

When Two Heads Aren't Better Than One: Conformity in a Group Activity

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Abstract

Group and team class decision-making activities often focus on demonstrating that “two heads are better than one.” Typically, students solve a problem or complete an assessment individually, then in a group. Generally, the group does better and that is what the students learn. However, if that is all such an activity conveys, then a significant teachable moment has been missed. It is often the case that a group member has one or more correct answers that the group did not use, or perhaps even outscores the group. The simple activity described here provides an opportunity to discuss a number of reasons that can cause such conformity to happen, integrating several areas of human psychology and behavior, and then segue into techniques to prevent it.

Keywords

group decision making, conformity, groupthink, individual differences, social norms

“Groups generally make better decisions than individuals.” Right? Is that not one of the key lessons of groups that research established very early and that shows up regularly in OB textbooks? After all, groups have a greater number of different ideas and bring different specializations to the table (Schmidt, Montoya-Weiss, & Massey, 2001). Although subject to groupthink (Callaway & Esser, 1984; Janis, 1982; Park,

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1990), risky shift (Myers & Arenson, 1972; Stoner, 1968), and common information bias (Stasser & Titus, 1985), groups can and—more often than not—do make more rational decisions than individuals (Kugler, Kausel, & Kocher, 2012). Decisions made by groups are more likely to be accepted by group members than decisions made by individuals (Maier, 1967; Weiner, 1977).

But wait, there is more—there is a problem in many groups. Group members may ignore the contribution of a member who has a great idea—sometimes even the one right idea. Conformity pressure may be so strong that a group member may not even share an idea or answer.

The activity presented in this article is intended to pounce on the teachable moment that occurs when group conformity pressure outweighs good ideas. Awareness and mitigation of conformity pressures can enhance group functioning in the classroom and beyond. This activity is suitable for any class where group and team concepts are taught, such as Principles of Management and Organizational Behavior, as well as any class that utilizes intact groups or teams for most or all of the semester. With a deeper debriefing and discussion, it can be suitable for higher level undergraduate and entry-level graduate students.

Andragogically, this activity allows students to explore the factors that cause group conformity, while engaging higher level cognitive processes (application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) of Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956). Application and analysis come into play when students attribute conforming behavior to possible causes, and improving group processes based on these determinations involves synthesis and evaluation.

Theoretical Foundation of Group Conformity

Conformity is behavior that enables individuals to fit in with the group (Coults & van Leeuwen, 2015). Research over the past century primarily focused on the impact of social norms (Asch, 1955) on behaviors that tended to increase social approval (Nord, 1969). Recent research is more focused on the biological and evolutionary causes of conformity (Claidière & Whiten, 2012) but has not yet provided better explanations for such behavior than psychology has.

Highly cohesive groups tend to experience greater conformity pressures (Hogg & Hains, 1998); individuals rarely offer conflicting ideas for fear of social sanction, and groups often ignore those that are presented. Although conformity pressure tends to increase with group size, it exists in groups as small as three individuals (Asch, 1955).

Group conformity can stifle critical thinking (Blake & Mouton, 1985) and is associated with poor decision making due to groupthink (Callaway & Esser, 1984). It can extend to the Asch Effect, where individuals yield to a group even when confronted with an obviously wrong answer (Asch, 1955).

A number of factors can contribute to conformity, largely due to differences between individuals in the group. Some of these factors are personality, and differences in culture, status, and conflict and negotiation styles. We explore them further in the debriefing section.

The Activity

The activity is a significant extension of Marchese's (2006) "two heads" state capital exercise. It is straightforward, requires minimal resources, and works for any class size above five students, although it tends to work better in larger classes. All that is needed before class is for the instructor to make one copy per student of "The Fifty States" sheet (in Appendix A; also available online at <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/2379298116676596>) and print one reference copy of the answer sheet.

Step 1: Preparation (2-5 Minutes)

Ask students to turn off and put away all Internet-accessible electronic devices. Then provide each one with a copy of "The Fifty States" sheet.

Step 2: Individual Phase (10 Minutes)

The students' objective is to write the name of each of the state capitals next to the state.

Step 3: Group Phase (10-15 Minutes)

The instructor puts students into groups, preferably of four to five people, though larger sizes will work. Each group's task is to agree on answers. Each student records the group's answers.

