Beyond Groupthink:

Developing Community Leaders to Facilitate Effective Decision-Making Processes

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About the Author

Ms. Paxton is currently the senior editor for University of Minnesota’s Extension Center for Community Vitality (CV). In her position, she is responsible for editing research reports written by CV’s community economics and leadership and civic engagement educators. She also writes for the Community Vitality newsletter, *Vital Connections*, which is published for more than 3,000 external stakeholders and other interested community development professionals and organizations. Additionally, Ms. Paxton edits and develops marketing materials, as well as manages internal publication processes and CV’s brand identity. In early 2015, she launched Community Vitality’s first Twitter account and currently serves on the communications committee for the Community Development Society (CDS), which will host its 2016 annual conference in Minneapolis.

Ms. Paxton became interested in the concept of groupthink after reading several pieces of literature about the 1994 Rwandan genocide in which approximately 800,000 men, women, and children perished within 100 days. Struck by the staggering ability of a group to carry out such horrific actions, she sought to understand the power and implications of groupthink as it manifests itself during group decision-making. To further study the theory as it applies to her current work, Ms. Paxton chose to explore the ways in which Community Vitality’s leadership and civic engagement educators can teach emerging community leaders to facilitate effective decision-making processes.
Executive Summary

This study explores ways to prevent groupthink from occurring during community decision-making processes. The relevance and importance of understanding groupthink is introduced, followed by a literature review examining the implications of groupthink within organizational settings. Subsequent results offer a compelling argument for further studying groupthink as it relates to community decision-making processes. Three research questions are identified, which include the following:

1. In what ways does University of Minnesota’s Extension Center for Community Vitality address effective decision-making in its leadership education curriculum?
2. How do Community Vitality’s leadership and education educators teach community leaders to prevent groupthink from occurring during community decision-making processes?
3. In what ways can followers act as defenders against groupthink?

A content analysis of Community Vitality’s leadership education curriculum, as well as in-depth interviews with Community Vitality educators and leadership program participants, is conducted. Results from the content analysis suggest the current leadership curriculum addresses two of the three main symptoms of groupthink—closed mindedness and pressures toward uniformity—as described by social psychologist Irving Janis. The curriculum does not address Janis’ third symptom of groupthink, which is overestimations of the group—its power and morality.

Analysis following the in-depth interviews suggests four distinct themes emerged from each group regarding the most effective ways to prevent groupthink from occurring. Interviews with Community Vitality educators revealed the following themes:

- Questioning skills help prevent groupthink.
- Effective facilitation results in more effective decision-making.
- How to decide is important.
- Creating a safe environment is critical.
Interviews with leadership program participants suggested the following themes:

- Participants are less likely to speak up if they are new or do not feel knowledgeable about a topic.
- Everyone in the group should be involved in the decision-making process.
- Questioning skills are critical to preventing groupthink.
- Diverse perspectives are important for effective decision-making.

Based on findings from both the content analysis and in-depth interviews, three recommendations are provided to help improve the current leadership education curriculum. These recommendations include:

1. Formally introducing the theory of groupthink into the leadership education curriculum.
2. Seeking ways of discussing the groupthink symptom of overestimations of the group—its power and morality.
3. Teaching specific questioning skills to use when a person is new to a group or does not have ample knowledge of the topic being discussed.

Following a discussion of these recommendations, study limitations are considered, as well as suggestions for future research.
Introduction

Common sense suggests that poor decisions often lead to poor outcomes. When leaders engage in decision-making processes that fail to address dissenting points of view or heed warning signs, there is often an illusion of consensus that exists among group members. This type of defective decision-making is known as “groupthink,” a term coined by social psychologist Irving Janis in 1972. He advanced his theory of groupthink in *Victims of Groupthink: A Psychological Study of Foreign Policy Decisions and Fiascos* (1982), in which he examined the faulty decision-making of several American political administrations. In the years following his unprecedented research, fellow scholars began to further examine the proposed implications of groupthink, as well as its impact on organizational decision-making. This research is made more prevalent, perhaps, by the increasing media coverage of organizations that have engaged in poor decision-making and how such faulty decisions have led to unintended, often grave consequences (e.g., Enron and the Columbia space shuttle explosion).

At the University of Minnesota, the Extension Center for Community Vitality has developed a leadership and civic engagement program that helps communities strengthen social capital, encourage local leadership, and create successful public forums where better decisions are made. Between 115 and 300 emerging community leaders participate in Community Vitality's leadership education programs each year. Participants are most often recruited or nominated by past program participants, county commissioners, or county extension committees. An essential piece of the leadership curriculum involves teaching participants how to facilitate effective decision-making processes. Just as it is critical for organizational leaders to recognize the symptoms of groupthink to avoid faulty decision-making, it is equally important for community leaders to be cognizant of its warning signs in order to facilitate effective community decisions.

History reflects the disastrous effects of community groupthink; for instance, lynching occurred in the United States during the 19th and 20th century, causing the death of more than 4,000
people. Other staggering examples include the Jewish Holocaust of the 1940s during World War II and the Rwandan genocide of 1994, two events in which nearly six million and one million people, respectively, were killed. On a far less catastrophic scale, groupthink manifests itself during group decision-making when communities continue on a path for a particular solution, even when it is realized along the way it is not the right one. Defective decision-making also occurs in communities when they fail to include all relevant parties at the table or when individuals dominate the conversation, not heeding warning signs or alternate points of view. It is therefore critical that community leaders learn to recognize the symptoms of groupthink in order to prevent faulty decision-making from occurring during both large and small scale decisions.

**Literature Review**

While a notable body of research exists regarding the negative impacts of groupthink within organizational settings, there is not a significant amount of research that specifically addresses groupthink within community decision-making processes. As a result, the following literature review will synthesize several pieces of scholarly work that consider the implications of groupthink as it occurs in organizational settings. Subsequent findings will provide a strong rationale for why it is also imperative to study the effects of groupthink during community decision-making processes, and ultimately, how to teach emerging community leaders to facilitate effective group decisions.

The concept of “groupthink” first emerged in 1972 by Irving Janis. In his second edition of *Groupthink* (1982), Janis examines major political fiascos that occurred during the administration of five American presidents—Franklin D. Roosevelt and the failure to prepare for the Pearl Harbor attack, Harry Truman and the invasion of North Korea, John F. Kennedy and the Bay of Pigs invasion, Lyndon B. Johnson and the escalation of the Vietnam War, and Richard Nixon and the Watergate cover up. Janis defines groupthink as “a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures” (p. 9). He suggests errors in decision-
making caused by groupthink subsequently increase the probability of a poor outcome and defines the symptoms of groupthink into three main types (p. 174):

*Type I: Overestimations of the group—its power and morality*

1. An illusion of invulnerability, shared by most or all the members, which creates excessive optimism and encourages taking extreme risks

2. An unquestioned belief in the group's inherent morality, inclining the members to ignore the ethical or moral consequences of their decisions

*Type II: Closed-mindedness*

3. Collective efforts to rationalize in order to discount warnings or other information that might lead the members to reconsider their assumptions before they recommit themselves to their past policy decisions

4. Stereotyped views of enemy leaders as too evil to warrant genuine attempts to negotiate, or as too weak and stupid to counter whatever risky attempts are made to defeat their purposes

*Type III: Pressures toward uniformity*

5. Self-censorship of deviations from the apparent group consensus, reflecting each member's inclination to minimize to himself the importance of his doubts and counterarguments

6. A shared illusion of unanimity concerning judgments conforming to the majority view (partly resulting from self-censorship of deviations, augmented by the false assumption that silence means consent)

7. Direct pressure on any member who expresses strong arguments against any of the group's stereotypes, illusions, or commitments, making clear that this type of dissent is contrary to what is expected of all loyal members
8. The emergence of self-appointed mind guards—members who protect the group from adverse information that might shatter their shared complacency about the effectiveness and morality of their decisions

Following the symptoms of groupthink, Janis lists its consequences (p. 175):

1. Incomplete survey of alternatives
2. Incomplete survey of objectives
3. Failure to examine risks of preferred choice
4. Failure to reappraise initially rejected alternatives
5. Poor information search
6. Selective bias in processing information at hand
7. Failure to work out contingency plans

In order for groupthink tendencies to emerge, Janis (1982) explains antecedent conditions must be present, one of which is the degree of cohesiveness of the group. He explains a group must be moderately or highly cohesive in order for groupthink to occur and offers three solutions to mitigate groupthink tendencies: assigning a devil’s advocate at every meeting, surveying warning signals, and having a “second chance” meeting after a preliminary consensus so group members can express any residual doubt before making a decision (p. 270).

Sims (1992) expands on Janis’ original research on groupthink by exploring how defective decision-making contributes to unethical behavior in organizations. He contends that, while many popular media outlets discuss managerial misbehavior, they rarely examine the link between organizational culture and groupthink and how it causes people to behave unethically (p. 651). He also clarifies that, while one may be tempted to link groupthink to government or military settings, evidence suggests that it frequently occurs in the business world as well. He references Trevino’s (1986) prior research on organizational culture and its relationship to groupthink to further explore how corporate climate impacts the ethical values of an organization. To illustrate this point,
Sims conducts a case study of three different organizations—Beech-Nut, E.F. Hutton, and Salomon Brothers—to explain how groupthink contributed to unethical behavior. Beech-Nut, the second largest baby food producer in the U.S., was accused of selling millions of jars of “fake” apple juice; E.F. Hutton, one of the country’s largest brokerage firms, plead guilty to wire and mail fraud; and Salomon Brothers became embroiled in a Treasury auction scandal by engaging in illegal bidding.

In each organization, Sims (1992) found that “individuals were willing to take the approach of ‘Let’s all close our eyes to this problem’” (p. 658). To prevent groupthink, Sims suggests two ways of programming conflict to raise different opinions and allow for more feedback regarding a decision. First, he cites the devil’s advocate technique suggested by Janis, which urges all group members to “present a critique of the proposed course of action” (p. 658). This technique allows possible unethical behaviors to be identified before any action is taken. Second, Sims suggests the importance of the dialectic method for structuring a debate between group members with conflicting views. This technique allows false assumptions to become apparent and heads off unethical decisions based on any faulty assumptions (p. 659).

Prior to Sims, Trevino (1986) developed an interactionist model of ethical decision-making within organizations. She combined individual variables, such as moral development, with situational variables to predict individual ethical decision-making. A major part of Trevino’s model is based on Kohlberg’s (1969) cognitive moral development model, which provides “the definition, measurement tools, and theory base for business ethics research” (Kohlberg, as cited in Trevino, p. 601). Trevino contends that one reason so little empirical research exists on ethical decision-making in organizations is because managers are likely not comfortable having their behavior observed. Despite this fact, she argues it is important to study their behavior because “their decisions and actions can produce tremendous social consequences, particularly in the realms of health, safety, and welfare of consumers, employees, and the community” (p. 601). Her proposed interactionist model suggests that individuals react to an ethical dilemma based on their cognitive
moral development stage. Trevino references research by Carroll (1978) to explain how managers lower in an organizational structure “felt more pressure to compromise personal values in order to achieve company goals” (p. 602). Organizational culture, Trevino suggests, plays a significant part in guiding the ethical behavior of individuals in an organization. She contends a company’s collective norms about what is and what is not appropriate behavior are both shared and used to guide behavior.

