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THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN PREVENTING GROUPTHINK IN ORGANIZATIONAL DECISION MAKING

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Abstract

Groupthink is a common situation in group decision-making, where the desire to reach consensus often overrides the critical evaluation of decision options. This phenomenon is more likely to occur in public organizations and bureaucracies that tend to be hierarchical and rigid. This study aims to identify the role of leadership in reducing the risk of groupthink through the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method. Of the 32 articles analyzed, it was found that an authoritarian leadership style increases the risk of groupthink, while participatory, inclusive, transformational, vigilant, and ethical leadership styles have been shown to minimize this risk. This study contributes both academically and practically, particularly in understanding the relationship between leadership style and the potential for groupthink.

Keywords: Groupthink, Leadership, Decision Making, Public Organizations.

INTRODUCTION

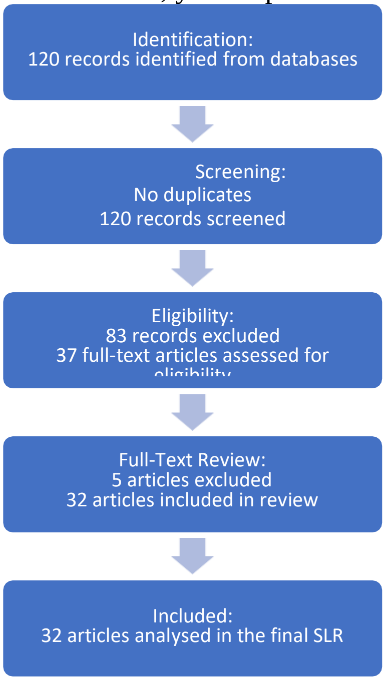
In an organization, the decision-making process is complex. It's common for group members to simply agree with the majority's decision without further questioning. When decisions are made collectively, groups are vulnerable to a phenomenon known as groupthink. In public or bureaucratic organizations, which tend to be highly structured and hierarchical, the risk of groupthink is even greater (Grube & Killick, 2023). This is where the role of leaders becomes crucial, not only as decision-makers but also as maintainers of healthy and open group dynamics. Groupthink introduced by Irving Janis. It is a psychological phenomenon that describes the tendency of groups to achieve consensus resulting in poor decision making. According to Janis (1972), groupthink happens when highly cohesive groups engage in a preferred mode of thinking, where the search for harmony and agreement among members leads to the neglect of critical thinking and realistic alternative evaluation (Griffin et al., 2019). The main characteristics of groupthink are pressure to conform, an increased illusion of consensus, and the disregard of contradictory information. In such situations, group members are often unwilling to suggest different opinions that potentially lead to suboptimal decisions. (Griffin et al., 2019).

The emergence of groupthink is often influenced by factors such as high group cohesion, dominant leadership, and pressure to make decisions quickly. In highly cohesive situations, group members feel bound by emotional bonds and tend to emphasize conformity over constructive criticism (Griffin et al., 2019). Furthermore, an authoritarian leader can place additional pressure on the group to adhere to a particular decision, thus inhibiting healthy and open discussion of all available options. To address the challenges posed by groupthink, Janis (1972) outlined several strategies, namely facilitating open discussions, appointing a 'devil's advocate,' and emphasizes the importance of evaluating and analyzing various alternatives. In this way, groups can improve their decision-making processes and prevent undesirable outcomes (Griffin et al., 2019). Groupthink does not only occur in business organizations but also extends to various organizational contexts, including public and bureaucratic organizations (Grube & Killick, 2023). Organizations with a hierarchical culture tend to be more vulnerable to being trapped groupthink due to social pressure to conform, the dominance of majority views, and the lack of diverse perspectives in discussions (Hoffman et al., 2023). In this context, leadership plays a strategic role in directing group dynamics to remain critical and open to various decision-making alternatives. Leadership in organizations reflects a variety of styles that influence the effectiveness of communication and decision-making. Authoritarian leadership, for example, places the leader in control, where decision-making is unilateral and involves minimal participation from organizational members. Authoritarian leaders establish firm directions, use power to control subordinates, and tend to discourage open discussion (Shockley-Zalabak, 2015, p. 223). In contrast, participative leadership encourages member involvement in the decision-making process, fosters dialogue, and creates a collaborative atmosphere that empowers organizational members to actively contribute to shared goals (Shockley-Zalabak, 2015, p. 223). Furthermore, transformational leadership is also an important focus, with the characteristics of leaders who are able to create an inspiring vision, build meaning through effective communication, and motivate members to go beyond personal interests to achieve larger organizational goals (Shockley-Zalabak, 2015, p. 227). Ethical leadership is also fundamental to an organization's effectiveness. Ethical leaders are not only committed to open and fair communication, but also facilitate diverse perspectives and ensure that decisions reflect a concern for the well-being of all parties involved (Shockley-Zalabak, 2015, p. 247). Ethical leadership encourages meaningful participation, creates an environment of trust, and fosters a sense of shared responsibility for achieving organizational excellence. The combination of participatory and transformational leadership styles, along with a commitment to organizational ethics, forms a solid foundation for effective communication and the organization's long-term success (Shockley-Zalabak, 2015, p. 248).