Step 4: Give Answers (5 Minutes)

The instructor reviews the names of the state capitals, and the students then score their responses by tallying the number of correct individual and group answers. Sometimes there is a student who will outperform his or her group, but most groups outperform individuals within the group.

Debriefing (30-40 Minutes)

Step 5a: Group Decision-Making Benefit

Initially, students are asked what the point of the exercise is. The typical student response is that "two heads are better than one," which often leads to a discussion on the benefits of group decision making. Although this was Marchese's (2006) original point, we have found that there is much more to be learned from this simple exercise.

Step 5b: Group Conformity Impact

Since the real point of the activity is to explore the concept of group conformity, the next question is to ask if anyone had a correct individual answer that was not agreed

to by the group. This situation occurs frequently; indeed, it is rare to find that it has not occurred (unless the class is extremely small).

If it has occurred, one of two situations exists. Most commonly, students offered the answer, but it was rejected or ignored by their group. In this case, the instructor should probe for reasons it might have happened. This is a good time to capture the reasons on the board, flip chart, and so on. The reasons are likely to be any or all of the reasons that create conformity pressures.

A somewhat more delicate situation can occur when students never mentioned the answer. Sometimes, they were unsure of the answer, but this reticence can also be caused by introversion, cultural differences, and low status, particularly when the group is dominated by outspoken, high-status members. The students may fear that others may disagree with them and that speaking may result in social sanction (Packer, 2009). Probing for reasons may need to be somewhat more subtle, especially if either personality or cultural values are involved. General questioning, such as asking “Why might *a person* be uncomfortable even suggesting an answer here?” can deflect attention from an individual who may become uncomfortable as the center of discussion. There are numerous reasons an individual might conform, and we explore a variety of common conformity factors below. Also, because a class may need “breadcrumbs” from the instructor to uncover the factors, Appendix B contains a table that maps these factors along with cue questions for the class.

Conformity Factors

Personality

Extraversion has been found to have a significance and positive (albeit curvilinear) relationship with task-based group performance (Waldman, Atwater, & Davidson, 2004), specifically strategy generation, which involves considerable decision making.

Cultural Differences

Studies (Bond & Smith, 1996; Hofstede, 2001) have found that collectivism is associated with higher levels of group norm compliance and modesty, and a tendency to avoid the limelight. Hence, group members from collective cultures may tend toward greater conformity.

Similarly, group members from cultures with higher power distance (Hofstede, 1998, 2001) will tend to defer to the acknowledged group leaders and ignore contributions from others. Also, feminine cultures tend to be more focused on relationships. Individuals from these cultures will tend to play ingratiating team roles and not push their perspectives on others (Hofstede, 2001).

Status Differences

Dominance and need for power can be at play. Parties with a high degree of power tend to take a coercive approach in negotiations (Lin & Miller, 2003), which tends to

silence others. Moreover, less dominant individuals tend to engage in concurrence-seeking behaviors (Callaway, Marriott, & Esser, 1985).

Research (Kirchmeyer, 1993; Kirchmeyer & Cohen, 1992) indicates that ethnic minorities contribute to group decisions at lower levels; similar results have been found for females in mixed gender groups (Skvoretz, 1988). Their lower status may contribute to an unwillingness to argue in favor of their correct answers.

Conflict Management Style Differences

Kuhn and Poole (2000) found that groups that developed collaborative norms for decision making were more effective than groups utilizing other norms. This difference was particularly striking for groups that utilized confrontation or avoidance norms and for groups that did not develop stable norms at all. If group members are invested in their ideas and have incompatible conflict management styles (Thomas, 1992), the group may not accept ideas introduced by less assertive members, such as those with avoiding and accommodating styles.

Step 5c: Reducing Conformity Pressures

Once the instructor has recorded the class' list of reasons, attention can be turned to mitigating the conformity. Students need to understand that awareness of social pressures is a key first step. After a short discourse on the difference between idea generation and decision making, the instructor can then ask students to suggest ideas to minimize conformity and groupthink. For idea generation, individual quiet time, disallowing criticism of suggestions, and actively seeking the input of all group members should make the list. Having enough time and appointing a devil's advocate can help avoid poor decisions, as can group leaders who do not express opinions early in the decision process.

This brainstorming can be expanded into a productive discussion of overall idea and decision processes using a technique such as de Bono's (1985) *Six Thinking Hats*, which is especially useful for higher level students. The *Six Thinking Hats* decision-making technique supports ALL team members while minimizing groupthink. Appendix C contains instructions for the use of *Six Thinking Hats*.

