

Chapter 5

PROBLEMS LEADERS HAVE

WHEN MAKING DECISIONS

The True Story of The Bay of Pigs

Early that April morning in 1961, a small brigade of armed men went into a place in Cuba called the Bay of Pigs. The men had originally come from Cuba, but they had fled a couple of years before because Fidel Castro had taken over the government of Cuba in a revolution. The men were there because a group of leaders in the administration of President John F. Kennedy had decided it would be a good way to topple the Castro government. They knew that less than 2,000 wasn't very many men to attack a whole country. But they were sure that the people who remained in Cuba were also against Castro. They thought Cubans would grab the chance to rise up and kick Castro out.

The brigade of men never got anywhere. By the third day, they were surrounded by 20,000 Cuban troops, and they

were all dead or led off to prison. There was no uprising of the Cuban people. The whole thing went so badly that it has been called the Bay of Pigs fiasco ever since.

But this was not the worst of it. The people in the Kennedy administration thought that if they did this all in secret, people would believe them when they said it was done by the Cuban exiles and not by the United States government. People didn't believe this. People in the governments of other countries in Latin America, including ones that had been friendly with the United States, were outraged. It scared them to think of the United States attacking another country, because then they could be attacked the same way. European countries were upset at the idea of a large country attacking a tiny neighbor. Strong statements against the action came out of the United Nations as well, and there were protests all over the world. The decision to do it had been really, really stupid.

The odd thing about this is that the people who made the decision to do it didn't try to argue that it actually had been a good idea. After all, plans sometimes go badly even when they're made well. But in this case, even the group of people who made the decision could see that it had been a terrible idea.

But it was not only a decision that looked bad after things had happened. They could see that they should have been able to tell ahead of time that things would go this badly. They had all the information they needed at the time they made the decision to show that it was a bad idea. They were really kicking themselves for having done it.

When Bad Decisions Lead to Violence

When talking about it later, some of the men who had been involved in making the decision admitted that they had doubts about it while the decision was being made. Yet none of them had spoken up. The basic problem was that

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each person saw that everyone else was going along with the decision. None of them wanted to be the person that rocked the boat.

About ten years later, Irving Janis was thinking about this and other times when people in governments made decisions that looked amazingly stupid. He came up with the idea of "groupthink." Groupthink is when a decision gets made because of the way a group of people thinks, but the decision is so bad that none of the members of the group would have made that decision if it had been up to him or her as an individual.

There are several parts to groupthink:

- The group members get an idea that they are so strong and safe that they can't be beaten. They think they can do more and get away with more than they can. Because they think this, they're willing to take all kinds of risks that a sensible person alone wouldn't take. The things that they say to each other keep backing this up.
- They also start getting the idea that they are such an upright and virtuous group of people that anything they do must be the right thing to do. That way, they can ignore questions of what really is right, because they know that their group already does only what is right.
- If they get any warnings that what they're thinking of doing might be a bad idea, they either don't pay attention or try to explain why the warnings are wrong. Rather than thinking through anything that they might have assumed, they work on figuring out how to show that what they assumed is true.

- They use all the words and ideas of cutting other people off. They have an idea that some group is the enemy. They think the enemy is too evil to allow a problem to be talked out. Or maybe the enemy is too weak, or too stupid. They don't think about the people in the enemy group reacting to something the same way most people would normally react.
- Members of the group keep themselves from thinking about their doubts. It's not that they are afraid of being punished or laughed at if they let their doubts be known. It's that everyone else seems to be thinking the decision is a good idea. So they doubt their own doubts. If the whole group is behind it, how could it be that it isn't so? Yet the reason that nobody else is saying they have doubts is because they are shutting themselves up the same way. So this idea that everyone is thinking the same way isn't so, but it seems to be so because no one wants to be the one lone voice saying something different than what everyone else is saying.
- Besides, group members are expected to be loyal. That means not rocking the boat or saying something that keeps the group from thinking about what geniuses they are to be coming up with this decision. Sometimes there are even people who take on the task of protecting the group from information that might make them less comfortable about the group and about the decision it's making.

"I bitterly reproached myself for having kept so silent during those crucial discussions in the cabinet room I can only explain my failure to do more than raise a few timid questions by reporting that one's impulse to blow the whistle on this nonsense was simply undone by the circumstances of the

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discussion . . . Had one senior advisor opposed the adventure, I believe that Kennedy would have canceled it. No one spoke against it . . . Everyone around him thought he had the Midas touch and could not lose."

—Arthur Schlesinger

There is another reason why a group of leaders can make unwise decisions about a war. When there has been a war going on for a long time, there may be people outside the situation who can see that it isn't working and will tell the people running the war that they should stop doing something so stupid. This happened a lot during several years of the American war in Vietnam. After a while it became very clear there was no way to win that war. Yet the U.S. government kept fighting, and people kept dying. Why did they keep the war going when they knew there was no way to win it? Because any point when they just stopped and went home would mean that all the effort they had put in so far was wasted. All the lives that had been lost would have been lost for nothing. Rather than admit that they had made so bad a mistake, they kept doing the same thing in order to pretend it wasn't a mistake.