Courtright (1978) performed an experiment to examine groupthink under a controlled, laboratory environment. He found that one, it is possible to study the groupthink phenomenon in a laboratory setting and two, Janis’ theory is essentially correct. Furthermore, Courtright found that the presence or absence of disagreement, which he defines as conflict or hostility, among group members may be the most distinguishing factor between groupthink and non-groupthink groups. Courtright predicted that “the higher the level of cohesiveness in a group, the more likely the members of that group will be to heed the experimental instructions given to them” (p. 234). The groupthink groups in the experiment, he hypothesized, would produce the fewest solutions, the greatest number of reinforcing comments, and the smallest number of negatively reinforcing comments. (The other groups, he theorized, would produce differing combinations of these three variables.) His hypothesis was supported, but Courtright cautions against the reliability of the results, explaining that Janis himself said there is not a direct, one-to-one correlation between groupthink tendencies and a poor final decision. Rather, groupthink behavior increases the chances that a poor outcome will result.

Welch Cline (1990) offers a counterpoint to Janis’ groupthink theory, saying while it is “intuitively pleasing,” it fails to encourage substantial research. Her research reconceptualizes symptoms of groupthink as clear group interaction patterns, and she uses two coding systems to detect the illusion of unanimity symptom and to replicate Courtright’s (1978) laboratory paradigm.
The results of her study support the validity of the coding systems used to detect the illusion of unanimity.

Welch Cline (1990) suggests that “when group members perceive that they have arrived at a unanimous decision, they are likely to conclude their deliberations shortly. If their vision of unanimity is an illusory one, deliberations may be halted prematurely” (p. 116). This behavior results in a failure to consider alternatives and may result in faulty decision-making. She focuses her study on how the illusion of unanimity symptom serves as a starting point for observing groupthink behavior. The results of her experiment supported the “discriminant validity of using statements of agreement and disagreement as methods for detecting groupthink in process, specifically the illusion of unanimity symptom” (p. 122). Furthermore, groupthink groups expressed more agreement during discussions than the non-groupthink groups, with no clear difference in the proportions of disagreement.

Fuller and Aldag (1998) also offer a critique of Janis’ original theory of groupthink. They argue “there is little support for the full groupthink model; in fact, in no study have all results been consistent with the model. In addition, Janis made no changes in, or additions to, the groupthink model despite evidence of the relevance of many additional variables, including group norms, the nature of the task, the degree of leader power, and stage of group development” (Fuller & Aldag, 1998, p. 167). Further, they argue subsequent research following Janis’ only adopts a “weak version” of his groupthink model, explaining that, “regardless of the number of disconfirming findings and whether or not that partial support relates to elements unique to the groupthink model, is hailed as further evidence of groupthink’s validity” (Fuller & Aldag, 1998, p. 167). Fuller and Aldag also contend Janis missed key elements of group decision making, saying, “A quarter century of groupthink research has led scholars to confirm that variables outside Janis’ conceptualization are critical to the understanding of group decision making. However, these ‘additions’ are typically factors that the groups literature has recognized as important for 50 to 60
years. Therefore, had the focus not been narrowed to groupthink, it would not need to be widened to include that which was already there” (Fuller & Aldag, 1998, p. 173).

While much of groupthink literature was published during the 1980s and 1990s, its relevance has continued to be studied throughout the 21st century as well. The following portion of this literature review focuses on more contemporary groupthink research.

In her study, Ferraris (2004) applies the concept of groupthink as it occurs within an organizational setting. Her research focuses on how a groupthink culture within NASA contributed to the August 2003 Columbia shuttle explosion. Referencing Janis’ theory of faulty decision-making, she suggests the cohesiveness of an in-group causes group members to view voices of the out-group as irrelevant to decision-making. Ferraris explains that, not only was this behavior evident within NASA at the time of the Columbia shuttle explosion, but also existed when the Challenger shuttle exploded in 1986. Her paper explores examples of groupthink-based decision making within NASA and how such behavior implicated intergroup decisions, communication behaviors, and eventual outcomes.

Ferraris’ study (2004) also reveals the culture within NASA does not accept being wrong. This dysfunctional flow of information caused an environment where no one wanted to speak up or ask difficult questions (p. 8). Additionally, Ferraris explains upper management neither wanted to look beyond the positive surface details of reports submitted by subordinates nor address any red flags that may delay the project. Perhaps most important, though, the team working on the Columbia shuttle project lacked a system of checks and balances and was therefore unwilling to listen to dissenting opinions from other experts (p.11).

Like Ferraris, Cohan (2002) examines the harmful effects of groupthink within a well-known organization. He conducts a case study of the Enron scandal to demonstrate how the internal dynamics of the firm contributed to the failure of knowledge conditions and suggests we can only understand the dissemination of information within a company if we understand the
realities of the behavior within. Cohan introduces the theory of cognitive dissonance, in which the human mind has an innate drive to maintain consistency between its preexisting attitudes and the information it receives (p. 283). He advances the idea that cognitive dissonance causes managers to systematically underestimate external threats to their projects. If risk-related information arises, they may seek to give it a positive spin or to use other defense mechanisms (p. 283).

Cohan (2002) contends that cognitive dissonance manifests itself in various types of bias that impact the flow of information in corporate hierarchies, one of which is group cohesion or groupthink. He says, “Once a group commits to an idea or a course of action, there is a strong motivation to resist evidence that it was the wrong move. This group cohesion phenomenon functions as a stress reduction mechanism” (p. 284). Cohan suggests the danger of groupthink lies in the fact that group members tend to have a strong bias toward the status quo, and “they will subconsciously seek to rationalize away or dismiss any dissonant information, only bringing it to the group’s attention if it is difficult or impossible to avoid” (p. 284). This tendency is what contributed to the Enron scandal.

Bénabou (2013) develops a model to illustrate how wishful thinking and collective denial spread throughout organizations and markets. Wishful thinking, which he defines as denial of bad news, is shown to be contagious in situations where the possibility of bad news results in increased risk or lower expected payoffs. The worse the possible outcome, the more contagious wishful thinking becomes, causing willful blindness (defined as information avoidance) among people (p. 429). Conversely, Bénabou also models how wishful thinking is self-limiting when a person benefits from others’ over-optimism. The person’s improved prospects make him or her more accepting of the bad news, which they ignore.

In addition to these observations, Bénabou (2013) also introduces the principle of Mutually Assured Delusion (MAD). This theory suggests that, in organizations in which some people have a greater impact on others’ welfare than the reverse (for example, supervisors and subordinates),
strategies of realism or denial will "trickle down" the hierarchy of the organization and subordinates will form their beliefs from those of the leader. Extending the MAD principle, Bénabou explains that if a person remains uninformed about information, this will lead him or her to increase the risk borne by others and, consequently, continue to spread ignorance—making it contagious—as it spreads throughout the organization.

Examining the intricacies of group dynamics, Sunstein and Hastie (2015) question the accuracy of group decision-making. They ask, “Do groups usually correct individual mistakes? Our simple answer is that they do not. Far too often, groups actually amplify those mistakes... groups turn out to be even worse than individuals are—which is a clue to a lot of failures in business, government, and daily life” (Sunstein & Hastie, 2015, p. 2). They acknowledge Janis’ earlier work and his theory that groups are often capable of making faulty decisions. They state, “Janis was right: much of the time, both private and public groups blunder not in spite of group deliberation, but because of it” (Sunstein & Hastie, 2015, p. 6). Sunstein and Hastie contend that poor decisions are made because of a lack of information. They explain, “The principal focus is on how groups may fail to obtain important information—and on how their leaders and members tell dissenters, or people who have a different perspective, to shut up” (Sunstein & Hastie, 2015, p. 15). Another reason groupthink may occur is because of pressure to conform to the majority way of thinking. They say, “By imposing pressure on one another, group members may reach a consensus on falsehood rather than truth” (Sunstein & Hastie, 2015, p. 21). Sunstein and Hastie also contend that trying to please the group’s appointed leader is dangerous, explaining that, "In many cases, what matters is the mere disapproval of others, but if those others are important, the disapproval could lead to serious personal risks” (Sunstein & Hastie, 2015, p. 23). They suggest a bit of apprehension may be one way to mitigate groupthink, saying, "Groups need a little anxiety, maybe even a lot of it. They need a culture that enables them to find out what they need to know” (Sunstein & Hastie, 2015, p. 13).
Similar to Fuller and Aldag, Sunstein and Hastie also offer a critique of Janis’ original theory. They argue, “... Janis’s contribution is more an evocative narrative than either a scientific account of how groups go wrong or helpful guidance for group success. Many researchers have tried to experimental evidence to support his specific claims about how cohesion and leadership styles shape group behavior, to little avail” (Sunstein & Hastie, 2014). They contend that groups error for two main reasons, explaining, “The first involves informational signals. Naturally enough, people learn from each other; the problem is that groups often go wrong when some members receive incorrect signals from other members” (Sunstein & Hastie, 2014). They continue, “The second involves reputational pressures, which lead people to silence themselves or change their views in order to avoid some penalty—often, merely the disapproval of others. But if those others have special authority or wield power, their disapproval can produce serious personal consequences” (Sunstein & Hastie, 2014). Reflecting the idea of an illusion of consensus, Sunstein and Hastie contend that, “Many groups end up thinking that their ultimate convergence on a shared view was inevitable. Beware of that thought” (Sunstein & Hastie, 2014). They suggest the leader should remain impartial so other group members do not feel pressured to decide a certain way. They explain, “Leaders can refuse to take a firm position at the outset, thus making more space for more information to emerge” (Sunstein and Hastie, 2014).

Bazerman and Chugh (2006) explore a compelling concept they call bounded awareness, which is “when cognitive blinders prevent a person from seeing, seeking, using, or sharing highly relevant, easily accessible, and readily perceivable information during the decision-making process” (Bazerman & Chugh, 2006). They explain that “bounded awareness differs from information overload, or having to make decisions with too much information and too little time. Even when spared a deluge of information and given sufficient time to make decisions, most individuals still fail to bring the information into their conscious awareness at the right time” (Bazerman & Chugh, 2006). Similar to the observation of Sunstein and Hastie, Bazerman and Chugh
mention the pressure to make a decision one feels *should* be made. They say, "The most worrisome version of the failure to seek information occurs when decision makers are motivated to favor a particular outcome" (Bazerman & Chugh, 2006). They cite the Bush administration's faulty decision to invade Iraq, as there was no evidence to indicate weapons of mass destruction actually existed.

**Research Questions**

Literature review findings offer a compelling rationale for understanding—and seeking to prevent—the impacts of groupthink within community decision-making processes. As a result, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. *In what ways does University of Minnesota’s Extension Center for Community Vitality address effective decision-making in its leadership education curriculum?*

2. *How do Community Vitality’s leadership and education educators teach community leaders to prevent groupthink from occurring during community decision-making processes?*

3. *In what ways can followers act as defenders against groupthink?*

**Method 1: Content Analysis**

To examine the ways in which Community Vitality's current leadership education addresses effective decision-making, a content analysis of its leadership curriculum was performed. Access to the curriculum was provided by Community Vitality's leadership and development specialist and included five written leadership workshops, totaling 19 hours of classroom instruction. Portions of the curriculum that address groupthink symptoms were coded by the author against Janis’ original three categories:

*Type I: Overestimations of the group—its power and morality*

*Type II: Closed-mindedness*

*Type III: Pressures toward uniformity*
Leadership cohorts are taught in person by educators. The curriculum for each workshop is available online, accessible to educators via a shared Google site. If needed, handouts are provided to participants to help explain a relevant concept or for individual or group learning activities. Most programs are funded through a mix of sponsor or partner money, participant fees, or Extension resources.