Leadership is not a simple structural position, but a process of influencing others to understand and achieve shared goals. Effective leaders create an atmosphere of open, safe, and supportive communication, thereby reducing the risk of conflict groupthink. Effective leaders not only set the direction of the organization but also facilitate healthy discussions, promote diversity of views, and ensure that every member feels safe to express different opinions (psychological safety). Previous studies have focused on general organizational culture factors or on group dynamics, without discussing effective leadership strategies in managing risk groupthink this study aims to conduct a systematic review of the literature that discusses the role of leadership in reducing groupthink in the organizational decision-making process. By utilizing the method Systematic Literature Review (SLR) which follows the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. This study is expected to provide a comprehensive overview of leadership styles, strategies, and factors that contribute to creating a more effective and bias-free decision-making process of groupthink.

Methodology

This research employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to collect, evaluate, and synthesize existing knowledge (Fink, 2007, in Dobbins et al., 2021). The review process adheres to the guidelines of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA), encompassing four main stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion criteria (Page et al., 2021). This approach was utilized to ensure the transparency and replicability of the article selection process. The search focused on open-access articles to allow for comprehensive analysis. The keywords used were "Groupthink," "Leadership," and "Decision-making." No publication year restrictions were applied, in order to capture the dynamics of groupthink's development. From the 120 articles identified, selection was conducted using inclusion and exclusion criteria in accordance with PRISMA guidelines. A total of 88 articles were eliminated, leaving 32 articles for further analysis. The data collected included author names, year of publication, title, methodology, and main findings.



PRISMA FLOW DIAGRAM

Results

The results of the journal search in the systematic literature review are grouped based on several criteria, such as year of publication, research methods, and research findings. Structured analysis allows for a better understanding of groupthink and its relationship to leadership patterns, seen from the causes of the occurrence, groupthink and influence leadership towards groupthink. By organizing data from 32 carefully selected academic articles into clear categories, patterns emerge that help understand the various components groupthink.

Table 1. List of Selected Journal Articles

No.	Outhor	Year	Title	Method
1	Maksimova O.V.; Aronov I.Z.	2024	Achieving Consensus in Groups with Low Authoritarianism of Participants in Decision Making	Quantitative
2	Grube D.C.; Killick A.	2023	Groupthink, Polythink and the Challenges of Decision-Making in Cabinet Government	Qualitative
3	Ricciardelli R.; Czarnuch S.M.; Kuzmochka N.; Martin K.	2021	‘I’m not sick!…Are you?’ Groupthink in police services as a barrier to collecting mental health data	Qualitative
4	Mintz A.; Wayne C.	2016	The Polythink Syndrome and Elite Group Decision-Making	Descriptive analysis
5	Choi J.J.; Mhaimeed N.; Al-Mohanadi D.; Mahmoud M.A.	2024	Medical residents’ perceptions of group biases in medical decision making: a qualitative study	Qualitative
6	Christensen S.S.	2019	Escape from the diffusion of responsibility: A review and guide for nurses	Literature Review
7	Pol O.; Bridgman T.; Cummings S.	2022	The forgotten ‘immortalizer’: Recovering William H Whyte as the founder and future of groupthink research	Literature Review
8	Bénabou R.	2013	Groupthink: Collective delusions in organizations and markets	Quantitative
9	Murata A.; Nakamura T.; Karwowski W.	2015	Influence of cognitive biases in distorting decision making and leading to critical unfavorable incidents	Quantitative
10	Hoffman F.; Kesharwani R.; Maynard J.	2023	How an outside perspective can help an organization enhance their supply chain risk mitigation strategy	Qualitative

