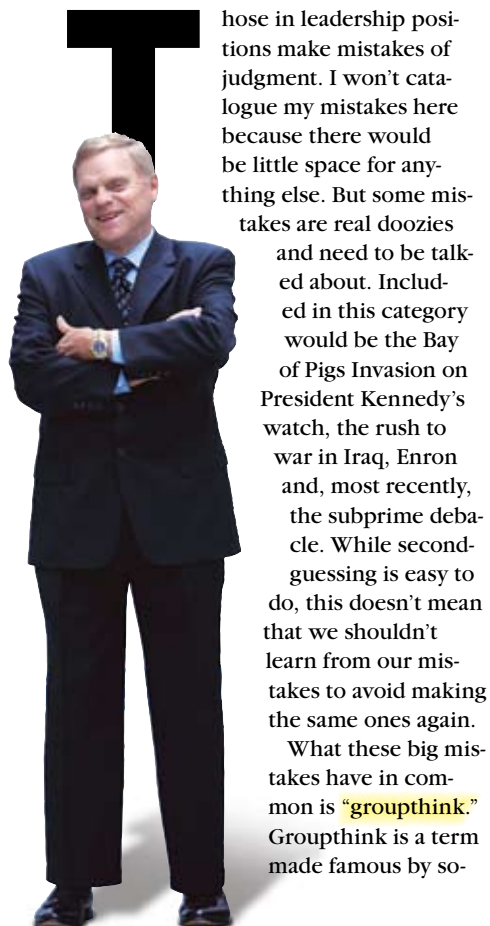


ENCOURAGE CONTRARY VIEWS TO AVOID FAULTY DECISION
MAKING KNOWN AS GROUPTHINK BY KENNETH "BUZZ" A. SHAW

THINK IT OVER



Those in leadership positions make mistakes of judgment. I won't catalogue my mistakes here because there would be little space for anything else. But some mistakes are real doozies and need to be talked about. Included in this category would be the Bay of Pigs Invasion on President Kennedy's watch, the rush to war in Iraq, Enron and, most recently, the subprime debacle. While second-guessing is easy to do, this doesn't mean that we shouldn't learn from our mistakes to avoid making the same ones again.

What these big mistakes have in common is "groupthink." Groupthink is a term made famous by so-

cial psychologist Irving Janis in the 1970s. It refers to decisions made under such group pressure that "mental efficiency, reality testing and moral judgment" are thrown out.

The group comes to a decision with incomplete consideration of possible consequences, and their exuberance for having made the "right" decision cuts off expression of contrary views. Groupthink teams tend to be overly optimistic, ignoring many of the possible dangers to their plan.

Also, team members feel that there is a right way of thinking. The nervous participant sees which way the wind is blowing and withholds contrary views in fear of being signaled out as disloyal. And silence is seen as consent by the rest of the group. So, everyone must be in agreement. This is a great decision.


How else can you explain the subprime situation? Imagine yourself as part of a management team unanimously concluding that there is little downside to subprime lending. The increase in the value of houses and the continuation of low interest rates will result in a win/win for everyone even if there are small or no down payments and a sizable number of financially marginal borrowers. Nobody gets hurt. Seems silly now but not when such decisions were made.

Janis offers eight suggestions for avoiding groupthink. Below is my distillation, take-home points for the busy executive.

- 1) When you and your team have reached an agreed upon decision, before you act, ask what could go wrong. What are the downsides we must consider? Don't expect others to ask these questions especially if you have already given your views.
- 2) Your leadership manner will either encourage or discourage the expression of contrary viewpoints. Sarcasm and negative body language on your

part can block team member's real feelings. It is ok to have strong viewpoints yourself; it is not ok to make others feel they can't disagree.

- 3) If no one ever offers contrary views, designate a devil's advocate for each meeting. It is this person's job to ensure that all sides of the issue are considered. Others will soon give their real views because they have been encouraged to engage in real discussion. Soon you won't need a designated devil's advocate.
- 4) If it is a huge decision, consider getting views from outside the team or company or assign two different internal groups to give their views independent of one another. Implementation can usually wait a few days.

I am not advocating slowing down the decision-making process. There is too much of that already. Rather, I am saying that the best decisions are fully vetted and effective leaders don't allow groupthink to result in costly errors. Remember, both efficiency and effectiveness are important parts of the decision making process. 

Kenneth "Buzz" Shaw is chancellor emeritus of Syracuse University and is the author of "The Intentional Leader" (Syracuse University Press). Shaw lectures frequently on the topic of leadership.

Kenneth Shaw also makes his expertise available to the public through a new leadership podcast series drawn from his book, "The Intentional Leader." The podcasts are available online at <http://whitman.syr.edu/shaw/podcasts.asp>.