It should be noted that Community Vitality’s leadership education curriculum neither specifically discusses the theory of groupthink nor labels any type of behavior as such. Despite this fact, however, the curriculum does include many instances in which the elements of effective decision-making address groupthink symptoms, such as closed-mindedness and pressures toward uniformity, as identified by Janis. Results of the content analysis reflect these particular instances.

Additionally, findings from the content analysis highlight Community Vitality’s concept of courageous followership, which addresses the importance of how group members who are not in a role of positional leadership—who are instead followers—can also facilitate effective decision-making processes. While it is important for leaders to recognize groupthink symptoms, it is reasonable to assume they will not always hold a leadership position in every group setting; during these occasions, then, it is critical they seek to prevent groupthink as followers as well. Portions of the leadership education curriculum that address this particular concept were also coded against Janis’ original symptoms of groupthink. For complete coding results, see Appendix A.

**Method 1: Results**

Of the 19 hours of classroom instruction, 16 separate statements or individual or group activities of Community Vitality’s leadership education curriculum address Janis’ groupthink symptom of closed-mindedness. Examples of these particular instances include performing participant activities, such as a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis, a data dump (brainstorming), a force field analysis (weighing the forces for and against a particular decision),
and a best and worst case scenario. Other parts of the curriculum address steps of an effective decision-making process, which include enabling group members to feel involved and influential, developing questioning skills, recognizing the importance of diversity and cultural intelligence, unpacking assumptions, and identifying personal blind spots. The workshop that contains the most references to preventing closed-mindedness is “Different Trails, Different Viewpoints,” with six examples; the workshop with the second most references is “Facilitation Processes that Define Direction,” with five instances. One workshop, “Leadership Strengths & Group Dynamics,” did not include any specific references to preventing closed-mindedness.

Regarding the concept of courageous followership, the workshop “Tenets of Effective Followership” addresses closed-mindedness three separate times. These instances include teaching followers how to use language that increases influence and effectiveness, how to demonstrate courage to stand up to and for leaders, and how to challenge and speak to hierarchy.

Thirteen aspects of the leadership and education curriculum address Janis’ groupthink symptom of pressures toward uniformity. Each of these instances also overlap with those addressing closed-mindedness, with the exception of a piece of the “Leadership Strengths & Group Dynamics” workshop, which also emphasizes the importance of effective leaders understanding their followers’ needs. Examples addressing pressures toward uniformity in the “Tenets of Effective Followership” workshop also overlap with those regarding closed-mindedness, as mentioned above.

There are no instances within the leadership education curriculum that address Janis’ groupthink symptom of overestimations of the group—its power and morality. The absence of this information presents an opportunity for the curriculum team to explore ways of teaching community leaders how to prevent an illusion of invulnerability from occurring during decision-making processes. As Janis explains, this symptom is important to recognize because it creates excessive optimism and encourages taking extreme risks. Additionally, addressing this symptom
will help community leaders realize the value of considering the ethical or moral consequences of their decisions.

**Method 2: In-Depth Interviews with Educators**

To explore how Community Vitality’s leadership and civic engagement educators teach effective decision-making in their leadership programs, in-depth interviews were conducted with five educators. Each was invited to interview because he or she had helped create, adapt, or compile the Community Vitality leadership education curriculum. (Individual names were identified on curriculum material.) Each educator received an email invitation, explaining the nature and purpose of the research. After agreeing to participate, a voluntary consent form was sent to each person. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were conducted over the phone, as each educator is located in a Community Vitality service area throughout Greater Minnesota. Educators were asked the following questions:

- **In what situations is groupthink most likely to occur in a community setting?**
- **Why address groupthink when educating community leaders?**
- **What decision-making techniques do you think help prevent groupthink?**
- **Why do you promote the idea of courageous followership when training effective community leaders?**
- **What role can followers play to help prevent groupthink?**
- **What types of questioning skills do you teach that help lead to decision-making based that is not based on assumptions or emotions?**
- **How do you teach program participants to recognize the importance of diverse perspectives during the decision-making process?**
- **What techniques do you teach to help foster a participatory decision-making process in which all group members are heard from and dissenting points of views are considered?**
What do you feel could be added to the current leadership education curriculum to help address groupthink within community decision-making processes?

For a complete list of each educator’s individual responses, see Appendix B.

**Method 2: Results**

Results suggest four distinct themes emerged from the five in-depth interviews with educators. The first is that questioning skills help prevent groupthink from occurring during a community decision-making process. One particular type of questioning skill is called humble inquiry. “It is an approach where a follower is trying to push the edges of their engagement, and if they're meeting resistance, then they take the approach of not telling the leader they’re doing something wrong but to humbly inquire by asking rather than telling,” explained an educator. This type of questioning allows a person to challenge authority in a respectful manner, and it helps prevent the leader from feeling threatened by an alternative suggestion or request for clarification. Reported another educator, “I will teach about questioning tools. One of the rules is ‘seek to understand.’ It’s not about who disagrees with you but with who you disagree. If you think about who disagrees with you, it’s a different frame. It helps them understand ‘because of this, then this [happens]’ and helps them identify ways in which this idea adds value to what we’re working on.” Understanding—or at least valuing—another person’s perspective is critical to preventing groupthink. Realizing what information you have or do not have is also important. “We teach critical thinking and appreciative inquiry... It’s nice to reflect back and say, ‘I'm hearing that we have a lot of values... let’s step back and look at the facts. What do we know, what do we not know, and what do we need to find out?’” said an educator. “You’re affirming what you’re hearing without taking a position. That helps people feel validated.”

The second theme that emerged is that effective facilitation results in more effective decision-making, as participants are taught to seek alternate points of view and embrace diverse
perspectives. "I spend time talking to them about facilitating good discussion that leads to a good decision," explained an educator. "As a facilitator, your job is to make sure you've got the right people in the room and that they're all comfortable." Having the appropriate people at the table ensures a more well-informed decision. Another technique is helping participants realize how others may perceive the issue at hand. "Our Dimensions of Leadership profile is an assessment we do with some of our groups, and it's a great way to get participants to see how someone might approach a problem in a different way," said an educator. "That helps prevent groupthink."

The third theme that emerged is that how to decide is important. "I spend a lot of time helping groups decide how they're going to decide," explained an educator. Establishing a process for what steps to take in the decision-making process helps pave the way for a well-considered decision. Acknowledged another educator, "The first thing is to actually teach about the types of decision-making processes. Recognizing that consensus in a decision-making process is very valuable in a lot of situations, but it's not applicable to all. It's important to have them recognize where and when it's the right decision... We have them understand the steps and then choose a decision-making method that is appropriate for that situation. A conversation around how to decide is important."

Lastly, the theme of creating a safe environment in which all group members feel comfortable sharing was revealed. "The facilitator is in charge of setting the stage," said one educator. "The group should come together and ask, 'What do we need to do so there is a feeling of safety with one another?' There needs to be communication, respect, and safety for sharing." Letting people write ideas down anonymously that are not shared with the group as a whole or breaking participants into small groups also helps create a safe environment. "They may feel more comfortable writing," explained an educator. "That allows the leader to not call out a person but say, 'Here's an idea that came up and let's share more about it.' That may give the person more courage to talk."
Method 3: In-Depth Interview with Participants

To determine what Community Vitality leadership program participants have learned about facilitating effective decision-making, in-depth interviews were conducted with five program participants. Each person was identified by an educator as someone who had community leadership experience and graduated from a Community Vitality leadership cohort. All were employed at either a university or for-profit organization. Some held leadership positions within their individual companies; others did not. All currently held leadership positions within their individual communities.

Participants received an email invitation, explaining the nature and purpose of the research, as well as letting them know they were referred by the educator who taught their leadership cohort. After agreeing to participate, a voluntary consent form was sent to each person. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were conducted over the phone. Two participants were located in the Twin Cities metro area, and three were located in communities across Greater Minnesota. Participants were asked the following questions:

- Have you ever experienced a situation in your community when groupthink occurred during a decision-making process? If so, what happened?
- As a leader, what protocols do you have in place to ensure decision-making involves all group members?
- When you haven’t been the formal leader of a group, did you still try to prevent groupthink? What did you do? Were there any barriers that make it difficult?
- What types of questioning skills do you use during a group decision-making process to help ensure the decision is not based on assumptions or emotions?
- How comfortable do you feel sharing your opinion, perspective, and concerns in a group decision-making situation? (If not very, what would make you feel more comfortable?)
What did you learn that has been most helpful in facilitating an effective decision-making process?

How do you feel the education you received in your leadership program helped you prepare to prevent groupthink during decision-making processes?

For a complete list of each participant’s individual responses, see Appendix C.

Method 3: Results

Results suggest that four themes also emerged during the five in-depth interviews with program participants. The first is that participants are less likely to speak up if they are new or do not feel knowledgeable about a topic. “I’m part of a board, and I’m pretty new, and it’s happened maybe once or twice where I felt I wasn’t really sure... didn’t have all the history and was shaky on the facts, so I wasn’t comfortable speaking up,” said one participant. “Also, I stayed quiet because there’s a very strong board chair that has very strong opinions on things. I didn’t feel up to speed enough to say, ‘I really don’t think we should be doing this.’” Another participant responded, “Groups that I’m not as much of a part of, I’m not as comfortable unless I have something informed to offer.” A third participant reported a hesitancy to speak up if it is not clear how the group will receive his opinion. “I think sometimes there’s a piece around my perception about how my opinion will be perceived by other people I’m with, so if I feel it will be heard and considered, I’ll be more apt to say something,” he said. “If I feel it will be dismissed for whatever reason, or discounted because of who is saying it, or it’s just going to be ignored, then it’s probably not worth my time to share.” Another participant reported a lack of knowledge prevents the courage to speak up. “One barrier is not having enough information,” the participant said. “If I’m not well-versed, I’m not as comfortable speaking out. It’s about now wanting to look stupid. Or, if you’re new to an organization or board, there’s that learning curve before you want to cause waves or controversy. You think, ‘If they’ve always done it this way, there must be a good reason for it.’” Unlike the
educators who reported they often have people write down their thoughts if they are shy or uncertain, participants did not mention written input as a way to express their opinion.

The second theme that became clear is the importance of everyone in the group being involved in the decision-making process. “You don’t want to make important decisions in isolation,” said one participant. Encouraging quiet group members to share their opinion is another technique. “I’m very strategic when I have a meeting,” said the participant. “Taking time to survey the room and people who are perhaps talking a lot, you can say, ‘Okay, we’ve heard from so-and-so, can we hear from someone else?’ Not rushing into decisions and giving people time to decide.” Another participant revealed a similar approach when leading a group. “One thing I like to do at the start is let people know I want to hear from them, and that is the expectation,” he said. “Not everyone has to speak right away, but I reinforce before the conversation is up that we hope to hear everyone’s voice.”

