DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 259 ^^2 HE 018 610

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TITLE A Preliminary View of the Quality of Decision-Making in the Benchmark Year of 1984. AIR 1985 Annual Forum Paper.
PUB DATE May 85
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research (25th, Portland, OR, April 28-May 1, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrators; *College Administration; *Decision Making; Governance; Higher Education; Institutional Research; *Interprofessional Relationship; Models; Political Influences; Professional Autonomy; *Researchers
IDENTIFIERS *AIR Forum; *Groupthink

ABSTRACT

Perceptions of college institutional research directors concerning the quality of executive decision making at their institutions were studied. Perceptions were assessed using a theoretical model of Groupthink developed by Janis, who postulates that a high amount of environmental stress should lead to a greater degree of "sticking-together" by the executive committee. In addition to examining the usefulness of this model for higher education, the analysis promotes understanding of the political nature of information and the role of the professional in a variety of organizational contexts. Sixty percent of the sample were from public institutions, while 40 percent were from private schools. Respondents' perceptions describe existing decision-making quality levels, characteristics of institutions, and the existence of preventive techniques that can encourage improved outcomes. Ratings of enrollment, staffing, and resource changes from 1979 to 1984 were developed to examine the level of environmental stress at each institution. Group indexes were developed for five areas: environmental stress, executive cohesion level, symptoms of Groupthink, defects in decision making, and Groupthink prevention techniques. Results validate the theoretical model of Groupthink in an educational context. (SW)

A PRELIMINARY VIEW OF THE QUALITY OF DECISION-MAKING IN THE BENCHMARK YEAR OF 1984

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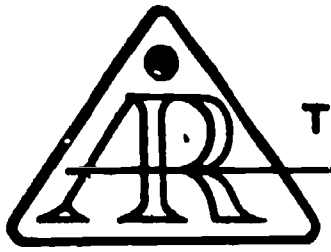
Portland, Oregon, April 28-May 1, 1985



THE ASSOCIATION FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

This paper was presented at the Twenty-Fifth Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Portland Hilton in Portland, Oregon, April 28-May 1, 1985. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum papers.

Elizabeth F. Fox, Chair
Forum Publications Editorial
Advisory Committee

ABSTRACT

Information professionals should become more concerned with the quality of decision-making as Higher Education passes through the current turbulent era. The present study compares a theoretical model of Groupthink, developed by Janis (1972), with a survey of Institutional Researchers. Respondents' perceptions describe existing decision-making quality levels, characteristics of institutions, and the existence of preventive techniques that can encourage improved outcomes. The survey results validate the theoretical model of Groupthink in an educational context. This is important for Institutional Researchers, as it provides them with a better understanding of their role as information providers in a political environment. It can also serve to broaden the Institutional Research function to include the analysis of Executive decision-making.

INTRODUCTION AND PERSPECTIVE

Information professionals have valid concerns about how information is developed, but they should also be more sensitive to its use in decision-making. In an era of tremendous upheaval in Higher Education, many stressful, external pressures have been brought to bear on institutions and their administrators who were previously accustomed to an environment of growth and prosperity. Competition in student markets, for public and private funding, and in new program development has changed decision-making from acquiring new resources from a larger pie, to survival in a shrinking resource pool. Does stress produced by these environmental pressures impact the quality of the executive level decision-making process? How is the process perceived by those information professionals directly involved and by those indirectly involved? Do men and women respond differently? Are there differences between small and large institutions, public and independent institutions, and/or among types of degree granting institutions?

The quality of the decision-making process becomes a vital concern since the process can occur in a continuum of open, informed discussion to a striving for unanimity known as "Groupthink", a situation in which an individual's rational thinking is subservient to achieving consensus within the group. Janis (1972) developed a theoretical model to judge the quality of the decision process. This model is comprised of five major areas: (a) Environmental stress, (b) Executive cohesion level, (c) Symptoms of groupthink, (d) Defects in decision-making, and (e) Preventive techniques. According to Janis, these areas are

interrelated. For example, a very stressful environment is conducive to groupthink, but doesn't automatically cause it. The same holds true for high levels of executive committee unity and apparent symptoms. What Janis postulates is that if there is a high amount of stress in the environment, it could lead to a greater degree of "sticking-together" by the executive committee. This result could lead to developing more symptoms of groupthink. Therefore, unless some intervention with preventive measures occurs, poor decisions could be made.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to answer some of the questions posed above by examining the perceptions of information professionals in Higher Education regarding the quality of decision-making at their institutions. These perceptions are measured in terms of the theoretical model developed by Janis as described previously. In addition to examining the usefulness of this model for Higher Education, it also serves to provide a better understanding of the political nature of information and the role of the professional in a variety of organizational contexts. As resource experts, the more we are aware of institutional circumstances, the better able we are to supply information in the format and context in which it is most acceptable. This qualitative research is but a beginning toward achieving that goal.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The initial work in this field was developed by Irving Janis (Victims of Groupthink, 1972). He examined American foreign policy decisions to determine the quality of the decision-making

processes that preceded their success or failure. The dynamics of group behavior that led to faulty decision-making were collectively termed "Groupthink". This "refers to a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action" (Janis, 1972, p.9). Groupthink is more likely to occur when the decision-making group is cohesive, insulated from qualified outside associates, and has a leader who actively promotes his/her own preferred solution (Janis, 1972, p. 197).