Step 5d: Reflection

Assigning a short reflection paper to be completed outside of class is a helpful way to encourage students to think more deeply about the activities and outcomes and to cement the learning. It also allows students to explore and express ideas they may have been uncomfortable voicing in class. Typical instructions for such a paper ask students who did not contribute a correct answer to discuss why that happened and what might produce a different outcome in a similar situation. Other students are prompted to consider (in this setting or another) if they have ever inadvertently hindered anyone from expressing a correct or better answer and what behaviors might prevent it from happening again or in the future.

Possible Activity Variations

If time is limited, the instructor can pick a handful of states near his or her institution and another handful at a distance. This variation addresses the time constraint while typically producing similar results. Since classes frequently have international students, countries and their capitals can be substituted for the 50 American states.

Time permitting, another alternative involves two rounds. The list of states could be split into two lists of 25, with each list containing different states. In Round 1, one list would be distributed and the exercise run as described above. Round 2 would be run with the other list using some of the techniques designed to minimize group conformity. Debriefing would proceed as above but would include a discussion of differences in results between rounds and of the effectiveness of the techniques selected in Round 2.

Summary

This simple activity allows the instructor to not only illustrate a common principle—that groups can utilize the inputs of all members to create better answers—but also that it does not happen in every case and possible reasons why. It allows students to explore their own group processes and potentially improve them while requiring them to apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate the course material. Hence, it has the hallmark of the critical thinking that management educators need to foster in today's students (Athanassiou, McNett, & Harvey, 2003).

Appendix A

The 50 States

Without using any electronic devices, write the capital of each state next to the state.

State	Capital		State	Capital	
	Your answer	Group answer		Your answer	Group answer
Alabama	_____	_____	Montana	_____	_____
Alaska	_____	_____	Nebraska	_____	_____
Arizona	_____	_____	Nevada	_____	_____
Arkansas	_____	_____	New Hampshire	_____	_____
California	_____	_____	New Jersey	_____	_____
Colorado	_____	_____	New Mexico	_____	_____
Connecticut	_____	_____	New York	_____	_____
Delaware	_____	_____	North Carolina	_____	_____
Florida	_____	_____	North Dakota	_____	_____
Georgia	_____	_____	Ohio	_____	_____
Hawaii	_____	_____	Oklahoma	_____	_____
Idaho	_____	_____	Oregon	_____	_____
Illinois	_____	_____	Pennsylvania	_____	_____
Indiana	_____	_____	Rhode Island	_____	_____
Iowa	_____	_____	South Carolina	_____	_____
Kansas	_____	_____	South Dakota	_____	_____
Kentucky	_____	_____	Tennessee	_____	_____
Louisiana	_____	_____	Texas	_____	_____
Maine	_____	_____	Utah	_____	_____
Maryland	_____	_____	Vermont	_____	_____
Massachusetts	_____	_____	Virginia	_____	_____
Michigan	_____	_____	Washington	_____	_____
Minnesota	_____	_____	West Virginia	_____	_____
Mississippi	_____	_____	Wisconsin	_____	_____
Missouri	_____	_____	Wyoming	_____	_____

Answers

State	Capital	State	Capital
Alabama	Montgomery	Montana	Helena
Alaska	Juneau	Nebraska	Lincoln
Arizona	Phoenix	Nevada	Carson City
Arkansas	Little Rock	New Hampshire	Concord
California	Sacramento	New Jersey	Trenton
Colorado	Denver	New Mexico	Santa Fe
Connecticut	Hartford	New York	Albany
Delaware	Dover	North Carolina	Raleigh
Florida	Tallahassee	North Dakota	Bismarck
Georgia	Atlanta	Ohio	Columbus
Hawaii	Honolulu	Oklahoma	Oklahoma City
Idaho	Boise	Oregon	Salem
Illinois	Springfield	Pennsylvania	Harrisburg
Indiana	Indianapolis	Rhode Island	Providence
Iowa	Des Moines	South Carolina	Columbia
Kansas	Topeka	South Dakota	Pierre
Kentucky	Frankfort	Tennessee	Nashville
Louisiana	Baton Rouge	Texas	Austin
Maine	Augusta	Utah	Salt Lake City
Maryland	Annapolis	Vermont	Montpelier
Massachusetts	Boston	Virginia	Richmond
Michigan	Lansing	Washington	Olympia
Minnesota	Saint Paul	West Virginia	Charleston
Mississippi	Jackson	Wisconsin	Madison
Missouri	Jefferson City	Wyoming	Cheyenne

Appendix B

Factors, Cue Questions, and Conformity Reduction Suggestions.

