




May 2020

How to Take Advantage of Your Entire Group and Avoid Groupthink

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Recommended Citation

Belloli, Ian (2020) "How to Take Advantage of Your Entire Group and Avoid Groupthink," *Marriott Student Review*. Vol. 3 : Iss. 4 , Article 19.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/marriottstudentreview/vol3/iss4/19>

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How to Take Advantage of Your Entire Group and Avoid Groupthink

By: Ian Belloli

The Problem with Group Problem Solving

When working in a group, have you ever felt like you had to go along with the majority even if you didn't agree with the decision? The desire to conform is a powerful element of human nature that can cause us to make irrational decisions. In group setting, group members often feed off of one idea in effort to avoid conflict that may arise as a result of bringing up new ideas or challenging initial solutions. To avoid this effect, groups must take part in a divergence idea generation phase in which individuals come up with as many solutions they can separately. This should be followed by a convergence stage, where the group narrows down *all* ideas jointly.

Group work is becoming increasingly integral to work and classroom environments. Most problems that need tackling require a team comprised of individuals. I'd argue that most teams do not know how to effectively solve problems as a group. Group leaders often make decisions without tapping into the team's full capacity. Frequently, leaders or other members of the group fit their own ideas on the rest of the group and do not encourage anyone to challenge their ideas or criticize, a process called groupthink.

Groupthink occurs when a group of well-intentioned individuals make rash decisions based on a desire to conform to the group. It is natural for individuals to not want to challenge the status quo due to social pressures with the group, perhaps because of a strict hierarchal system or because certain members feel they are less competent or less important in the group.

The Department of Veterans Affairs did a surgical study analyzing wrong-side surgeries, when a surgeon operated on the wrong side of the targeted location. Although rare, the Journal of the American Medical Association stated that this occurs 1300-2700 times

“Groupthink occurs when a group of well-intentioned individuals make rash decisions based on a desire to conform to the group as a whole.”

every year.¹ Surprisingly, one of the main reasons why the surgery was finished on the wrong side of the body was because although others in the room often recognized the mistake, no one spoke up about it to the surgeon.² This is an example of how culturally, we as a society tend to conform and not challenge the status quo, giving way to groupthink.

As Art Markman explained, there are two main reasons why people fall into the groupthink dilemma. One, very few people are formally trained in creative problem-solving through their education. Two, rarely do people understand group dynamics enough to harness their full potential.³

Understandably, the educational system most of society experiences is very structured. However, this structure can disincentivize creativity in the classroom. In the classroom, students are rewarded for following the regimented process that is being taught to get the correct answer. Rarely are students rewarded for deviating from the regimented path in attempting to solve a problem.

Even in my undergraduate schooling, I have felt lost when an assignment has no template or little to no instructions. *The questions we typically ask as students are (1) what is the right answer and (2) how do I get to the right answer.* We are so used to being given the roadmap to the correct answer that we shut down when we are just given a compass.

After receiving such schooling, we like receiving the answer and the process without having to come up with it by ourselves. This lends heavily to the fact that we tend to conform to an answer that is given to us in a group setting without challenging it.

“We are so used to being given the roadmap to the *correct* answer that we shut down when we are just given a compass.”



Though most of us will not be in a surgical room deciding whether we should ask the surgeon whether he is operating on the right side of the patient's body, there are many instances in which groupthink can abound in our work and school settings. When deciding how to increase revenue, which new products to launch, who to hire out of a group of candidates, or when launching a new marketing campaign, groupthink lies as a potential threat to the success of your team