Janis identified eight major symptoms of Groupthink:

1. Illusions of invulnerability
2. Collective rationalization to discount warnings
3. Unquestioned belief in the group's inherent morality
4. Stereotyping of opponents
5. Direct pressure against dissenting members
6. Self-censorship of deviations from apparent consensus
7. Shared illusion of unanimity
8. Mindguards who protect group from adverse information

Janis also postulated that these sypmptoms led to six major defects in decision-making:

1. Limited consideration of alternatives
2. Failure to re-examine the preferred alternative
3. Failure to re-examine previously rejected alternatives
4. Little or no attempt to obtain expert information
5. Selective interest in supporting information and rejection of contradicting information
6. Failure to develop contingency plans

While Janis only examined American foreign policy decision-making, he indicated that these types of symptoms and defects would be expected in industry, medicine, law, education, or any field (Janis, 1972, p. 196).

In the final chapter, Janis suggests mechanisms for preventing groupthink. These include:

1. Group members act as critical evaluators
2. Group leader accepts criticism of his/her judgements
3. Group leader keeps from stating solution preferences
4. Subgroups assigned to examine the issue independently
5. Subgroups assigned to examine alternatives
6. Group members discuss issues with trusted associates outside of the decision-making group
7. Qualified colleagues periodically invited to attend meetings
8. Group members assigned role of devil's advocate to evaluate alternatives
9. Competitors' activities considered in solutions
10. Discussions held to consider residual doubts after alternative was selected

The model has remained essentially dormant since 1972. Moorhead (1982) reviewed the major points of the model and indicated that no systematic research has been published. He provides some suggestions for future research, but none is evident in later publications.

DATA SOURCES

The sample for this research study was identified as Directors of Institutional Research, or individuals with

comparable titles. The Association for Institutional Research Directory served as the source of potential respondents and 503 members were defined as the population. A 20 percent sample was drawn by selecting every fifth person from this alphabetical list, after randomly identifying the first person. The 100 person sample proportions are indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of the Sample

Institutional Characteristics	
Control	
Public	60%
Independent	40%
Type by Highest Degree Offered	
Associate	21%
Bachelors/Masters	49%
Doctoral	30%
Individual Characteristics	
Gender	
Male	63%
Female	37%

The questionnaire was designed to reflect the basic components of Janis' model, as well as to try to identify institutional and individual characteristics that could influence the model's applicability. The Institutional Background section included questions about size, location, control, and a series of comparative ratings. These ratings of enrollment, staffing and resource changes from 1979 to 1984 were developed to examine the level of environmental stress facing each institution. The Individual Data sought personal involvement with the institution,

the decision-making group and the planning process. Finally, the Decision-Making Environment section elicited perceptions about the characteristics of the Executive Group, as viewed by the institutional researchers. The twenty-eight statements corresponded to the executive cohesion, symptoms, defects and prevention components of the Janis model. These questions were put in random order to avoid concentrating on the component nature of the analysis, and were phrased so that there was no consistent positive or negative orientation. During the analysis phase, the questions were re-organized into their respective components, and re-coded to obtain a consistent orientation.

ANALYSIS

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was selected to analyze the questionnaire responses using frequencies and crosstabs. Frequencies substantiated that responses fairly represented the original sample (See Results Section - Table 2). Therefore, along with a 70% response rate, 60% useable, non-response bias was determined not to be a problem warranting further investigation. Also, since this was a small, qualitative study, significance tests for the crosstabs were deemed inappropriate because each of the cells contained fewer than 30 responses.

Composite indices were developed for five major areas: (a) Environmental Stress, (b) Executive Cohesion Level, (c) Symptoms of Groupthink, (d) Defects in Decision-Making, and (e) Groupthink Prevention Techniques. A mean was calculated for each set of questions for each respondent in each of the five major areas. Next, the group means were recoded so that ranges for the four

areas of Environmental Stress, Executive Cohesion Level, Symptoms of Groupthink, and Defects in Decision-Making became 1-Very Low, 2-Low, 3-Moderate, 4-High and 5-Very High. The range for Groupthink Prevention Techniques became 1-Very High, 2-High, 3-Moderate, 4-Low and 5-Very Low.

