

GUYdelines

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from
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Toxic Leadership

Last issue, we discussed the essential purpose of leadership – *fashioning and then maintaining shared purpose*. Groups need leaders, and well-led groups achieve far more than those relying on laissez faire leadership or anarchy. But are there times when leadership creates or contributes to problems instead of solving them? Some recent research looks at the interesting connection between leadership and *group-think*.

Group-think is that fascinating and sometimes dangerous tendency of members in groups to begin to think alike, and to resist constructive critique. In 1972, Janis offered the signal thinking on this topic with this definition: Group-think is “a *deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures.*” (Janis, 1972, 9). Janis then identifies 8 symptoms of group-think:

1. Illusion of invulnerability
2. Collective rationalization
3. Belief in inherent morality
4. Stereotyped views of out-groups
5. Direct pressures on dissenters
6. Self censorship
7. Illusion or unanimity
8. Self-appointed “mind-guards”

A Case in Point: “A legendary accident in Alaska involved a ten-man team of British soldiers, who set out to climb 20,320 foot Mount McKinley on June 4, 1998. At their mandatory briefing, the rangers at Talkeetna recommended the easiest route, called the West Buttress, because some of the team members had very little experience with the glacier crossings and ice climbing that would be necessary on other routes. Nevertheless, the army team ignored the advice and decided to climb the West Rib, which is Grade 4. As they proceeded in three rope teams, one man fell, dragging the others on his rope down with him. All three people on the rope were injured, but one, Steve Brown, suffered head injuries, went into shock, and became delirious.

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Lester R. Zook, **WILD GUYde Adventures**
1047 Stuart St.
Harrisonburg, VA 22802
(540) 433-1637 lester@wildguyde.com

In all, the group split up a total of seven times, as various members tried to climb down or rescue one another. The expedition descended into chaos as several others fell and were injured. The final rescue wasn't completed until June 22, nearly three weeks after the soldiers had set out, by which time two climbers had spent four nights partially exposed in bivouac bags during bad weather. ... The military uses groupness deliberately to create strong bonds among its members from the squad level right up through the entire organization. Groupness is used specifically to reinforce self-confidence in the group's abilities. That can-do attitude, along with the tendency to reject information from the outside, no doubt contributed to the British team's decisions throughout the incident, from selecting the harder route to attempting various descending routes, despite having no practical knowledge of them. (Gonzales, 2008, 30)

"Research on conformity began in the 1930's and has consistently indicated that a person's judgment, when in the presence of others, will tend toward a group norm." (Moore, 2000, 2) "The nail that sticks up gets hammered down."

What role do leaders play? Recently, Kayes (2006) has done some thinking about the psychology of goal-setting, and how personal and shared goals can become destructive forces. He has coined the term *goalodicy* – a combination of **goal** (*an idealized future state, an optimal outcome*) and **theodicy** (*people who hold strong beliefs often seek to maintain those beliefs even in the face of contradictory information. Individuals rely on future desired states to rationalize current suffering*).

"Goalodicy emerges as leaders and their followers begin to ignore new information, especially when this information contradicts current beliefs about achieving the goal. Goalodicy provides a tool to maintain the motivating power of goals, even when new information may indicate that the goal cannot be achieved. The problem of goalodicy lies in the following complication: Goals motivate leaders and their followers to continue to put more effort into achieving a desired outcome. In many cases, however, the additional effort will not lead to goal achievement. Goalodicy describes a situation in which the more effort that is put into achieving the goal, the more likely the goal will become destructive." (2006, 44)

Straw (1993) refers to this as *"an escalation of commitment to a failing course of action."*

Put this together with Janis' ideas about group-think. What we observe is that ***when group identity and goal striving are intertwined, leaders may in fact wittingly or unwittingly evoke group-think to maintain commitment to both group and goal.*** Can we witness this at work in the story about the British mountain expedition?

Taken together, I would offer a few observations:

1. Reinforcing group norms is not just a matter of a few exerting their will on a group – it is about reinforcing group identity – something, incidentally, that we tend to give considerable time and attention to early on in our program groups and expeditions. Are we sowing the seeds of goalodicy?
2. *"Tightly coupled to a weak chain."* "Any mountaineering party can only accomplish what its weakest member is capable of (Fredston, Fesler, and Tremper, 2000, 4). By reinforcing group identity, we have more tightly coupled ourselves to the weak link in the chain, making escape even more difficult.
3. Let's not forget about "risk shift" – that well researched phenomenon in which being in a group impels people to take riskier decisions than when they are alone.

Think deeply about these ideas, and examine whether there are elements of your leadership style represented here. In the Fall issue of **GUYdelines**, we will look at some of Janis' suggestions for guarding against group-think, and the implications for leaders in shaping a constructive instead of a destructive group identity.

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How was your trip with the **WILD GUYde**?!

"My son in particular and the whole family in general, are still talking about our spectacular day on Sunday. This was a homerun beyond my wildest dreams, and it will remain a highlight for our kids for many years!" (Dad, and family, 2005)

"Thanks again for a great time! You had the perfect mix of patience, intimidation, challenge, and expertise to make it a great experience!" ("Young" couple, 2006)

"Really my only comment was that it was wonderful. I enjoyed having you as a guide, and will certainly recommend you. I appreciated (later even more) that once we were on the rocks you were willing to give us pointers but at the same time, you let us figure it out for ourselves. Thank you for an amazing experience!" (Climber, 2006)

"What a great experience we had! The girls learned so much, and were so impressed with your gentle manner. When you talked to them before they began rappelling, they were absolutely riveted. You made concepts so easy to understand with your calm and kind way of explaining things. The rappelling itself was fantastic! There were several girls that were so scared to begin with, but you were able to talk them through the experience and they said they were so glad they did it. I'm so glad someone referred us to you. We had a wonderful time!" (Girls group leader, 2007)

"Thank you so much for making our 12th anniversary so memorable! Your knowledge and expertise really made us feel at ease and yet challenged us to push beyond what we thought we could do. Our time spent rappelling and climbing was definitely the biggest highlight of our time in Virginia!" (Colorado couple, 2007)