11	Thomas J.; Li J.; Scowen C.; Eigenstetter A.; Georgiou A.	2024	Emergency department pathology order support tool (ED POST): a protocol using qualitative inquiry to inform design and development of a prototype to reduce low value care	Qualitative
12	Grinnell D.	2023	Corporate Disobedience	Qualitative
13	Singh G.G.; Sinner J.; Ellis J.; Kandlikar M.; Halpern B.S.; Satterfield T.; Chan K.	2017	Group elicitations yield more consistent, yet more uncertain experts in understanding risks to ecosystem services in New Zealand bays	Quantitative
14	Chen J.; Dedman E.; Kim J.R.; Metwally T.; Stark A.W.	2025	Board Nationality Diversity and Firm Value	Quantitative
15	Olabiyi O.J.; Du Plessis M.; Van Vuuren C.J.	2024	Unveiling the toxic leadership culture in South African universities: authoritarian behaviour, cronyism and self-serving practices	Qualitative
16	Fitzgerald C.	2019	Give credit to the market: The decision not to prohibit 100 per cent loan-to-value mortgages	Qualitative
17	Loft P.; He Y.; Yevseyeva I.; Wagner I.	2022	CAESAR8: An agile enterprise architecture approach to managing information security risks	Qualitative
18	Veelen R.V.; Sleegers P.J.C.; Endedijk M.D.	2017	Professional Learning Among School Leaders in Secondary Education: The Impact of Personal and Work Context Factors	Quantitative
19	Ho-Tassone E.; Judge A.; Trant A.; Courtenay S.	2023	Collaborative watershed analysis: A ‘groupthink’ assessment of cumulative effects	Qualitative
20	Gomes P.F.; Reia S.M.; Rodrigues F.A.; Fontanari J.F.	2019	Mobility helps problem-solving systems to avoid groupthink	Quantitative
21	Pillai K.G.; Hodgkinson G.P.; Kalyanaram G.; Nair S.R.	2017	The Negative Effects of Social Capital in Organizations: A Review and Extension	Qualitative
22	Su X.; Wong V.; Liang K.	2023	The indirect effect of autonomy on job satisfaction through collective psychological ownership: the case of social workers in China	Quantitative

23	Wallenburg I.; Weggelaar A.M.; Bal R.	2019	Walking the tightrope: how rebels “do” quality of care in healthcare organizations	Qualitative
24	Coelho N.; Neves A.; Gregório J.	2023	Physicians and nurses professional relationship with criminal investigation in dealing with survivors of sexual abuse: a scoping review	Qualitative
25	Allam A.; Moussa T.; Elmarzouky M.	2024	Examining the relationship between CEO power and modern slavery disclosures: The moderating role of board gender diversity in UK companies	Quantitative
26	Kabel D.; Martin J.; Elg M.; Witell L.	2024	Capturing the voice of the customer: focus groups versus netnography?	Qualitative
27	Bruccoleri M.; Riccobono F.; Größler A.	2019	Shared Leadership Regulates Operational Team Performance in the Presence of Extreme Decisional Consensus/Conflict: Evidences from Business Process Reengineering	Quantitative
28	Schmoldt D.L.; Peterson D.L.	2000	Analytical group decision making in natural resources: Methodology and application	Quantitative and Qualitative
29	Peterson R.S.; Owens P.D.; Tetlock P.E.; Fan E.T.; Martorana P.	1998	Group dynamics in top management teams: Groupthink, vigilance, and alternative models of organizational failure and success	Qualitative
30	Mcphilemy S.	2013	Formal rules versus informal relationships: Prudential banking supervision at the fsa before the crash	Qualitative
31	Bell S.; Morse S.	2013	Towards an understanding of how policy making groups use indicators	Qualitative
32	Kowert P.A.	2001	Leadership and learning in political groups: The management of advice in the Iran-Contra affair	Qualitative

From 20 out of 32 articles analyzed, the article explicitly discussed the causes of groupthink. Studies have identified six major causes of groupthink in the context of organizations and decision-making, ranging from leadership style and organizational structure to social dynamics, sociological factors, and external pressure.