The Groupthink model can be symbolized cyclically (Figure 1).

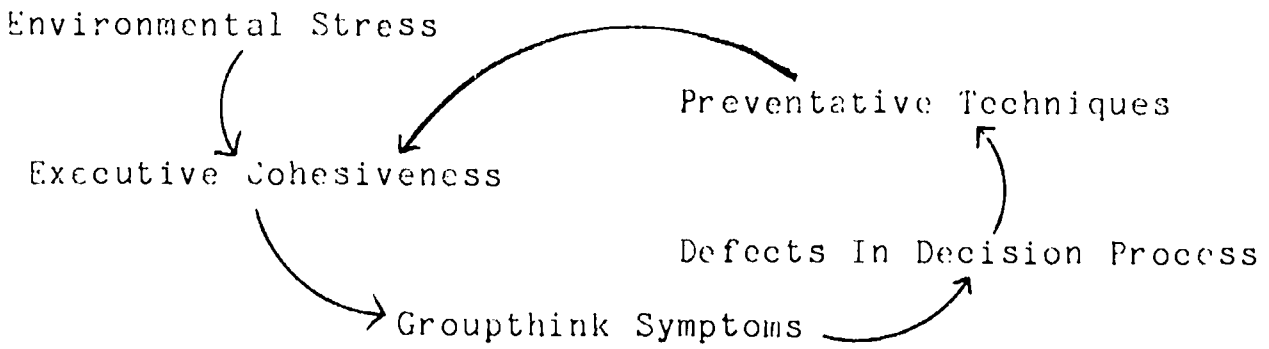


FIGURE 1: Janis' Groupthink model represented cyclically

In essence, as environmental stress reaches a high level, pressure is exerted on the executive committee to become more cohesive in order to resolve this stress. As the executive committee becomes more cohesive, it can exhibit more groupthink symptoms which could lead to defects in the decision-making process. If the defects are perceived, then preventive techniques can be introduced and brought to bear on the executive committee to reduce the cohesiveness, reduce the symptoms and reduce the defects.

For the first set of crosstabs, the five major areas were examined based upon the theoretical model. This gave five tables from which to determine relationships within the data, and whether groupthink was present based upon Janis' model.

Additional sets of crosstabulations were completed for the following six subgroups: (a) Institutional Control, (b) Type of

Degree Granting Institution, (c) Institution Size, (d) Respondent Gender, (e) Respondent Age, and (f) Respondent's Attendance at Executive meetings. These provided more information and allowed inferences to be drawn concerning the first six crosstabs.

From the crosstabs, if perfect relationships occurred, we expected to get the following type of distribution:

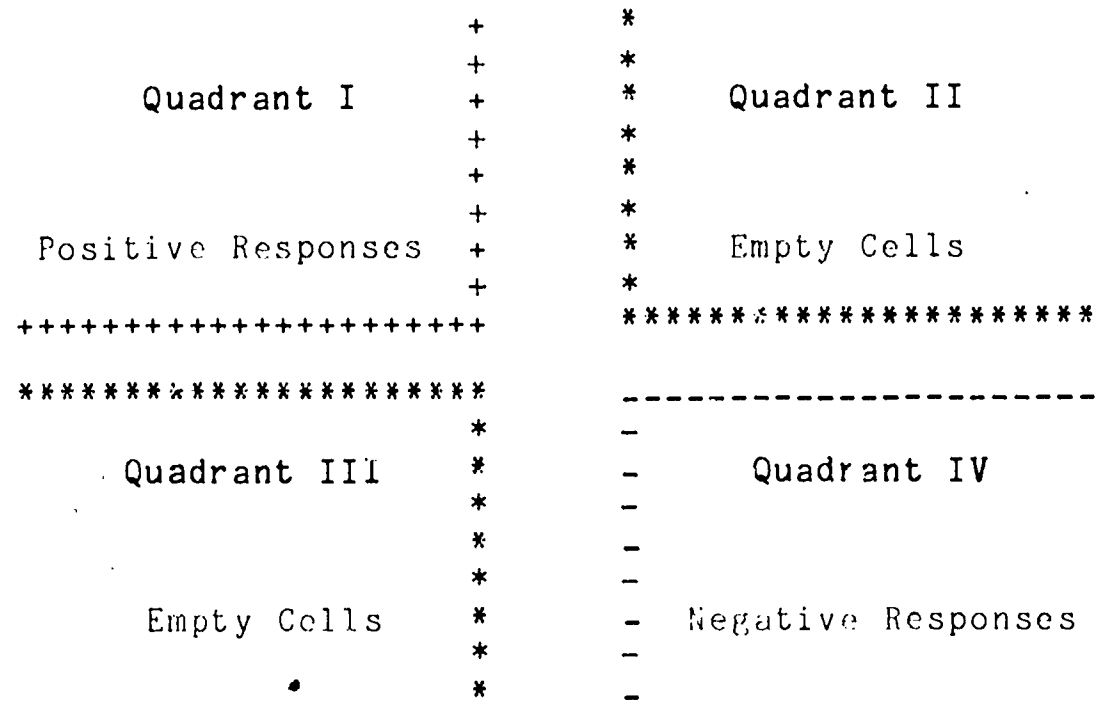


FIGURE 2: Expected results from perfect relationships

In this way, the existence of groupthink in a Higher Education context could be addressed. The strength of the linkages was based on the percentage of responses in either the upper left or the lower right quadrants.