It's also true that sometimes if a war seems to be coming up, leaders get really scared, so they have trouble thinking clearly. People who have studied the speeches of leaders in peace time find them more likely to be able to understand different points of view. This is missing when nations are on their way to war. If both countries are moving to war, this missing ability to understand will show up in the speeches for them both. If one is about to attack and the other is wanting to avoid war, the speeches of the leaders in the one that is thinking about attacking will show that they don't look at different points of view. But for the country that is about to be attacked, with leaders trying desperately to avoid

a war, the speeches will show a very good ability to understand different people's point of view. They have to do this if they think the problem can still be talked out.

How Do We Stop the Violence?

What are some of the ways to stop groupthink? There are several ideas that could help. One is having the people who make policy know about how groupthink works, long before any situation where it might happen comes up. This is the kind of thing where being aware of the problem can keep it from happening. It happens because people don't understand how it can come about.

- When it does come time to make a decision, the leader of the group could offer information without saying what choices he or she likes most. That way, people have a chance to talk about it without a feeling that they're saying something different than what the leader wants. The leader can also make it clear that he or she expects people to have doubts and tell the group what they are.
- In fact, one person can be given the very job of coming up with doubts. This is called the "devil's advocate." This person can be respected for doing something the group really needs, arguing the opposite of what other people are saying. Sometimes the group will decide not to do what they had thought was a good idea at first as they realize it wasn't such a good idea after all. Sometimes the group will see that what they wanted to do was good but that they need to make some changes to make it better, or to keep mistakes out of it. And sometimes they'll stick with the original decision, but because of the arguments of the devil's

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advocate, they know at least that it's better thought through.

- People from outside the group, especially people who are experts in what the group is thinking about, can be brought in and asked their opinion. They won't be as caught up in what other people in the group think of them, since they aren't members of the group and will be leaving it after they've said their piece.
- Members of the group can also talk about the decision with other people they know and trust. People who weren't at the meetings can have valuable reactions and ideas.
- The large group can be divided into two sub-groups so that they can talk over ideas in different places. That way, different points can come up. When the two groups get back together as one, more ideas will have been thought up.
- When the decision has some kind of rival group involved—the “enemy” group—a good chunk of time can be given to thinking about all the ways that rival group might react. How would group members react to the action being thought of, if they were in the rival group? It may be that the other group will react entirely differently, because they have different ideas in their culture or in their way of doing things. But it would be silly to be so sure that they are so evil or so stupid that they wouldn't react the same way people believed to be good or smart would react. Warnings from the rival group should be paid attention to, along with all kinds of different ways of looking at it from the rival's point of view.

- For very big decisions, there can also be a “second chance” meeting. Once people have pretty well decided what the best policy is, there can be another meeting whose whole point is to express doubts and work them through.

Groupthink can be a problem for more than just governments. People in businesses can have the same problem, and so can people doing work for charity or for their religious places or even for the peace movement. In fact, it is not uncommon for people trying to make social changes and claiming to use nonviolence to fall into the trap of groupthink. They make demons out of their “enemies” that oppose them and do things they should have known were foolish.

Governments are the ones that mostly do wars, but other groups can also cause a lot of pain. Bad businesses decisions may just lose businesses money, but they can also make people lose their jobs and their retirement money if the top leaders think they can get away with things they can’t get away with. Charity and religious groups and groups trying to make social changes can lose chances to do good work because of foolish decisions, too. So it’s important to understand how groupthink works when we are citizens watching the government, but it’s also important to watch out for it in groups we might be members of ourselves.



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In spite of all this, it's also true that most of the time, decisions made by groups are actually better than decisions made just by individuals. More people can help to come up with more ideas. One person may think up an idea because another person said something. The idea might never have come up if that person had been just off thinking alone. When people feel free to say so when they think something's not a good idea, then the group can also keep the individual from doing something foolish by making points that the individual may not have thought of.

While he was talking about groupthink, Irving Janis pointed out some times that the decision-making went well, as it should in a group. He thought a decision of U.S. President Harry S Truman in the Korean War counted as an example of groupthink, but that the same president's Marshall Plan was an example of a decision done well. The Marshall Plan was named after George Marshall, who was U.S. Secretary of State then and was pushing for it.

It was right after World War II, and Europe was still suffering from all the bombs and destruction and killing from the war. Since factories and homes had been destroyed, people didn't have food and were going hungry. They didn't have enough clothes, and the winters are cold. As with any war, the people who lost could be fuming and later want to fight all over again. They could certainly want a dictator who could see to it that they got food and clothes and shelter. They wouldn't see a democratic government as worth having if they were still cold and hungry.

So the Marshall Plan did what amounted to a major nonviolence campaign by the U.S. government. Huge amounts of aid were sent over to Germany and Italy and other countries. They gave food and clothes and help in rebuilding homes and factories. After a few years, people were calmed down and able to get jobs and get their own food and clothes and shelter. The U.S. government gave a huge amount of help to people it had defeated in a war. The

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losers of the war didn't need to resent the winners, because the winners were helping them out.

After World War I, the winners had tried to punish the losers, saying it was their fault for starting the war and that they should pay for it. World War II followed just a couple of decades later. But since the Marshall Plan, Germany has become democratic, friendly to its neighbors, prosperous, and hardly war-like. The Marshall Plan was an idea that Congress had to approve and so was a decision made by many people, and it was well thought out. It's a good example of what happens when leaders who make decisions are thinking through all the possible options and talking them out well so that they come up with the best idea they can.

Healthy ways of making group decisions are an important part of making peace. The better we understand how to make group decisions well, and how to keep from making them badly, the closer to peace we will be.