

Hive Mind and Groupthink

The Curse of the Perfect IPT

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Okay, brothers and sisters, let's take a look at the model integrated product team working in one of our world-class DoD program offices. You have young, talented, well-educated, well-groomed professionals—a mix of military, government, and contract support people—engaged in some high-tech project that promises to be transformational to the warfighter.

The military crowd is largely composed of technically oriented acquisition professionals who have career-tracked from one systems command or lab to another for the majority of their time in the Service. The government crowd is mostly made up of serious, upper-caste GS types—engineers, logisticians, budget whizzes, and contracts administrators. The contract support bunch is probably former or retired military, there to provide depth of knowledge and experience where the rest of the team comes up short. The team members are very likely to agree on politics and worldview (and anyone who doesn't, knows better than to speak up). The team leader is an O-5 or O-6 overachiever, driven to keep the program on track through its milestones and get the product to our boys in Iraq, so they can use it to finish off this fight once and for all and come home in time for the victory parade.

They are a purpose-driven team. They share a common goal and a common culture. They believe in what they are doing.

They also believe their own BS.

The program is behind schedule, over budget, and coming up short on performance parameters. The operational testers are reporting serious effectiveness and suitability issues. The Service's program objective memorandum working group is eyeing the program's budget exactly the way a



***Hive mind:* “A form of collective consciousness strongly exhibiting traits of conformity and groupthink.”**

Wikipedia

Hewson is the program manager of NAVAIR's CH-46 helicopter program. When not on duty, he can occasionally be seen wearing sandals.

pit bull eyes a t-bone steak. Neutral stick and opposite rudder won't help the spin that this program is in. It's time to ride the silk. Eject, eject, eject.

What's the Problem?

Sound familiar? The DoD is rife with programs that fit this description, and no Service is particularly better at producing them than another. We are jointly capable of running bad programs. And while there is a long list of reasons why programs fail, somewhere on each team's list should be a note about its composition because across the DoD, our organization and management of people tend to set us up for disaster.

Which brings me to hive mind and groupthink.

Hive mind, says Wikipedia, is "a form of collective consciousness strongly exhibiting traits of conformity and groupthink." *Groupthink*, according to psychologist Irving Janis, who coined the term, is "a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action." Each term shares the common roots of conformity, unwillingness to dissent, and self-censorship. Combined, they form a noose around the neck of any cross-functional team, producing shallow thinking, flawed reasoning, and bad decision making.

Military and government service, particularly in the weapons systems acquisition communities, tends to appeal to a certain type of person. You don't get many artists, or amateur rock musicians, or neo-beat poets. Patchouli-wearing peaceniks and anti-World Trade Organization anarchists usually don't make the cut. There are very few big-wave surfers, half-pipe skateboarders, or budding concert pianists in the ranks. We are a fairly homogenous, left-brained community that does not strongly value artistic creativity, spontaneity, individualism, or imagination. We suppress dissent like a HARM missile suppresses radar. We tend to be a fairly self-righteous lot, convinced of our purpose and mission. We are a little uptight and very defensive about our programs. All of which makes us good fertile agar for the insidious culture of hive mind and groupthink.

Fighting Back

So how do we, as leaders and members of high-performance IPTs, recognize and avert these destructive conditions? There are some easy, local things we can do to avoid hive mind, groupthink, and the long list of their genetic cousins.

First, recognize and understand the fact that hive mind and groupthink are always lurking in the shadows and are ultimately destructive. Make everyone on the team aware, and make it clear that such tendencies must be battled.

Second, work to create a climate that values dissent. Appoint a devil's advocate.

Open up discussions and demand well-reasoned discourse from every team member. Encourage rational arguments. Engage and provoke people, and demand that they do the same.

Third, when making hiring decisions, look for the outliers. You know who these people are. They're the organizational weirdos who tend to take up a lot of your time with their side issues and interpersonal problems. Often they don't work well with others. Perfect! Find the kernel of genius in these folks and use it.

Finally, reinforce your ties with the end users: the soldiers, sailors, airmen, or Marines who are relying on your product in actual combat. Plumb them for ideas, and bounce your concepts off them. Learn the ground truth for yourself so that you can keep the team headed in the right direction. An infusion of operator skepticism will help cut through the program office BS every time.

Hive mind and groupthink are the antithesis of critical thinking. As professionals entrusted with turning tax dollars into effective weapons systems, it's really our responsibility to make sure that we recognize the risk and control for it. You all agree, right?

Right?

Groupthink: "A mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action."

Irving Janis

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