Table Causes of Occurrence Groupthink

No	Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Number of Articles	Related Articles
1	Authoritarian / Directive Leadership	Dominant leader, minimal space for open discussion	5	Ricciardelli R.; Czarnuch S.M.; Kuzmochka N.; Martin K. (2021); Olabiyi O.J.; Du Plessis M.; Van Vuuren C.J. (2024); Coelho N.; Neves A.; Gregório J. (2023); Peterson R.S.; Owens P.D.; Tetlock P.E.; Fan E.T.; Martorana P. (1998); Kowert P.A. (2001)
2	Hierarchical and Rigid Organizational Structure	Centralized decision making, Communication channels one direction	2	Choi J.J.; Mhaimeed N.; Al-Mohanadi D.; Mahmoud M.A. (2024); Coelho N.; Neves A.; Gregório J. (2023)
3	Social Pressure in Groups	High conformity, Excessive cohesion, Desire to maintain group harmony	5	Ricciardelli R.; Czarnuch S.M.; Kuzmochka N.; Martin K. (2021); Mintz A.; Wayne C. (2016); Christensen S.S. (2019); Chen J.; Dedman E.; Kim J.R.; Metwally T.; Stark A.W. (2025); Olabiyi O.J.; Du Plessis M.; Van Vuuren C.J. (2024)
4	Psychological Factors and Cognitive Biases	Confirmation bias, Social loafing, Optimistic bias	4	Choi J.J.; Mhaimeed N.; Al-Mohanadi D.; Mahmoud M.A. (2024); Murata A.; Nakamura T.; Karwowski W. (2015); Hoffman F.; Kesharwani R.; Maynard J. (2023); Loft P.; He Y.; Yevseyeva I.; Wagner I. (2022)
5	Stress and External Pressure	Tight deadlines, crisis situations or high pressure	3	Ricciardelli R.; Czarnuch S.M.; Kuzmochka N.; Martin K. (2021); Choi J.J.; Mhaimeed N.; Al-Mohanadi D.; Mahmoud M.A. (2024); Mcphilemy S. (2013)
6	Lack of Decision-Making Standards	Absence of risk evaluation procedures, No clear reporting standards	1	Hoffman F.; Kesharwani R.; Maynard J. (2023)

The influence of leadership on groupthink is very significant and encompasses various leadership styles. Authoritarian leadership styles have been shown to increase the risk of groupthink on the other hand, participatory, inclusive, and transformational leadership styles have been shown to reduce the risk of groupthink. In addition, it was found that vigilant and ethical leadership is able to encourage a more careful decision-making process to avoid group errors.

Table of Leadership Influence on Groupthink

No	Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Number of Articles	Related Articles

1	Authoritarian / Directive Leadership	Dominant leader, minimal space for open discussion	5	Ricciardelli R.; Czarnuch S.M.; Kuzmochka N.; Martin K. (2021); Olabiyi O.J.; Du Plessis M.; Van Vuuren C.J. (2024); Coelho N.; Neves A.; Gregório J. (2023); Peterson R.S.; Owens P.D.; Tetlock P.E.; Fan E.T.; Martorana P. (1998); Kowert P.A. (2001)
2	Participative Leadership	Encourage active engagement, Encourage open dialogue	3	Choi (2024); Grube & Killick (2023); Ricciardelli (2021)
3	Inclusive Leadership	Psychologically safe environment, Accepting differences of opinion	2	Grube & Killick (2023); Ricciardelli (2021)
4	Vigilant Leadership	Careful decision making, Critical evaluation of available options	2	Grube & Killick (2023); Mintz & Wayne (2016); lainnya
5	Ethical Leadership	Prioritize integrity and moral values, Encourage ethical awareness of team members	2	Studi profesi keperawatan (2024); Grube & Killick (2023)
6	Transformational	Inspire critical thinking, Encourage innovation	3	Mintz & Wayne (2016); Ricciardelli (2021);Grube & Killick (2023)