General factor	Specific factor	Cue questions	Conformity reduction
Personality	Introversiion	Who (or what personality trait) is likely to be uncomfortable speaking up in a group?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual quiet time • Disallow criticism of ideas • Actively seek input from all group members, for example, round robin • Assign a devil's advocate role
Cultural values	Collectivism	Who (or what culture) prefers to work alone vs. in a group?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage best product and best member strategy
	Power distance	Who (or what culture) lives by "don't rock the boat?" Who (or what culture) thinks it is very important to listen to "the boss?"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group leaders wait until the end, after others have contributed • Compliment ideas as they are suggested
	Femininity	Who (or what culture) is particularly focused on relationships?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assign a devil's advocate role
Status and power	Ethnic minorities and females	Who (or which people) are willing to defer to others in a group? Who (or which people) may assume that their ideas won't be heard anyway?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively seek input from all group members, for example, round robin • Group leaders wait until the end, after others have contributed • Assign a devil's advocate role
Conflict management	Avoiding and accommodating	Who (or which styles of conflict management) back off or give in when disagreements arise?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disallow criticism of ideas • Actively seek input from all group members, for example, round robin • Assign a devil's advocate role

Appendix C

The Use of Six Thinking Hats

Edward de Bono (1985) analyzed the thinking process and dissected it into six categories. The behaviors in each category comprise a role that he felt that thinkers need to be able to assume as appropriate during brainstorming and decision making. He described these roles colloquially as six different colored hats that individuals could put on as needed. The hats and corresponding roles are as follows:

- *White:* Facts, figures, and objective information
- *Red:* Intuition, emotions, and feelings
- *Black:* Devil's advocate; logical negative thoughts
- *Yellow:* Optimism and opportunity; positive constructive thoughts
- *Green:* Creativity and new ideas
- *Blue:* Process control and meta-thinking

We have found that formally using these roles in a debriefing process can be very helpful. It shows students there are several ways of thinking other than just their preferred approach. It can also be used to take them out of their comfort zone and thereby learn new skills. While de Bono's (1985) hats were typically metaphorical, it can be helpful to have real physical hats available to reinforce that they identify roles in the process.

The instructor wears the blue hat, serving as facilitator of the discussion. The remaining hats represent student roles. When first using this technique, the instructor can raise a hat to signal the type of discussion appropriate at a given moment. If students are already familiar with *Six Thinking Hats*, then the instructor can ask students to announce which hat they have put on when they contribute to the class discussion. A third alternative is to assign roles, along with the associated hats, to students. Any of these actions helps them recognize the different roles that are being used. It also helps them learn to distinguish between facts, opinions, and emotions; observe the process; and identify what may cause emotional impacts during discussions.

The debriefing begins with students taking the white hat role, which is used for reporting information, without conclusions and attributions, as in "just the facts, ma'am." This step is done to establish what actually occurred during the activity.

Once the facts are known, the debriefing moves to a largely green hat phase, as the students are asked to consider the causes of the phenomenon of individuals who have right answers not adopted by the group.

If at any point any students become uncomfortable with the discussion, it becomes a red hat moment to discuss feelings. Another approach is to assign the red hat role to one or two relatively empathetic students to monitor the class for adverse effects. If the activity is used later in the semester, the role can be used to help less empathetic students learn to recognize emotional issues, preferably before conflict arises. Ideally, the red hat is a signal that it is okay to share injured feelings as well as positive ones. It can

help distinguish issues arising from the delivery and phrasing of a suggestion from the content of an idea.

When the instructor is satisfied that the students have identified a sufficiently complete list of potential behavioral causes, the discussion can turn to how to use this information to improve teamwork, which primarily involves the yellow hat—generating positive ideas for future use.

The black hat role is the critiquing role and comes into play at this point more than at other times. In the activity, it is used to challenge both assumptions and propose causes for the observed behaviors. This rule is very important, because the students need to learn how to give negative but unaggressive feedback. The red hat can be used to teach students how best to express disagreement without offending, for example, instead of saying, “That will never work,” say, “I have a suggestion that I think will increase the chances that your idea will work.”

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