Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences
University of Colorado **Boulder**

Understanding Team Dynamics: Groupthink

By Kayleigh Ward, ESIIL | February 2nd, 2026

What is Groupthink?

One of the most common causes of ineffective teamwork but least visible is groupthink. Groupthink occurs when individuals suppress their true ideas, opinions, questions, or concerns in order to maintain harmony, avoid conflict, or protect themselves from potential repercussions (Janis, 1982). In scientific teams, this dynamic can significantly undermine collaboration.

Groupthink often emerges in two related ways. First, team members may hold back their genuine perspectives out of fear of damaging relationships, appearing uninformed, or facing subtle or overt repercussions (such as retaliation). Second, individuals may choose not to disrupt an emerging consensus, particularly when discussion feels implicitly "closed." In both cases, people default to safer, more conventional thinking rather than offering their best or most original ideas.

When groupthink is present, team dynamics suffer. Instead of critically evaluating assumptions or exploring alternative explanations, teams converge prematurely around dominant viewpoints which are often those expressed by senior members or Principal Investigators (PIs). Rather than taking a stance that runs counter to an emerging opinion, group members may remain silent to preserve their standing within the group. This silence is frequently misinterpreted as agreement, reinforcing a false sense of consensus (Edmondson, 2018).

Groupthink is more likely to occur under certain conditions, many of which are common in scientific environments. These include:

- Vertical organization values, such as strong hierarchies and deference to authority
- Overly directive or micromanaging leadership styles
- Lack of clear ways for feedback or dissent
- Limited experience with collaborative problem-solving or creative thinking
- Feelings of insecurity or low psychological safety among team members
- A history of unresolved conflict or prior instances where discussion was shut down
- Ongoing interpersonal tensions that have never been addressed

Because these dynamics are often normalized within scientific culture, teams may not recognize groupthink as it unfolds. To counteract this tendency, both group members and PIs need to engage in honest reflection.

Useful questions to ask include:

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1. Do people in this group genuinely feel free to speak their minds? If so, how do we know?
2. Have there been consequences (formal or informal) for opposing a leader's or the group's opinion (e.g., being sidelined, ignored, or losing opportunities)? If so, what were they?
3. Are dissenting views welcomed as a valuable part of the scientific process, or treated as obstacles to progress? How do we know if we treat this as valuable or an obstacle?

These types of questions can move groups beyond simple yes/no responses and help team members name actual instances. In other cases, like question 3, it helps the group reflect on their shared norms of collaboration. It is good for a team to have certain guardrails in place to handle conflicts, such as those that may be uncovered by question 2. For example, if hosted at a university, having an advocate or compliance officer available can provide member space to share sensitive information with external personnel. This is especially important, if consequences led to substantial harm to the group member (e.g., loss of promotion, publication, job prospects). If the team is operating within a private company or a non-profit or non-government organization, referring to human resources or engaging a trained facilitator may be better.

Importantly, addressing groupthink does not require forcing conflict. Instead, teams can adopt structured practices that reduce social risk and make dissent safer, especially for junior or less powerful members.

Example Practical Strategies for Reducing Groupthink

- Use discussion partners or small groups rather than large, open discussions to collect ideas
- Silent digital brainstorming, such as using online documents where ideas are added (without attribution) that group reflects upon afterwards
- Explicitly listing pros and cons of different options, again these can be collected anonymously
- Identifying best-case and worst-case outcomes to encourage fuller evaluation of decisions, again these can be collected anonymously

These approaches can help decouple ideas from individuals, making it easier for teams to surface concerns without putting less powerful team members at risk.

References

Edmondson, A. C. (2018). *The fearless organization: Creating psychological safety in the workplace for learning, innovation, and growth.* Wiley.

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