The third theme that occurred concerned questioning skills and how critical they are to preventing groupthink. “Learning types of questioning skills can be very helpful,” said one participant. “I also think what’s helpful with groupthink is really taking a look at a problem and naming it and then seeking the advice of others and asking, ‘Is this the issue we have at hand?’” Another participant acknowledged questioning is very important. “I try to make sure I’m asking questions as much as possible,” she said. Learning how to phrase questions in a different way is also useful. “Sometimes just asking questions a little bit differently can be helpful,” said another participant. “Reflective questions, evaluative questions, interpretive questions... they dig a little deeper and can get the conversation going in a different direction.”

The last theme that emerged is that diverse perspectives are critical to effective decision-making. “Intentionally seeking out folks that are not in the same group you are always talking to,” explained a participant. “We intentionally seek out different people from the county so we are able to get different ideas.” Said another participant, “I’ll also use creativity or imagination to get people
to think beyond their most comfortable feelings. It also opens our reception to more ideas and broadens what people are willing to consider.” Understanding that you may not have all the answers and recognizing diverse points of view also help inform a decision. “Everyone has a different way of getting to the final decision, everyone processes differently, and everyone needs different timeframes,” said a participant. “It’s opened my eyes... working with people from across the whole state and having people from different perspectives and backgrounds coming together. Being vulnerable and knowing you don’t know it all is important.” Another participant acknowledged groups that are very similar have a tendency to be the most susceptible to groupthink. “Situations that are most problematic are those that have a homogeneous type of group,” she said. “When a group lacks diverse perspective, with regard to generations or sectors of the community or ethnicity or race, that’s when it’s most likely to happen.”

**Discussion and Implications**

Results from the content analysis address the study’s initial research question concerning how Community Vitality’s current leadership education curriculum addresses effective decision-making. Findings suggest the curriculum does acknowledge the symptoms of groupthink in two of three key areas. While the curriculum includes several statements or activities that reference Janis’ groupthink symptoms of closed-mindedness and pressures toward uniformity, it does not address the symptom of overestimations of the group—its power and morality. This idea is important to acknowledge, as it prevents group members from experiencing an illusion of invulnerability and ignoring the ethical or moral consequences of their decisions. As reported by one educator, community groups can often become so optimistic they fail to slow down and consider all options. “In communities, sometimes they’ll be so hungry for someone to take the ball and run with it that they don’t judge it very much,” he said. “Sometimes there’s a lot of energy, and... they don’t think it through.”
As far as ignoring the ethical consequences of a decision, one program participant mentioned an instance when group members experienced “a lot of power and control issues.” Another participant reported continuing the implementation of a program even though it was later found out it was not the best decision. “We’d put so much time and effort into it, though, we didn’t want to tell people it wasn’t right,” he said. A third participant said she experienced a situation when group members did not feel a sense of accountability to their constituents. Based on these results, it is important the current leadership curriculum begin to address overestimations of the group—it’s power and morality.

While not addressing Janis’ third groupthink symptom, Community Vitality’s leadership curriculum does inform participants of the importance of drawing out the knowledge of group members, making members feel involved and influential, asking questions that lead to decisions based on fact rather than assumptions or emotions, embracing diverse perspectives, and deconstructing assumptions and blind spots. These teaching points are critical ways of preventing groupthink and facilitating an effective decision-making process.

Along with teaching emerging leaders how to prevent groupthink, Community Vitality’s leadership curriculum also addresses the study’s third research question that explores the ways in which followers can act as defenders against groupthink. Results of the content analysis indicate that the curriculum instructs those who are not in the role of a positional leader—who are instead followers—how to act as defenders against groupthink through its courageous followership workshop. For example, participants are taught to use language that increases their influence and effectiveness. They are also taught to demonstrate courage by standing up for and to their leaders, which encourages community members to voice their opinions and not fear speaking up—critical aspects of preventing groupthink.

In-depth interviews with Community Vitality leadership and civic engagement educators, as well as program participants, address the study’s second research question regarding the ways in
which community leaders are taught to prevent groupthink from occurring during community
decision-making processes. Results suggest four distinct themes emerged from each set of
interviews. Educator interviews revealed the following themes:

● Questioning skills help prevent groupthink.
● Effective facilitation results in more effective decision-making.
● *How* to decide is important.
● Creating a safe environment is critical.

Interviews with program participants suggested the following four themes:

● Participants are less likely to speak up if they are new to a group or do not feel
  particularly knowledgeable about the topic.
● It is important for the entire group to be involved in the decision-making process.
● Questioning skills are important.
● Diverse perspectives are essential to making a fully informed decision.

Both educators and program participants reported the importance of asking questions to help
prevent groupthink from occurring during decision-making processes. Another similarity among
both set of respondents is ensuring all group members feel comfortable speaking up. Educators
emphasized the importance of creating a safe environment, and program participants revealed they
are less likely to speak up if they are new to a group or do not feel knowledgeable about the topic
being discussed. The participants’ response provides an opportunity for the curriculum team to
develop questioning skills specifically focused on this type of situation. Even if one is new to a
group, it does not mean he or she has nothing of value to offer—in fact, the opposite may be true.
Oftentimes, someone who is new can offer a fresh outlook or suggestion for process improvement
simply because they have *not* been immersed in the group for a long time. Additionally, it is
recommended the curriculum team place careful emphasis on the idea of allowing participants to
write down their opinions. While the educators reported they use this technique often in their
leadership training, participants did not mention its use. This finding leads to the assumption that participants do not currently view writing down opinions as a way to prevent groupthink.

Interview themes among educators and program participants also differed in two areas. While educators reported the importance of establishing how to decide on a particular issue and that effective facilitation skills result in effective decision-making, program participants reported the importance of involving the entire group in the decision-making process and embracing diverse perspectives. Educators emphasized that if a group is clear about how a decision will be agreed upon, groupthink symptoms are alleviated (e.g., no one can go “rogue” and simply decide for the group as a whole; all members must be involved). They also teach program participants the skills to successfully facilitate a decision-making processes so that all group members are heard from and have an opportunity to share their opinion. Program participants, on the other hand, reported similar ways of preventing groupthink but used different language. They emphasized the importance of involving the entire group in the decision-making processes, which reflects the educators’ theme of being clear about how a group decision will be made. Program participants also reinforced that it is critical to embrace diverse perspectives to arrive at a fully-informed decision, and this theme parallels the educators’ regarding effective facilitation skills (e.g., welcoming different points of view). Consequently, while two of the themes among the educators and program participants differed, they do appear to reflect one another, suggesting the skills taught by educators to prevent groupthink are well received—and implemented—by program participants.

Regarding the study’s third research question regarding the ways in which followers can act as defenders against groupthink, results from both sets of interviews suggest the idea of courageous followership is a critical piece of Community Vitality’s leadership education. In each educator interview, the relationship between leader and follower was emphasized, as well as a follower’s responsibility to courageously speak up to and for authority. The primary way educators teach courageous followership is through the use of effective questioning skills. Likewise, program
participants reported the usefulness of these skills to help prevent groupthink from occurring during community decision-making processes. As a result, findings from both educator and program participant interviews suggest the best way for followers to act as defenders against groupthink is to implement effective questioning skills.

Aside from reinforcing the importance of allowing group members to write down their suggestions and opinions, recommendations to improve the current leadership education curriculum also include formally introducing the theory of groupthink. Giving a specific name for this type of behavior will help program participants better understand its implications and how it impacts group decision-making processes. Being equipped to call out potentially harmful behavior is a sign of a strong leader—and followers.

The curriculum team is also encouraged to seek ways of discussing the groupthink symptom of overestimations of the group—its power and morality with program participants so they are better prepared to prevent it from occurring during community decision-making processes. Doing so will help prevent group members from simply going along with an idea—and perhaps even implementing it—knowing it is not the right decision. Addressing this groupthink symptom also minimizes a lack of accountability or inappropriate power among outspoken or strong willed group members.

Lastly, it is recommended that educators teach specific questioning skills to use when a person is new to a group or does not have ample knowledge of the topic being discussed. This addition could serve as a supplement to the current questioning portion of the leadership education curriculum. Encouraging participants to engage in groupthink role playing for this type of situation may also help build confidence. In conjunction with this idea, developing a “language of intervention” is suggested. For individuals who may feel especially uncertain speaking to an authority figure, having a key phrase or question in mind to use is critical. This statement could be something similar to “I am new to this group, but I would like to learn more about how we plan to
arrive at this decision. Can you please explain how this idea was first developed?” or “I am not sure I understand exactly what you mean. Can you please tell me more about your suggestion?” This teaching point may fit well with the current courageous followership portion of the leadership curriculum.

**Study Limitations**

Limitations to this research include the author’s own bias, as the leadership education curriculum studied for the content analysis was that of the author’s colleagues at the Center for Community Vitality. Due to the time constraints of this study, a second coder was also not used to help prevent subjectivity of the coding process. (And, had a second coder been utilized, it would have been important to establish a specific framework for how the coding process would be carried out to ensure the most reliable results.) Additionally, the lack of a comparison between Community Vitality’s leadership education curriculum and another organization’s limited the breadth of the research. Furthermore, this type of analysis may have provided a point of comparison and baseline for establishing the overall strengths and weaknesses of each curriculum.

Another limitation to this study is a lack of quantitative research. Rather than surveying leadership program participants, it was decided a second set of interviews would invite richer, more detailed responses. Allowing participants to reflect on their personal experiences through a comfortable conversation, rather than through an impersonal survey, provided the justification for the omission of quantitative data collection.

Interviewing more educators and program participants would also have strengthened the research and subsequent results. Due to a limited time frame in which to complete the study, as well as a lack of formal research funds, it was not possible to interview as many people as preferred. Additionally, it would have been valuable to audit an actual leadership education program to observe first-hand how educators teach the current curriculum.
Lastly, all interview participants lived in the state of Minnesota. Interviewing Extension professionals who teach leadership programs in different parts of the country would lend more credibility to the study and perhaps cast a wider pool of geographic responses, and it would also explore how particular regional cultures perhaps respond to groupthink. (Do leaders in Minnesota, for example, exemplify “Minnesota nice” as compared to leaders in New York or California?).

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Recommendations for future research include exploring group size as it relates to symptoms of groupthink. It would be useful—and quite illuminating—if research was conducted to determine whether the number of individuals in a community group contributes to the presence of groupthink. Is it more likely to occur in a large setting when a greater number of people are inclined to experience an illusion of unanimity, or would the number of group members have no bearing on its occurrence?

Another recommendation for future research is to explore whether or not certain communities are more prone to groupthink tendencies, such as those experiencing a crisis situation or a desire to maintain a favorable public reputation (e.g., communities that have faced a natural disaster or have been involved in a political scandal). Additionally, it would be worthwhile to perform further research on how community cohesiveness impacts groupthink behavior. Ferraris and Cohan offer a foundation for this idea by examining individual companies that have fallen victim to groupthink behavior; could community cohesiveness also be a definitive predictor of the possibility of faulty decision-making?

Lastly, it would be valuable to explore the implementation of Community Vitality’s courageous followership curriculum in other Extension or organizational leadership education programs. As it was first introduced several years ago by Community Vitality’s leadership and development specialist, it is still in its infancy stages in terms of being introduced to other
leadership programs. How might its success be measured in other organizations? Can the idea of courageous followership be implemented on a broader scale across the country?

