

10 Ask the most obvious question, which often

goes unasked – such as, 'Is anyone really going to eat avocado cupcakes? Can we change the colour?'

Hitler's army as it entered Vienna. It took not only courage but also a free mind for anyone to understand that absolutely everyone else was horribly wrong and, sadly, few rose to the occasion.

Say it how you see it

It's not just global communication that demands clear-sighted and independent thinking. Personal relationships can benefit, too. Psychologists say that to communicate well with a partner, we need to be able to reveal our deepest desires and to share our history. This is much easier to do if you know yourself really well – in other words, when you're not unconsciously expressing someone else's needs. For example, your partner is far less likely to listen to you if he suspects that you're spouting your mother's wishes and not your own.

So, however well-formed our opinions are, how can we tell whether we're independent thinkers or not? It's really down to how much you rely on external validation: how easily dissuaded are you from a decision or an opinion by those around you? How often do you compare yourself to others or doubt your actions and values?

Our capacity to think depends on our willingness to stand alone and risk conflict. Many of us have a fear of speaking out because we worry that it may lead to rejection – yet we shouldn't, argues Deanna Kuhn, professor of psychology at Teachers College, Columbia University. 'There's a key difference between criticising an idea and criticising a person,' she explains. 'You can be tolerant

and cautious without withdrawing from a debate.'

For those of us who struggle with shyness or passivity, social psychologist Sharon Presley, director of Resources for Independent Thinking (www.rit.org), suggests reading up on assertiveness training and practising your skills in safe situations. One technique: pretend you're someone else – your pushy sister, perhaps – as you ask tough questions. 'You may find the consequences of being different are not as catastrophic as you imagine,' says Presley. To get started, try saying, 'I'd like to play devil's advocate for a bit...' or, 'for the sake of argument, have you considered...?' Remember that even if you sense a

bad response, you can re-establish the social connection without backing off from your critique. Say, 'Thanks for the discussion. I enjoyed it.' Grown-ups know that they are supposed to tolerate debate, even if they're not feeling

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grown-up. We all want to be liked, but you can be independent-minded and charming, so long as you are respectful and willing to listen.

Put yourself out there

The social psychologists Robert Cialdini, president of the consulting firm Influence At Work, and his colleague Melanie Trost point to another overwhelming urge besides fitting in – the desire to be right. No one likes to admit error or drop cherished beliefs. As the turn-of-the-century psychiatrist William Alanson White once put it, 'The trouble with people is not so much with their ignorance as it is with their knowing so many things that

Signs you're not thinking independently

- You trust your own experience; you don't need any numbers or generalisations to back you up. (This may feel like independent thinking, but, in fact, it's very likely that you've interpreted your experience in line with unexamined conventions.)
- If you don't understand the other side of a debate, the chances are that you don't understand your own. You need to be able to answer the other side point by point. Say you're in favour of the death penalty. Why isn't this murder? How does killing another person make a bad situation better?
- If you know you're prejudiced, or have been accused of prejudice, take this seriously. Where did you get your ideas, say, about people of a different nationality or religion to you? Question your assumptions.
- You rely on or quote experts that you haven't actually read or heard speak.
- You'll judge art (a book or a film) by a single review, even though you don't even know if you've agreed with that reviewer in the past. Or you won't go to a show that's been poorly reviewed, even though you love the writer or performer.
- Everyone you know agrees with you.
- You're angry, hurt or defensive when someone contradicts an opinion or a fact you believe, and your reaction surprises you. You may see the challenge as an attack on someone you have trusted. It could be a sign that you haven't seen things very clearly.

RESOURCES

DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU THINK by Thomas Kida (£9.28 from www.amazon.co.uk)

are not so.' Creative thinkers drop assumptions and look hard at their own thought processes. Human beings seem to be hardwired to make certain logical errors over and over again. Weed out the habitual errors, and you could be amazed at the lovely new shoots that spring up in their place.

Thinking for yourself, at its best, means constantly challenging your own opinions as well as those expressed around you. It takes effort and discipline to keep asking 'Why?' It's also a risk, like many worthwhile

endeavours. If you force yourself, however, it's likely you'll earn your own respect. Conversations are actually more fun if you don't know

Creative thinkers look hard at their own thought processes

where you'll end up. With any luck, you'll bring people into your life who also have active, open minds. Speaking up at work carries the risk of criticism – but it's also one of the most effective ways to get noticed. People are impressed with opinions and views that are well-expressed, heartfelt and thoughtful, whether you are, ultimately, right or wrong. ■

SPOT THE FLAWS IN OTHERS' ARGUMENTS

Diane Halpern, an expert on critical thinking at Claremont McKenna College in California, suggests the following: at your next group gathering, strike up a conversation about a current controversial topic, listen to the discussion and watch for the everyday flaws in thinking below. After a very short time, someone will:

1 TELL AN ANECDOTE

Stories are powerful, but they are always just stories: one person's experiences filtered through her interpretation. Good evidence is more objective, observable by anyone, and rather than rely on one person, it takes into account many different experiences.

2 REFER TO 'INSTINCT'

or 'laws of nature', or what 'everyone knows'. Human nature is extremely flexible – 'instinct' or 'laws of nature' are just as subject to change as anything else. The Ancient Greeks thought

homosexuality was the norm for men – yet now many would argue the opposite and use 'laws of nature' as part of their argument. Accept such terms for what they are – empty rhetoric.

3 ASSUME ONE EVENT

caused another, without proof, simply because they occurred together.

4 OVERESTIMATE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PEOPLE

Let's say Alice is unhappy in her job. Before we start thinking about Alice's faults, stop to consider whether

this is the kind of job in which anyone would be unhappy.

5 UNDERESTIMATE THE ROLE OF CHANCE AND COINCIDENCE IN OUR LIVES

The incredible happens every day, somewhere.

6 RELY ON INDIVIDUAL MEMORY

It's scary to realise that our mental database isn't reliable. But, as Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert points out, our brains are selective – cherry-picking what to store, and leaving big gaps or distortions in our memory.