

What Happens When Groupthink Trumps Smart Think?

By Steve Tobak | July 22, 2010

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I once worked at a politically correct company. Seriously, the whole company was that way. Everyone was treated equally, people rarely cursed in meetings, everyone sat in cubicles so nobody raised their voices, very family oriented, the whole nine yards. How it got that way is beyond me. Just part of the culture, I guess.

The bigger question is how did I get there? I'll never figure that one out. The Corner Office regulars know my management (and writing) style leans heavily in the irreverent, no BS, no sugarcoating, non-PC, call-it-as-I-see-it direction. Needless to say, I didn't fit in there, not by a long shot.

Come to think of it, that was the last company I worked for before starting my own consulting business. That's probably not a coincidence. Another little factoid is that just about the entire management team turned over since then. I was just on their website and eight of the 10 executives are new.

In truth, it was a controversial company that had lots of problems and made big mistakes. But I often wonder how many were of their own making. More to the point, how many of those issues were due to groupthink? You see, this company was one of the biggest havens for groupthink I'd ever seen before or since. And over the years, I've seen the inner workings of many, many companies.

Sure, there were some benefits to the whole groupthink thing. In terms of communication and efficiency, the place was like a beehive. Everybody seemed to know what everyone else was going to do before they did it. Productivity was high and so was transparency. But there was a big price to pay for all that. Ultimately, it didn't work. Ultimately, it led to some disastrous executive decisions. Indeed, that's probably why just about the entire management team is no longer there.

Stanford professor **Jeffrey Pfeffer**, who posts here from time to time, recently wrote, "Unfortunately, devil's advocacy is not practiced very much or institutionalized in many corporate decision-making processes, which may be why so many poor decisions are made." He may be right. Honestly, I don't know. What I do know is that, at this particular company, groupthink was institutionalized and the effects were disastrous.

Clearly, some of the best run companies have a common culture. But when it comes to critical decision-making, when everyone starts singing the same tune all the time, something's very wrong. For companies to survive and thrive over the long haul in this highly competitive global marketplace, their culture must value entrepreneurial spirit, straightforwardness, questioning of authority, and devil's

advocacy. In other words, it must eschew groupthink.

I sometimes use a fun term that some of you have expressed an affinity for: "negatron," as in, "Don't be a negatron." I picked it up at the subject company where it was typically used to lighten up heated discussions and facilitate coalescence. Now that I think about it, it just doesn't seem that endearing to me anymore. You might want to reconsider its usage.

And you know, thinking back to the beginning of the story, I can't help but wonder if overboard political correctness is a predictor for groupthink in companies. What do you think?

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