Conclusion

It does not seem possible to explore the elements of effective group decision-making without also considering the implications of groupthink. One needs look no further than the present news media to witness the devastating effects of groupthink. Recently, Enron and the Columbia space shuttle explosion have emerged as dismaying examples of when faulty organizational decision-making has resulted in unintended, grave consequences. Just as it is critical those in organizational leadership positions are aware of groupthink symptoms, it is equally imperative those in community leadership positions also heed its warning signs.

In the case of community groupthink, history will hopefully never repeat itself. Events such as lynching and genocide have displayed the horrific consequences of faulty decision making. On a far less tragic scale, ineffective decision-making within communities can result in the implementation of an unwise idea or solution simply because group members fear acknowledging its flaws. Groupthink can also allow strong willed group members to dominate the discussion and make decisions for the entire group. While the possible loss of life may not always be a consequence of community groupthink, faulty decision-making—at the very least—threatens the integrity, wisdom, and reputation of a community to make the right decisions for its members.

While Irving Janis provided the initial framework for groupthink in 1972, subsequent studies have both supported and criticized his initial theory. Though scholars are positioned on either side of the fence, in terms of agreeing or disagreeing with Janis’ claims, it is indisputable that groupthink does occur. While the individual elements contributing to the theory may differ among researchers, its potentially disastrous effects cannot be diminished. It is the responsibility of all group members—whether leader or follower—to courageously act as what Janis refers to as “mind
guards” against groupthink. As such, this study has sought to explore the specific ways in which University of Minnesota’s Extension Center for Community Vitality addresses effective decision-making in its leadership education curriculum. Research findings suggest participants of the leadership education program are taught to successfully identify and prevent groupthink from occurring during community decision-making processes. Likewise, Community Vitality’s unique leadership education component of courageous followership teaches program participants to embrace an active followership role and to develop the skills needed to stand up to and for authority figures. These results suggest individuals who have participated in Community Vitality’s leadership programs are informed about groupthink tendencies and equipped to make a positive difference in their individual communities.

Groupthink occurs in communities around the world, and its prevalence is likely much larger than one would think. Research has explored its symptoms and how to mitigate its effects, but it is critical to further examine how other variables, such as community size or cohesiveness, may impact its potentially harmful outcomes. As American social critic, actor, and author George Carlin once said, “The larger the group, the more toxic, the more of your beauty as an individual you have to surrender for the sake of group thought. And when you suspend your individual beauty, you also give up a lot of your humanity.”
References


### Appendix A

Coding of Groupthink Symptoms

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<th>Workshop Title</th>
<th>Type I: Overestimations of the group—its power and morality</th>
<th>Type II: Closed-mindedness</th>
<th>Type III: Pressure toward uniformity</th>
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<td>SWOT analysis, snow cards, data dump, force field analysis, best or worst case scenario</td>
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Appendix B

In-Depth Interviews with Educators

Participant #1

Educator with the Center for Community Vitality since 1998

1. In what situations is groupthink most likely to occur in a community setting?

I think it happens whenever everyone wishes a situation to be true. We all wish the new factory coming to town is going to be everything they told us it would be... it's that unbridled hope. It also happens when people are not using critical thinking skills, and they've convinced themselves that this is the way to go.

It'd be nice if everyone made decisions by consensus, but then it comes down to a vote, and it only takes half of the people to decide [so half of people could be engaging in groupthink]. That's what wrong with legislative situations. There's a fear of punishment if you decide to go against what they want.

In communities, sometimes they'll be so hungry for someone to take the ball and run with it that they don't judge it very much. Sometimes there's a lot of energy, and people just run with it. They don't think it through.

2. Why address groupthink when educating community leaders?

It gets in the way of decisions that are longstanding. I spend a lot of time helping groups decide how they're going to decide. The hardest part is getting that decision to stick over time, and some people decide to make an out down the road if the decision doesn't work out. The 'out' excuses the bad decision.

3. What decision-making techniques do you think helps prevent groupthink?

Everything we use, and the facilitation guide we put together... Criterion Grid, Fist to Five. I've brought people in to be the devil's advocate. It may seem like people don't want to listen to you, but you have to say what you mean. Some people get marginalized for being the devil's advocate once in a while, but you have to ask the hard questions. If you preface it as, “Let me be the devil’s advocate and see what happens if...”—anyone can play that role. If you ask the question, probably everyone else is thinking it, but they don't ask it because they feel they have to go with the plan.

I see projects all the time where they will accept lots of things happening just to get something done rather than dealing with the issues. And you don't want to fight the whole thing and then find out no one supported it. You want it to happen, but you want it to happen right.

4. Why do you promote the idea of courageous followership when training effective community leaders?

I get excited about the idea. Look at the Battle of Gettysburg... leadership was told by many people that it wouldn't work, and they followed through anyway. Or look at the Air France crash. They
knew a couple people in the cockpit knew how to handle it. I promote courageous followership, because I think it’s half the job. One half is coming up with the idea and building support and gathering some people together to make it happen. But there’s a whole other job that involves making sure it passes scrutiny—and that comes from people who really care about the decision.

I know people who play the devil’s advocate role, and I’m not even sure if they’re in favor of the decision or not. They just want it to be completely vetted. I’m guilty of ending discussions when something has been discussed over and over and over again and I just want to come to a decision point.

5. What role can followers play to help prevent groupthink?

We don’t teach people to speak up! We don’t have language [to use] to interrupt the leader. You have to have a language of intervention! You need to have something to use to intervene when everyone is going in one direction and you have a reasonable doubt for why it should go the other way. You never know how bad a situation is going to get.

6. What types of questioning skills do you teach that help lead to decision-making that is not based on assumptions or emotions?

I spend time talking to them about facilitating good discussion that leads to a good decision. As a facilitator, your job is to make sure you’ve got the right people in the room and that they’re all comfortable. Then you can call people out. I force people to go into the role of saying what they think, especially if they show an inkling at all that they have an opinion that’s not in the majority.

7. How do you teach program participants to recognize the importance of diverse perspectives during the decision-making process?

They certainly need to know that there has to be some diverse perspective, because no one culture will come up with all the solutions to the problems they face. I’m a really mean facilitator. I’ll call them out and say, “Larry, it’s your turn to talk.”

Before we finish any facilitation, we go around the room and everyone has their say about their opinion regarding the decision or how the decision was made. They can all feel like they were heard and express their opinions, even the dissenting ones. That’s when I feel like I’m doing my job.

8. What techniques do you teach to help foster a participatory decision-making process in which all group members are heard from and dissenting points of views are considered?

If you can get people in groups of four or five to work together in different parts of the room or building so they’re not being influenced by the group next to them, then when they report back, you do get some of the chaff sifted out already. It’s long and monotonous, but you get some of the best ideas. I’ll have them share their first idea and then go around the room, then share their second idea. I physically separate them so they’re not trying to overhear what the next group is talking about.

9. What do you feel could be added to the current leadership education curriculum to help address groupthink within community decision-making processes?

I just think we need to get back to some work around facilitation. We didn’t feel it was educational, so we haven’t had it as much. It was too much labor and too much demand for our services, so we
had to back off. There was a group decision, and it is still bothersome, because it's a real learning opportunity. When you get people together that are very concerned about something in their community, that's the best meeting to have.

The staff with have in LCE do know how to facilitate meetings, and people can learn from seeing it. They do learn even if we're not teaching. Someday, we'll go back to facilitating more.
Participant #2

*Educator with the Center for Community Vitality since 2007*

1. **In what situations is groupthink most likely to occur in a community setting?**

   Situations that are most problematic are those that have a homogeneous type of group. When a group lacks diverse perspective, with regard to generations or sectors of the community or ethnicity or race, that’s when it's most likely to happen.

2. **Why address groupthink when educating community leaders?**

   One thing I think of is the Ladder of Inferences. We all go through the process of moving forward and solving a problem. If everyone is coming to the same conclusion and assumptions based on the fact that they’re homogeneous, most likely the solutions are not going to be very diverse or innovative, because everyone is probably arriving at the same conclusion. Since we’ve become globalized, solutions have to be global in nature. Solutions must have multiple parts. If you have groupthink, you won't arrive at a solution that is going to be sustainable or relevant long term. It may work for that particular sector of the community, but not for the larger community as a whole.

3. **What decision-making techniques do you think helps prevent groupthink?**

   I think the Six Thinking Hats and education we do around questioning and asking rather than telling. Some of our critical thinking curriculum is helpful for a community working through a decision... having people be aware of the process they are under when dealing with a decision-making process. Our Dimensions of Leadership profile is an assessment we do with some of our groups, and it’s a great way to get participants to see how someone might approach a problem in a different way. That helps prevent groupthink.

4. **Why do you promote the idea of courageous followership when training effective community leaders?**

   I think you can’t have leadership without followership. There’s a relationship between the two, and followers play an equally important role in the element of leadership. Facilitating the lead is something we teach. When you think of leadership in today’s world, you don’t have to be in a positional leadership role. Another method to prevent groupthink is learning how to facilitate well and how to expand the diversity of a group. We advocate for the concept of facilitating the lead. The reason you need to learn facilitation skills is to help the leader and prevent groupthink.

5. **What role can followers play to help prevent groupthink?**

   The first one is to understand the theory of followership and understand the ways in which someone follows. To be aware of and understand that model and recognize when you’re falling into one of the followership categories. Be aware of when you’re engaged and interested and using your critical thinking skills so you play that role as often as possible. We all come upon leaders that want their followers to be sheep, but our curriculum in Extension advocates that followers take on an engaged role. If someone is more shy or reserved, they have to step out of their personality or comfort zone and become more engaged and more critical in their thinking. In the long run, it will help the leadership. If the leader understands that’s what good leadership looks like, they will embrace that. We’ll practice good decision-making within the cohorts so they can really see how to avoid groupthink. When they go back into their organizations or communities, though, I don’t know
how well that goes. We should probably do some follow up and coaching on that. Sometimes I’ll ask how they demonstrated followership or how they helped leadership, so they can identify and recognize what it looks like. If you have people in the program that are not a positional leader, and you have an authoritarian leader, that can be a challenge. If a leader is not receptive to that—to them being engaged—then you’re looking at a loss of prestige or potential backlash. The best advice I’d give to someone in that position it to use humble inquiry. That is an approach where a follower is trying to push the edges of their engagement, and if they’re meeting resistance, then they take the approach of not telling the leader they’re doing something wrong but to humbly inquire by asking rather than telling.

6. What types of questioning skills do you teach that help lead to decision-making based that is not based on assumptions or emotions?

I’m big into the Socratic method and ORID. We talk about the rational/emotional mind. We look at some of the neurological research around that. Another method is the intercultural communication styles as a way to help participants identify how they deal with conflict. It looks at how cultural experiences and background and how they’ve influenced how we respond to conflict. Culturally, when we’re under major stress, we generally fall back on what we’ve learned in our youth development. I’ve talked to communications experts at the University level, and they say you have to remove the emotions and stay logical. I think that does allow for good sense around contentious issues, but it also eliminates part of the population that is emotional under stressful situations. People value and appreciate the opportunity to express their emotions. It’s a delicate balance, and I don’t know the best solution for that. In public spaces, I advocate for more of a rational, logical approach to addressing conflict. I think that has to be there in public spaces. One way we teach that is by setting ground rules, having norms, etc.

7. How do you teach program participants to recognize the importance of diverse perspectives during the decision-making process?

