

AVOIDING THE RISK OF GROUPTHINK: WHAT MAKES A WATCHFUL TEAM

When can a team risk becoming too attached to their way of looking at the world?

Recent history offers many examples of organisations derailed by problems that someone knew were there, but which the organisation chose to ignore, or which were not surfaced until it was too late.

Leaders talk about danger signs such as:

- Reluctance to surface issues that could undermine consensus, or damage organisational reputation
- A tacit conspiracy of silence on issues that might be controversial
- Unwillingness to challenge the strong views of influential team members
- Meeting agendas that leave too little time for exploring strategic risks
- Disregard for the views of critics, whether internal or external
- A lack of capability or willingness to question specialist advice, or set it in a wider context
- A relentless focus on immediate issues

To guard against groupthink we have observed teams

- Designate a ‘contrarian’ within a team on particular subjects with a remit to raise awkward questions and unearth hidden assumptions
- Set time aside for the occasional facilitated “pre-mortem”, to imagine a future where they have failed to achieve their goals and consider what is most likely to have gone wrong. What could they do now to address the risks?
- Invite observers to comment on the nature of engagement in team meetings: both what is said and what is not said
- Ask the leader or Chair to ensure that all team members’ views are given equal attention, that diversity of thought is encouraged and that discussion is driven by outcomes, not personalities
- Set up mechanisms to allow staff and stakeholder views to be properly examined
- Equip the team to be an intelligent client of specialist advice
- Use external health checks and lessons learned exercises when the stakes are high.

What risks of groupthink might your team face and what approaches might be relevant in your context? Our current sequence of Prompts looks at how teams can adapt and develop to a changing environment.