Discussion

This study reinforces previous findings on the relationship between leadership styles and the risk of groupthink in organizations. From the 32 analyzed articles, it was found that leadership plays a strategic role, acting as both a risk factor and a mitigant in group decision-making processes. First, authoritarian leadership styles were consistently found to increase the risk of groupthink. This supports Janis's (1972) view that dominant leadership can suppress dissent and hinder the evaluation of alternatives. Leadership that is overly dominant, directive, and offers minimal room for open discussion creates high conformity pressure within a group. In this context, team members tend to agree with the leader's views without adequate criticism, thereby neglecting potentially more rational alternatives (Maksimova et al., 2024; Ricciardelli et al., 2021). In rigid and hierarchical organizations, the risk of groupthink is also further elevated (Grube & Killick, 2023). On the other hand, a participative leadership style has an influence in minimizing risk groupthink participative leaders encourage active involvement from team members, create an atmosphere of open discussion, and value diverse views. This has been shown to be effective in preventing the dominance of majority thinking and enriching the alternative evaluation process (Choi, 2024; Grube & Killick, 2023; Ricciardelli et al., 2021). Likewise, an inclusive leadership style contributes to creating a psychologically safe space for team members to express differing opinions. By being open to diverse ideas, groups become more resilient to the pressures of conformity that typically trigger conflict (Grube & Killick, 2023; Ricciardelli et al., 2021). Additionally, transformational leadership has been identified as inspiring group members to think critically and innovatively. Transformational leaders not only motivate teams to view challenges from multiple perspectives, but also foster a healthy culture of discussion that can prevent pitfalls groupthink (Mintz & Wayne, 2016; Ricciardelli et al., 2021). This study found leadership styles, vigilant or vigilant leadership that has proven effective in minimizing risk groupthink. The leader vigilantly ensures that every decision is carefully considered through critical evaluation to minimize the tendency of groups to fall into collective bias (Grube & Killick, 2023).

This study also found that ethical leadership can make a positive contribution by placing moral values and responsibility as the primary foundation of the decision-making process. By implementing high ethical standards, leaders can encourage teams to uphold integrity and openness in assessing each decision alternative (Nursing Profession Study, 2024). This confirms that effective leadership goes beyond providing direction, but also builds an organizational culture that supports diverse ideas, critical discussion, and the thorough evaluation of alternatives. Some studies recommend strategies such as appointing devil's advocate and simulation of alternative scenarios to reduce the tendency for groups to fall into groupthink (Hoffman et al., 2023). These strategies align with Janis's (1972) suggestion to encourage critical evaluation of decision alternatives. By combining these strategies, leaders can proactively reduce the risk of groupthink in group decision making. However, this study also identified limitations in the available literature. Most research is still confined to specific organizational contexts, such as the public sector and healthcare. Further research is needed to explore how this leadership style operates across different organizational cultures, as well as how external factors such as time pressure and problem complexity influence leadership dynamics groupthink in decision making.

Conclusion

This study shows that leadership style has a significant impact on the risk of groupthink in group decision making. An authoritarian leadership style increases the risk of groupthink. In contrast, participatory, inclusive, transformational, vigilant, and ethical styles can minimize groupthink. These findings provide a strong foundation for implementing more adaptive leadership strategies, particularly in complex and dynamic organizations. Further research could explore the effectiveness of specific leadership interventions in minimizing the occurrence of groupthink in various organizational and cultural contexts, for example in government bureaucracies. Bureaucratic environments that tend to be hierarchical and rigid are vulnerable to these practices' groupthink, especially when strategic decisions are made under time pressure or in crisis situations. By adopting a more adaptive leadership approach, organizations can improve the quality of decision-making and avoid the negative consequences of groupthink.

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