By recognizing the research on teams. Research shows, by far and away, the type of teams we have are homogeneous teams. The best performing teams that are diverse or performing better than the homogeneous teams are those in which the leadership recognizes and values the importance of diverse perspectives and ideas. They follow the patterns of our ecological system—that the best solutions come from ecological balance. We do simulations around that... recognizing that we’re generally ethnocentric and recognizing when that occurs. From that point on, they see things differently. We’re also trying to expand their horizons by doing international sessions or even outside our own state. Extension is working across the board trying to address community issues that are very complex, and one way to understand complex solutions is to recognize that globally people might be doing things differently than us, and what we can learn from that?

8. What techniques do you teach to help foster a participatory decision-making process in which all group members are heard from and dissenting points of views are considered?

The first thing is to actually teach about the types of decision-making processes. Recognizing that consensus is a decision-making process is very valuable in a lot of situations, but it’s not applicable to all. It’s important to have them recognize where and when it’s the right decision. We practice that in sessions...snow cards, brainstorming. We walk them through the steps of the decision-making process, looking at alternatives, gathering information, voting. We have them understand the steps and then choose a decision-making method that is appropriate for that situation. A conversation around how to decide is important.
9. What do you feel could be added to the current leadership education curriculum to help address groupthink within community decision-making processes?

There are always things that need to be added. I don’t know if we really even use the word “groupthink.” Maybe naming it and teaching some of its pitfalls. We could share research on groupthink... how often it happens, what are the warning signs. We could use that information for participants and then maybe have an activity or simulation that recognizes when groupthink occurs. Maybe even a short video or clip to show what it is. What drives me in inclusivity. That is the counter of groupthink. It can be very exclusive because it doesn't want to listen to other perspectives.
Participant #3

_Educator with the Center for Community Vitality since 2004_

1. In what situations is groupthink most likely to occur in a community setting?

I think when it's around a really controversial issue or topic or when there are huge power differentials. When people are in positional leadership, sometimes others will be afraid to speak up. If the people involved don’t feel they know enough about a topic, or they've not been lead to feel they have something to contribute, or they’re afraid to admit they don’t know... that's when groupthink can occur. Or someone in the group says something that makes them question themselves or feel bad about themselves. Then they can shut down.

2. Why address groupthink when educating community leaders?

I think leaders sometimes don’t have enough experience to know it exists or that it’s going on. They think everyone is in agreement and move too quickly around a topic. They don't give the space for people to process and think about it. The other thing sometimes, depending on who is in front of the room, is that they can be very extraverted and process things out loud, whereas introverts may need the time and space to process an issue. Or, they may want to do it one-on-one. Groupthink has some subtleties around why and how it happens based on personality styles.

3. What decision-making techniques do you think helps prevent groupthink?

Exploring the different parts of the decision-making process. Doing things like a data dump where you have the opportunity for everyone to share what they know about a topic. Prior to that, being clear what the decision is that we’re focusing on. Then analyzing the information we have and synthesizing and using the tools for how we’re going to agree on a decision. You need to be really intentional about how you’re going to make a decision. Snow cards allow everyone to have an input early on. Analyzing through a SWOT analysis and synthesizing through a best/worst scenario... putting yourself in someone else’s position. That can be really valuable—seeing yourself through someone else’s lens. A prioritization grid really engages the group. All of these processes, if done well, will involve everyone in the group. Underlying all of this is building trust and paying attention early on. If I suspect someone is not sharing, I’ll pair them. Sometimes they're more likely to share with another person. Then I’ll mix up the groups and have them share a good idea that someone else had. For someone who is not as open, now their idea has been shared, and it validates it. They think, “Oh, someone thought it was a good idea.”

4. Why do you promote the idea of courageous followership when training effective community leaders?

I promote it because I believe everyone has something to contribute. And if they aren’t willing or feel comfortable in being able to share, then the answer is not going to be as strong. The collective opportunity is not going to be there. We encourage people to find the best way to share. Sometimes the leader of the group doesn’t have the best skill set. We’re helping them be better.

5. What role can followers play to help prevent groupthink?

I think they can be sitting around the table and watching. They, themselves, might draw out other people by asking questions. Everyone has the opportunity to do that. They need to be skilled, as well, in looking for opportunities. It can just be by active listening and watching the group dynamics...
and paying attention to who may or may not be saying anything. They can suggest, “Can we take a break?” and then you have the opportunity for an informal conversation. I’ll invite people to write their idea on an index card. They may feel more comfortable writing. That allows the leader to not call out a person but say, “Here’s an idea that came up and let’s share more about it.” That may give the person more courage to talk.

6. What types of questioning skills do you teach that help lead to decision-making based that is not based on assumptions or emotions?

Strategic questioning. It avoids yes or no answers or dead-end questions and opens people’s own thinking. They are also questions that create ownership. Too often, people in a discussion aren’t making the questions strategic enough. For example, “What are you willing to do to clean up the river?” instead of “What are we willing to do to clean up the river?” Putting ownership in the answer is another way to get people involved.

7. How do you teach program participants to recognize the importance of diverse perspectives during the decision-making process?

I will teach questioning tools. It’s also by having ground rules. They are really important. One of the rules is “seek to understand.” It’s not about who disagrees with you but with who you disagree. If you think about who disagrees with you, it’s a different frame. It helps them understand “because of this, then this happens” and helps them identify ways in which this idea adds value to what we’re working on.

8. What techniques do you teach to help foster a participatory decision-making process in which all group members are heard from and dissenting points of views are considered?

I think it’s different tools and techniques you use. SWOT analysis, for example. Best/worst scenarios. Pair/share. More often than not, I’ll have them write their idea or opinion to get their input. It’s about really encouraging them to speak up and bolstering their confidence to speak up. That’s the hard thing for people sometimes.

9. What do you feel could be added to the current leadership education curriculum to help address groupthink within community decision-making processes?

It could be interesting if we taught groupthink. We do sometimes use the Abilene Paradox. You can use it as a teaching point or in a process if we notice it’s going on. When we teach group dynamics, it’s certainly an element that would fit well in what we already have in our competencies. You should come up with a top 10 infographic for symptoms of groupthink that we could use in our curriculum!
Participant #4

Educator with the Center for Community Vitality since 2010

1. In what situations is groupthink most likely to occur in a community setting?

I think power dynamics play a big role. When we have a lot of similarities, we often think we have the same opinions and values without digging in. People go along because they don’t want to seem different whether it's related to power, race, or age. Or, if you haven't been in a community long, you may think you don’t have the right to speak up. When we teach about conflict, we go through an interactive feedback method to emphasize how we may all think we think the same, but do we really when you get to the nuances? People don’t want to seem like they’re not on the same page.

2. Why address groupthink when educating community leaders?

I think it’s important, and we do teach facilitation and the diversity of different perspectives. We’ll have a group break out in different ways, because it helps bring out different ideas and takes people out of their traditional roles. As a leader, it’s important to think about, “Who are the people here, and what do they bring?” When people feel more valued, they will be more likely to speak up. We talk about it in questioning, too. We’ll say, “Let’s pause here a second and think, ‘What if?’” You don’t want to make someone the devil’s advocate all the time, and you want to create a safe space, so putting on different hats and different roles is important. You want to think about, “What are the possible roadblocks here?”

3. What decision-making techniques do you think helps prevent groupthink?

Open space technology can be a way. You can put people into small groups to talk about things, although in those small groups, they could have groupthink happening, so it’s important to shuffle and reshuffle. If they share an idea with someone else, it gives the idea a little more emphasis, and you’re more likely to say something that's outside of the box when you have allies. We do this a lot in community meetings—we have an expert come in, and then that’s the way it’s going to be. That’s the path we’re going to go. If you don’t start with any original thinking before you get the big group together, you can really help prevent groupthink. People may have contrary thoughts, but if they feel someone is the expert, they may not question it.

4. Why do you promote the idea of courageous followership when training effective community leaders?

You can be a leader without having the position of being a leader. And not everyone wants to be a leader. Denise and I use Strengths Finder based leadership. We all have strengths, and when you talk about a team, it’s important to be well-rounded. You need to think about the people around you and how they can contribute to the group. How can you lean on others? That followership is huge, but people struggle with it. An organization can be very large or formal, which can be really challenging. Asking questions is really important.

5. What role can followers play to help prevent groupthink?

By questioning. And not questioning as in, “Are we doing the right thing?” but “Is what we’re doing making us stronger?” Sometimes followers also hear different things than the leader does, and they can bring that to the leader... a “champion follower,” so to speak, if you have the leader’s ear. Mentoring is also really huge. Not everyone wants to be a positional leader, so how can we help
these people navigate an organization and grow them? The biggest thing is knowing each other’s strengths. I think sometimes leaders have trouble taking on too many things. As followers, we have the responsibility to offer, “Hey, I noticed this or that—have you thought about bringing Kelly into the conversation there?” That’s one thing we can do... take some of the responsibility off the leader so they have time to do strategic direction instead of the nitty gritty.

6. What types of questioning skills do you teach that help lead to decision-making based that is not based on assumptions or emotions?

We teach critical thinking and appreciative inquiry. Those are good questioning methods or processing methods that help move a conversation forward. We also teach compassionate listening, which is listening to facts, feelings, and values. It’s nice to reflect back and say, “I’m hearing that we have a lot of values... let’s step back and look at the facts. What do we know, what do we not know, and what do we need to find out?” You’re affirming what you’re hearing without taking a position. That helps people feel validated.

7. How do you teach program participants to recognize the importance of diverse perspectives during the decision-making process?

We talk about diversity in a lot of different ways. We weave it throughout our program so the philosophies are embedded throughout. In our Generations Workshop, we have people talk at their table and then break out into groups and then another new set of groups. It’s important to have different avenues for decision-making. What are similar things? What else could there be? We talk about empathy. What are other people’s needs and strengths? Preserve, change, and create is another tool we use. It brings out what we should keep, what we should alter, and what things should be done differently.

8. What techniques do you teach to help foster a participatory decision-making process in which all group members are heard from and dissenting points of views are considered?

We’ll have people use sticky notes to bring forward their ideas, and people can walk around and add them to the wall. We also use facilitation techniques like, “Kelly, we’ve heard from you, so let’s hear from someone else.” You can also talk during breaks and have one-on-one conversations with people who may be too shy to speak up. Or, you can stop the conversation and say, “Let’s take a step back and hear from some other people in the room. What other perspectives are out there?” You can also give different roles out for the situation so people can think about and see different perspectives.

9. What do you feel could be added to the current leadership education curriculum to help address groupthink within community decision-making processes?

Groupthink could be brought up during brainstorming, and it’s something to discuss when you’re talking about power dynamics.
Participant #5

Educator with the Center for Community Vitality since 2010

1. In what situations is groupthink most likely to occur in a community setting?

It occurs most often when the group is the same and is consistently put together. They lack perspective. It also occurs when there isn’t a code of ethics or conversation, when the expected culture is not defined. It can also occur when there tends to be a lack of sustained vision.

2. Why address groupthink when educating community leaders?

Three reasons: First, to make it very clear and transparent, so it can be identified and named. The second is because, honestly, it helps them understand that it happens, and they should be aware of it. It's not a beneficial thing; it might have happened in the past, but it's not beneficial in the future... understanding the damage of groupthink. Third, you need to let new members at the table know that you understand, as a facilitator, what's going on and when there are less perspectives. It allows the new members to know they will be heard.