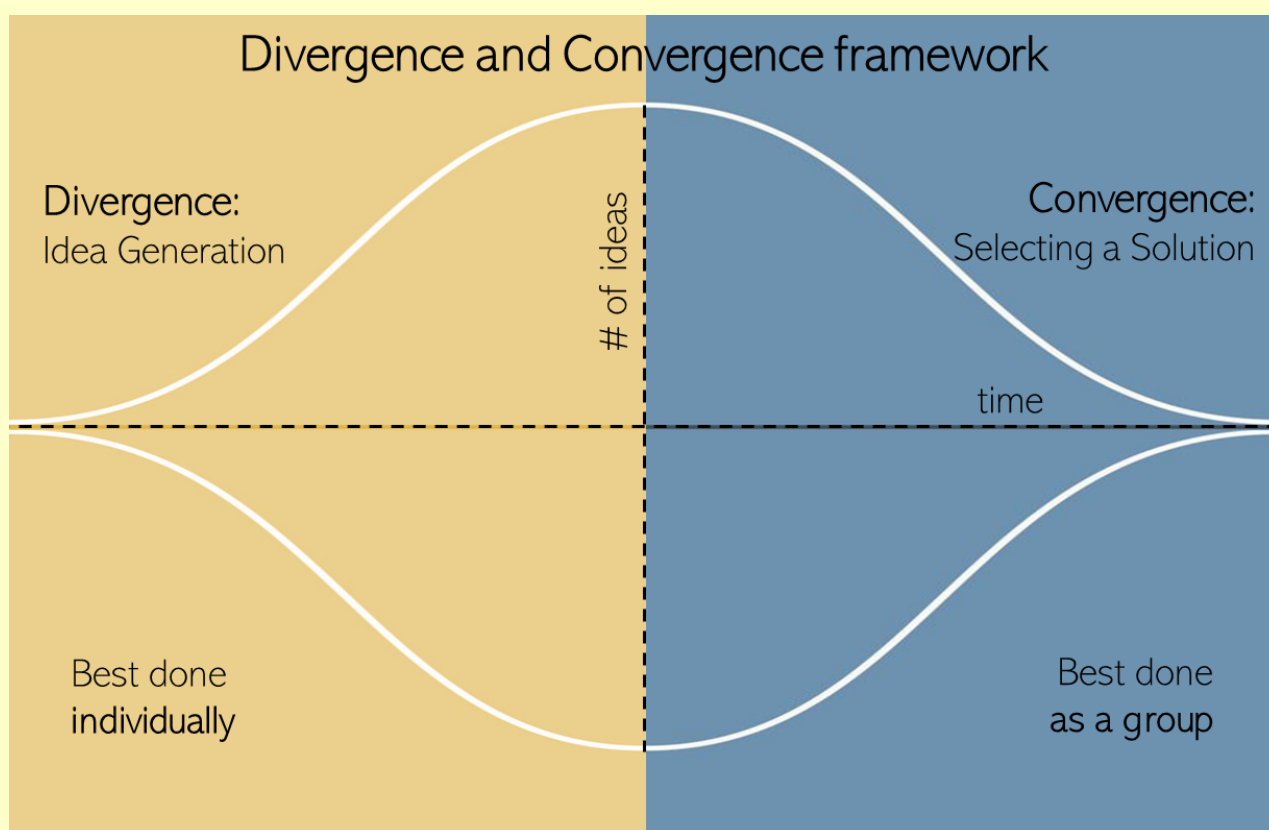
The Solution to Groupthink

In order to avoid groupthink, groups must create ideas individually, often referred to as divergence, and select a solution as a group, often called convergence.

Divergence is the process of generating ideas for a solution. For divergence to be most effective, a leader must encourage the divergence phase to happen individually. For a group to get the largest number of ideas, this phase is done individually. Perhaps a leader can hand out a number of sticky notes to each individual and give everyone in the room five minutes to fill out as many potential solutions to the problem they are trying to solve.

If divergence is to be done as a group, the group must understand that there is a set limit of time that will be spent on idea generation and not idea criticism. The leader of this group would then be in charge of exploring all avenues of the ideas that are generated. Overall, *the purpose of the divergence stage is to get the most amount of ideas out there and encourage all group members to stretch their thinking and creativity.*

Convergence, on the other hand, is the process of reflecting on the ideas generated and narrowing down the options. This is where the group must switch mindsets and begin to think about feasibility of the ideas and the pros and cons of each one.



There are several ways convergence can be done. One proven introductory technique is to have every member of the group privately vote for the top three (or any number the leader chooses) ideas that were generated by the divergence phase. Private voting highlights true opinions that may have been masked by groupthink if it were a public vote. After counting the votes, the team will begin to see a ranking of ideas and they will be able to eliminate the bottom half of ideas that were not voted on.

From that point, the group can begin to analyze the top ideas. Developing pro and con lists is an effective way to generate good analysis and to incentivize any flaws or opportunities in a specific solution. An effective leader will be able to use questions to push the reasoning for pros and cons brought up in the discussion. Ideas like, “what led you to that conclusion?” or “what data would you need to have to change your mind about that?” are effective in probing reasoning. Overall, *the purpose of the convergence stage is to narrow down the options through logical analysis.*

What we naturally do in problem solving is mesh convergence and divergence together. For example, someone in an executive meeting may suggest a solution to an issue the company is facing while someone else immediately says something like, “We did that last year. That did not work at all” or perhaps, “There is no way we could afford that.” Divergence immediately followed by convergence is dangerous. Both processes at the same time put the divergence stage to the stop. It disincentivizes idea exploration because group members are then thinking about an idea that will not easily be shut down by someone else. This process eliminates creativity and limits the power of diverse teams in coming up with solutions.

Alex Osborn, an advertising executive from the 1950s, is known as the “father of brainstorming”. His theory was that idea generation was best done as a group where you toss out as many ideas as possible, build off each other’s ideas, and avoid criticism early on. As intuitive as that may

sound, there have been decades of studies⁴ proving that this method creates a convergence on idea generation too early on. Groups that use this traditional approach on average will be less effective and less creative in comparison to those that use the divergence and convergence approach. As Art Markman writes in his HBS article entitled, “Your Team Is Brainstorming All Wrong”,

“When people work together, their ideas tend to converge. As soon as one person throws out an idea, it affects the memory of everyone in the group and makes them think a bit more similarly about the problem than they did before. In contrast, when people work alone, they tend to diverge in their thinking, because everyone takes a slightly different path to thinking about the problem.”

Call to Action

The concepts of divergence and convergence are not rocket science. Teams who have the proper training and understanding of these concepts can have effective and unbiased problem-solving processes set in place. In my opinion, a leader must understand these concepts as do the members of the team. A leader wanting an effective problem-solving session should spend a few minutes explaining the process of divergence and convergence before initiating this process.

Thinking about this divergence and convergence framework can be useful in putting together a team. In other words, a business owner should look to hire employees who have a demonstrated history of challenging the status quo. A perfect candidate is one that will know when to push and question, but also one that will know when to proceed with a solution given a certain level of ambiguity. Overall, the divergence and convergence framework leads to greater efficiency within team problem solving while minimizing the loss of creativity that comes from groupthink.

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