3. What decision-making techniques do you think helps prevent groupthink?

One is to really have a dialogue about it and the second is to create a culture of learning and security. The facilitator is in charge of setting the stage. The group should come together to ask, “What do we need to do so there is a feeling of safety with one another?” There needs to be communication, respect, and safety for sharing.

4. Why do you promote the idea of courageous followership when training effective community leaders?

Research shows there's too much focus on developing leaders and there's a blind spot regarding followers. People are often in a followership role, and followers should understand there are types of followers. It also teaches people they can do either role (leader or follower), but they can't lead all the time. It opens the door to the importance of followers, that they have a huge influence, and that they have a choice to be a follower.

5. What role can followers play to help prevent groupthink?

They're key. Followers, as they develop their skills, find their voice. And as effective followers, they give feedback. They can say, “We're not exploring this totally.” They're essential to speaking up, and it's their responsibility as courageous followers.

6. What types of questioning skills do you teach that help lead to decision-making based that is not based on assumptions or emotions?

I use the ORID method, the seven components of critical thinking, and the decision matrix. I also use open-ended questions. As a facilitator, once you set the code of ethics, you adhere to it. If someone is talking too much, you say, “Thank you. Let's hear from someone else.” It's your responsibility as a facilitator to invite conversation from everyone in the room, not just from people with their hands up.
7. How do you teach program participants to recognize the importance of diverse perspectives during the decision-making process?

One way it to understand that everyone in the room has a different background, history, religion—and all those perspectives are needed to build a better movement, strategy, or idea. It’s important to invite people with different perspectives, whether it’s related to ethnicity, gender, etc. You want to try to get as many people at the table as possible.

8. What techniques do you teach to help foster a participatory decision-making process in which all group members are heard from and dissenting points of views are considered?

I use the decision matrix. You can also facilitate by using Post-it notes and having people write on them anonymously. Snow cards are another technique. That’s a good way to get everyone’s perspective. You can also allow people to write things down anonymously that are not shared to the group as a whole, and then you can share some interesting things you’ve learned as a facilitator or the trends that you saw.

9. What do you feel could be added to the current leadership education curriculum to help address groupthink within community decision-making processes?

Continuing to develop the followership piece and to really bring the topic up around communication, safety, and culture... to very clearly talk about it and not just mention it. Perhaps a workshop on groupthink that discusses it and why it is important to understand. We should label it and make it very clear what it is—I think that’s one of the best things to do—name it.
Appendix C
In-Depth Interviews with Participants

Participant #1

1. Have you ever experienced a situation in your community when groupthink occurred during a decision-making process? If so, what happened?

Well, I've been in multiple meetings when groupthink has occurred. It's hard to tell what the end result is due to the groupthink... whether it still serves the purpose of the community as a whole, regardless if everyone's voice was hard. I was recently part of a large [leadership] cohort in Redwood County in 2015. Twenty-four people from the county attended, and there was a lot of groupthink going on there. One thing that stuck out to me the whole time was that there was no representation there from the local Indian reservation that we have in our county. They have a lot of impact in our community, so this was a situation where all parties weren't really at the table. I thought, “Why?” and about the reasoning behind it. It was brought up once as to why they weren’t there. The facilitator said they now just has a specific cohort for the Indian reservation, but that struck me, because now we’re separating people and we’re all from the same community. To purposely separate the two groups didn’t seem to serve a purpose.

2. As a leader, what protocols do you have in place to ensure decision-making involves all group members?

Especially in ULAA, I learned a lot of things that are helpful. I was doing things but didn’t know there was an actual tool for them. I’ve always been a question asker and felt more comfortable asking the questions that other people may not. I’ve gotten over looking stupid. More often than not, people thank me. I just step up. Specifically for leadership, and running community meetings and being a board chair, trying to summarize the conversation has been really helpful. Most of the members are quite tenured on the board, and there are a lot of assumptions about what we have done and what we’re going to do. When we bring in new people, it’s difficult for them to get a full feeling of the purpose of what we’re doing and the future of where we’re going. There’s an assumption that we’re all on the same page. ULAA has taught me to summarize the history, why we’re doing what we’re doing, what roles different people play... and also giving it more time and not feeling rushed. Just because it’s working doesn’t mean it can’t be improved upon.

3. When you haven't been the formal leader of a group, did you still try to prevent groupthink? What did you do? Were there any barriers that make it difficult?

I try to make sure I’m asking questions as much as possible. It’s definitely something I’m not the greatest at yet. Making my presence known is sometimes enough to get group to think outside the box. I’m part of a board, and I’m pretty new, and it’s happened maybe once or twice where I felt I wasn’t really sure... didn’t have all the history and was shaky on the facts, so I wasn’t comfortable speaking up. Also, I stayed quiet because there’s a very strong board chair that has very strong opinions on certain things. I didn’t feel up to speed enough to say, “I really don’t think we should be doing this.” You kind of get bulldozed over.
4. What types of questioning skills do you use during a group decision-making process to help ensure the decision is not based on assumptions or emotions?

It’s kind of all in the process of how the question is being asked or how people are allowed to respond. I’ve found people are more comfortable being anonymous. Voting yay or nay sort of just perpetuates voting on what the group is voting on instead of what they really want. Taking time is important. If things are rushed, and you need a response immediately, some people really need time to digest the information. You may need to step away for a week or month until the next board meeting. That helps people make decisions based on fact rather than emotion.

5. How comfortable do you feel sharing your opinion, perspective, and concerns in a group decision-making situation? (If not very, what would make you feel more comfortable?)

I’m more comfortable now that I used to be. It comes with age and knowing more what your own opinions are as well. The more involved I am, the more issues I’m confronted with, the more I have to form my own opinion and stand behind it. It all depends on the group and the setting. It’s hard for me working and living and volunteering with all the same people. It’s difficult to separate that, especially in a work situation—my professional opinion vs. not a personal attack.

6. What did you learn that has been most helpful in facilitating an effective decision-making process?

The most effective way is making or forcing people to step up to the plate and take some responsibility. It’s really easy for everyone to join a group and try to make change and then kind of sit back and let someone else roll with it. I don’t mind being quiet sometimes, though, because it makes people uneasy. I learned that from my sales background. I’ll ask for things, like volunteers or heading a committee, and then just stand there and not say anything. People get really uncomfortable and then say, “Okay, I’ll do it.” People need to feel a little uncomfortable to take action.

7. How do you feel the education you received in your leadership program helped you prepare to prevent groupthink during decision-making processes?

It’s opened my eyes that not everyone works like me. Everyone has a different way of getting to the final decision, everyone processes differently, and everyone needs different timeframes. They’ll give back feedback in different ways. I learned a lot in that it’s not so much how I communicate; it’s how they need to be communicated with and really making sure I keep that in mind and making it as easy as possible for people to communicate their feelings to me. It’s opened my eyes being in ULAA and working with people from across the whole state, and having people from different perspectives and backgrounds coming together. Being vulnerable and knowing you don’t know it all is important. I lead the rotary club, so there’s a lot of history and tradition there. I still get anxious and I’m at the end of my term. I think, “Am I doing this right?” So I just ask, “Is this the right way to do this?”
1. Have you ever experienced a situation in your community when groupthink occurred during a decision-making process? If so, what happened?

It happens all the time. One time I was working together with a colleague to facilitate a roundtable with Baptist leaders in Minneapolis/St. Paul, as well as staffers from elected officials and students. Everybody had the same interest in working with African American youth in the religious and political sector. We met several times, but ultimately, what the people wanted was a big grant to do this work. The group really wanted that and didn’t try to talk about leveraging resources or collaborating with anyone else. They wanted the University to give away a big chunk of money and be done with it. Saboteurs even showed up to keep any other decision from being made. My colleague and I looked at each other and thought, “What happened?” It was devastating. It was one of our most challenging group processes to date. Whoever would have thought it would have gone that bad that quickly? And this was a huge room of people who wanted to help African Americans. The groupthink happened mostly among those who wanted to sabotage; not everyone was on board.

2. As a leader, what protocols do you have in place to ensure decision-making involves all group members?

Having a very transparent agenda and having people involved in creating the agenda, even talking to people ahead of time. I’m very strategic when I have a meeting. Taking time to survey the room and people who are perhaps talking a lot, you can say, “Okay, we’ve heard from so-and-so, can we hear from someone else?” Not rushing into decisions and giving people time to decide. For reflecor, giving people materials ahead of time. You need to kind of cater to different learning styles. Or, having people write down ideas. That provides a pause. Another way is to break up those that are dominating.

3. When you haven’t been the formal leader of a group, did you still try to prevent groupthink? What did you do? Were there any barriers that make it difficult?

It’s easy to come unprepared to a meeting or not having thought through the agenda items as a participant. I try to listen to agenda items that are not about my work and have something to say about them, whether it’s a suggestion or improvement. We tend to pay attention to things on our plate that we care about most. It’s easy to shut down when it’s an item that you don’t care about. To really tune in; that’s where I push myself. If something doesn’t sit well in my gut, I’ll say something even if I don’t have a fully thought out reason why. To say something in real time and raise a question—sometimes it’s enough to get people to think otherwise.

4. What types of questioning skills do you use during a group decision-making process to help ensure the decision is not based on assumptions or emotions?

We can make great decisions based on emotions, but especially when data is needed. I’ll ask, “Are we making a data-based decision here? Where do we need this program? What data are we using to make that decision?” Being the person who is always bringing that up or speaking to the literature or what’s trending about a given topic... that works most of the time. We do need to make decisions based on good information.
5. How comfortable do you feel sharing your opinion, perspective, and concerns in a group decision-making situation? (If not very, what would make you feel more comfortable?)

For me, what helps is the relationship I have with the other group members. Groups that I’m not as much of a part of, I’m not as comfortable unless I am informed have something to offer. If I’m just taking in information, I’ll be a stronger contributor later on. I’ll also have more of an opinion if I have some skin in the game. Sometimes just asking questions a little bit differently can be helpful. Reflective questions, evaluative questions, interpretive questions... they dig a little deeper and can get the conversation going in a different direction.

6. What did you learn that has been most helpful in facilitating an effective decision-making process?

I have a naturalist kind of style where I really get to know the group and the culture of the group. I tend to be a person of action and move things along. I’ve learned how to introduce an idea, when to have discussion about it, how much time to give it, the meetings in between to get everyone up to speed, and when to pitch the proposal. You shouldn’t start with action right away. And for things that come up that you have to make a decision about immediately, I have a few colleagues I can go to discuss the decision. You don’t want to make important decisions in isolation.

7. How do you feel the education you received in your leadership program helped you prepare to prevent groupthink during decision-making processes?

Learning types of questioning skills can be very helpful. Setting up a meeting really well and having a well-crafted agenda, as well as having really good, well-paced questions. I also think what’s helpful with groupthink is really taking a look at a problem and naming it and then seeking the advice of others and asking, “Is this the issue we have at hand?” It’s important to really address the issue. It’s a problem-solving technique that is much more collaborative and thinks about strategies to resolve it and being proactive about it in the future.
Participant #3

1. Have you ever experienced a situation in your community when groupthink occurred during a decision-making process? If so, what happened?

I have. It was recently. I’m volunteering on the board of our homeowners association. We have an annual meeting coming up, and out of five positions on the board, we’re filling three of them. There was conversation around identifying individuals that we may want to ask about their interest in applying, and it became very clear they had people in mind and people they didn’t have in mind. Very quickly, it felt like, “We’re moving in this direction.” I did not say anything because I just joined on an interim basis two months prior, so I didn’t really realize what was happening until after the meeting was over and had time to reflect on the process. And it seems like the other board members saw that as business as usual. I was just kind of going with it. They very quickly dismissed other voices for consideration. That realization came to me about an hour after the meeting. My newness didn’t prevent me from speaking out against it, but it prevented me from even realizing it was happening.

2. As a leader, what protocols do you have in place to ensure decision-making involves all group members?

One thing I like to do at the start is let people know I want to hear from them, and that is the expectation. Not everyone has to speak right away, but I reinforce before the conversation is up that we hope to hear everyone’s voice. That’s more of a process piece. I’m reticent to call on people, because I know putting people on the spot can be uncomfortable. I also like to use a lot of questioning in different ways. Are there other ways we can frame the discussion? Are there other viewpoints we can imagine? Playing the devil’s advocate role. For me, it’s mostly getting around one or two mindsets to approach a conversation. I’ll also use creativity or imagination to get people to think beyond their most comfortable feelings. It also opens our reception to more ideas and broadens what people are willing to consider.

3. When you haven’t been the formal leader of a group, did you still try to prevent groupthink? What did you do? Were there any barriers that make it difficult?

I feel like I’m rarely in places where I am in a position of positional authority. I’m pretty comfortable with using questioning to redirect as an opportunity to manage up or lead from the middle. When I do have formal authority, I have a similar technique. I want the ownership to rest within the group. I’ll ask clarifying or guiding questions to get people to consider multiple frames or challenge them to approach it from a different angle. In cases where I haven’t spoken up, I think it’s because I’m already comfortable with what the groupthink belief may be. There have also been times when I’ve felt groupthink is happening, but if the meeting is too long or I’m experiencing fatigue, I get a greater benefit of getting the meeting to end quickly than speaking up. Another thing to think about is when groupthink is a positive thing... used to norm an idea that you feel is worthwhile.

4. What types of questioning skills do you use during a group decision-making process to help ensure the decision is not based on assumptions or emotions?

That’s an interesting question, because I feel emotions are a pretty valued response to have. I want people to feel like they can include emotion in their consideration. But I also try to suggest they include a broader sense of experience in addition to emotion. We’re not just feeling machines or thinking machines; we’re both. It’s about trying to strike a balance between those things instead of
making it all one or all the other. If I feel emotion is really present in the room, I’ll ask questions about what we can use beyond that. If all we have is data, I’ll ask, “How does this make you feel?” Some of that is influenced by my experience is policy formation. With policies, there are always winners and losers. If your entire frame is emotion, you’re missing something. If your entire frame is data, you’re missing something.

5. How comfortable do you feel sharing your opinion, perspective, and concerns in a group decision-making situation? (If not very, what would make you feel more comfortable?)

At this point, I feel comfortable with the team I work with. I feel like I’ve established enough of a personal relationship with other people that if I express something poorly, a lot of grace will be extended by the group. I don’t have to feel like I have to defend myself or be vilified. There’s a sense of safety there. There are times where I don’t share my opinion, but I don’t because I don’t think the outcomes are worth the work of bringing them up. Even if I disagree, I can live with it. I think sometimes there’s a piece around my perception about how my opinion will be perceived by other people I’m with, so if I feel it will be heard and considered, I’ll be more apt to say something. If I feel it will be dismissed for whatever reason, or discounted because of who is saying it, or if it’s just going to be ignored, then it’s probably not worth my time to share. It’s tricky, because it’s a judgment call based on my perception of others.

6. What did you learn that has been most helpful in facilitating an effective decision-making process?

For me, a big thing is laying out the criteria at the start. So that all opinions are being considered and perspectives are being shared, it’s helpful to know how they will fit into the decision-making process. That gives me the ability to assign value to different opinions, so when it comes time to narrow things down, hopefully you’ve gotten a variety of options.

7. How do you feel the education you received in your leadership program helped you prepare to prevent groupthink during decision-making processes?

I think they do a lot of great things. A lot of things aren’t spoken but just embedded... like reflection and how you think about the processes. And to do some of those checks to ensure you’re not falling down the path of groupthink. I feel like they’ve provided a lot of great ways to use questions to guide conversation and open perspectives. Another fantastic way is to provide resources around decision-making techniques... helping to narrow down if there’s a range of options available.
Participant #4

1. Have you ever experienced a situation in your community when groupthink occurred during a decision-making process? If so, what happened?

We have five council members out of eight that always stick together on decisions. These five have really gone rogue. There’s a lot of power and control issues, and a lot of their decisions show a conflict of interest. There’s groupthink on both sides: the five that don’t think they have to answer to their constituents and the people who are on the other side. They got the city administrator fired; more than 100 people signed a petition when it was found out. She’s a woman who is very bright and professional, and I think that was a threat to the ring leader of the five. Right now, we’re going through the process to establish misconduct and destroying the public trust. We have a group of 70 people who have come together to make an effort to recall him. Obviously, these five council members had no concept there was this kind of community support and that they didn’t agree with their actions. They completely missed the warning signs that this was not going to fly with the people.

2. As a leader, what protocols do you have in place to ensure decision-making involves all group members?

Intentionally seeking out folks that are not in the same group you are always talking to. I need to step back and ask questions of people I don’t normally ask questions of. We’ll ask “What documentation is needed?” “Does it destroy the public trust?” “What would a devil’s advocate say?” It gives people permission to disagree with your point of view. We intentionally wanted to have a discussion about this so there was no groupthink. We have another meeting tonight, and one of the items we’re going to talk about is brainstorming. If you’re on the other side of the fence, what would you do to derail this effort of the petition? Another thing is just trying to find people with diverse backgrounds. We have a large Latino population in our community and a fast growing Somali population. We intentionally seek out different people from the county so we are able to get different ideas.

3. When you haven’t been the formal leader of a group, did you still try to prevent groupthink? What did you do? Were there any barriers that make it difficult?

One barrier is not having enough information. If I’m not as well-versed, I’m not as comfortable speaking out. It’s about not wanting to look stupid. I’m actually high avoidance, but once you hit one of my core values, then that’s crossed the line. Then avoidance is not an issue for me. I'll address it head on. It’s a matter of getting to the point of, “Is this an issue I care about?” Or, if you’re new to an organization or board, there’s that learning curve before you want to cause waves or controversy. You think, “If they’ve always done it this way, it must be a good reason for it.”

4. What types of questioning skills do you use during a group decision-making process to help ensure the decision is not based on assumptions or emotions?

I’m an analytical person, so I do like to get the data in. We have some wonderful resources in our community to help generate data. I’m a really lousy question-maker, but ULAA has taught me to sit back and work on that. I like the line, “Tell me more.” It helps me not to have to be an expert at it to ask a smart question. Sometimes I don’t know how to frame a question so that “tell me more” opens the door for more discussion.
5. How comfortable do you feel sharing your opinion, perspective, and concerns in a group decision-making situation? (If not very, what would make you feel more comfortable?)

Structure and authority—I’m very aware of that. If I’m not the senior leader in the room, I’m going to be more conservative, but it should almost be the flip of that. If I’m in a meeting with my employees, I should actually make sure to step back and not answer too quickly so it allows them time to ask questions. I’m more sensitive about my answers or questions when I’m with a group of my peers. If I’m with other regional directors, I’m still a little bit reserved because I know they’ve been in their roles for such a long period of time. I respect their thoughts and input, so I would tend to be a little bit more reserved.

6. What did you learn that has been most helpful in facilitating an effective decision-making process?

Asking more questions and thinking about how I’m going to formulate something before it comes out of my mouth. If I’m going to disagree with someone, I’ll ask questions, and not just a yes or no question. Another thing is that ULAA gave us a variety of tools to walk through a process. First it’s important to identify very clearly what the real goal is. Then based on what you’re trying to accomplish, you need to find the right decision-making tool to help you through that process. What are the strengths? Who are the supporters? What are the values? It was so efficient having a toolbox and knowing which tool to use at the right time. Tapping into others that have expertise in this and learning from them is also helpful.

7. How do you feel the education you received in your leadership program helped you prepare to prevent groupthink during decision-making processes?

Just making me aware of it—that it even exists... creating that awareness and the questioning skills.
Participant #5

1. Have you ever experienced a situation in your community when groupthink occurred during a decision-making process? If so, what happened?

I think I can speak from a business perspective from my job. Looking at it from the outside in, our members have made a few technology decisions that have definitely not worked well for the company. We made a major core conversion that affected the whole company and cost them a million dollars. Once they got into it, no one really seemed to think it was that great of a system. We'd put so much time and effort into it, though, we didn't want to tell people it wasn't right.

2. As a leader, what protocols do you have in place to ensure decision-making involves all group members?

I was the leader of the Jaycees for years and president of the curling club. I try to pry people. I want people to give me their feedback. I'll say, "Don't let me tell you what I think or just let three people in this group run the whole thing." Do I have a protocol in place to go around and put people on the spot? No, because some people don't like that. I just try to include everyone in the meeting and try to get as many ideas and perspectives on the situation as I can.

3. When you haven't been the formal leader of a group, did you still try to prevent groupthink? What did you do? Were there any barriers that make it difficult?

I like to think that I do! I'm very outgoing. I don't just sit back and listen in a group. I tend to jump into the group fully. I fully engage myself. Let's just get everyone involved. I'll say, "What do you think?" It goes back to how I lead. How can we make this better? What's your perspective on this? I can't back off. In my professional career, sometimes I want to say something but I don't know how to say it the proper way. I may be so worked up about something that I'm extremely involved in or have taken personal interest in that I've left and was upset that I didn't say anything. Other times, you get into a big group setting, and there's too many people, and I think, "I'm just going to make this worse" and let it go for now and circle back at a later date.

4. What types of questioning skills do you use during a group decision-making process to help ensure the decision is not based on assumptions or emotions?

Every situation I'm in is so different. I'll step back and look at the group dynamics and think, "Do we have a room full of leaders? Of followers? A mix? What situation am I in?" And then I'll mold my questions or responses or feedback to foster a more grounded discussion. Sometimes I run wild, because I am very passionate about what I do and what I'm a part of, so sometimes people need to ground me, too.

5. How comfortable do you feel sharing your opinion, perspective, and concerns in a group decision-making situation? (If not very, what would make you feel more comfortable?)

I am very comfortable! My wife will give me a hard time all the time because there are not a lot of situations where I am uncomfortable. But there were a lot of times when I was a young lender when I would sit back and think, "I don't know if I'm talking about this situation in the right way" or whether I had the knowledge to give good feedback on the situation, so I would just sit there in meetings.
6. What did you learn that has been most helpful in facilitating an effective decision-making process?

Making a decision that includes everyone. You’re never going to get 100% of people on board, but getting people comfortable with how you’re doing it... it makes the process so much better.

7. How do you feel the education you received in your leadership program helped you prepare to prevent groupthink during decision-making processes?

There are so many things I learned through my leadership program. It’s so much about looking within yourself. There were times when I would think, “These people aren’t thinking right or aren’t helping the group,” but maybe it’s something I’m doing that’s preventing them from doing that. It’s not always the group’s fault. Sometimes it’s me that’s at fault and not fostering proper decision-making skills. I also learned how to get inside other people’s minds and inside the group and continue fostering what is being done.