RESULTS

As mentioned earlier, responses were representative of the original sample. Response percentages are indicated in Table 2 along with percentages for other data items. These six items allowed for secondary analysis by subgroup using crosstabulations.

Table 2: Characteristics of the Responses

Institutional Characteristics	
Control	
Public	69.5%
Independent	30.5%
Type by Highest Degree Offered	
Associates	26.7%
Bachelors/Masters	43.3%
Doctoral	30.0%
Size by Headcount	
<3,000	23.7%
3,000 - 6,999	22.0%
7,000 - 9,999	16.9%
10,000 - 20,000	25.4%
>20,000	11.9%
Individual Characteristics	
Gender	
Male	69.0%
Female	31.0%
Age	
25-35	20.0%
36-50	53.3%
51-65	25.0%
66+	1.7%
Attendance at Executive Committee Meetings	
Yes	30.5%
No	69.5%

Examination of the initial crosstabulation of all respondents produced some interesting results. When Environmental Stress was compared with Executive Cohesion, we expected to find that low stress matched with low cohesion, and conversely, that high stress matched with high cohesion. We anticipated that when enrollment, personnel, and resource difficulties produced a high stress level, executives would be compelled to unify. Contrary to expectations, when environmental stress was compared with executive cohesion level, they were not highly related. So, it appears that the environmental problems alone do not contribute to creating high cohesion levels among executive groups.

The next comparison of Executive Cohesion with Groupthink Symptoms did appear highly related. When executive cohesion was in the low range (n=39), symptoms of groupthink were also in the low range (Quadrant I: 30 of 39). Conversely, when executive cohesion was in the high range (n=9), symptoms of group think were in the high range (Quadrant IV = 7 of 9). Where we expected no responses, there were only three in the low cohesion/high symptoms range (Quadrant II) and none in the high cohesion/low symptoms range (Quadrant III).

Likewise, the third comparison, Groupthink Symptoms with Decision Defects, was highly related. When the symptom level was low (n=33), the defective decision-making was low (Quadrant I: 27 of 33). And, conversely, when symptoms were high (n=17), defective decision making was also high (Quadrant IV: 12 of 17). Where we expected no responses, there was only one in the low symptoms/high defects range (Quadrant II), and only two in the high symptoms/low defects range (Quadrant III). These results

support the model.

And again, the fourth comparison, the Decision Defects with Prevention Techniques, was very highly related. When decision-making exhibited low defective characteristics (n= 32), the prevention level was high (Quadrant I: 19 of 32). Conversely, when the defective decision-making level was high (n=15), the prevention level was low (Quadrant IV: 10 of 15). In Quadrants II and III where no responses were expected, there were only 3 of 32 and 1 of 15 respectively. These results supported the model.

Finally, for the first set of crosstabs, the fifth comparison, Prevention Techniques with Executive Cohesion, was very highly related. When Executive Cohesion Level was in the low range (n=39), the Prevention Techniques Level was in the high range (Quadrant I: 22 of 39). Then, when the cohesion level was in the high range (n=9), the prevention level was in the low range (Quadrant IV: 7 of 9). Where we expected no responses, in Quadrant II for low cohesion/low prevention, there were only 3 of 39 responses; and, in Quadrant III, there were indeed no responses for high cohesion/high prevention. Again, these results supported the model.

To summarize, the results of the first five crosstabs show that all five components demonstrated a relationship, with four of the five being very highly related (Table 3).

Table 3: Crosstabulations Comparisons

Comparison	Relationship
Environmental Stress with Executive Cohesion	Related
Executive Cohesion with Groupthink Systems	Very Highly Related
Groupthink Symptoms with Decision Defects	Very Highly Related
Decision Defects with Prevention Techniques	Very Highly Related
Prevention Techniques with Executive Cohesion	Very Highly Related

Further analyses were conducted for six subgroups, three related to the institutional characteristicos and three related to the individual characteristics. The three institutional characteristic comparisons were for: (a) Control: Public/Independent, (b) Institutional Type by Highest Degree: Associates/Bachelors-Masters/Doctoral, and (c) Size: <3,000/3,000-6,999/7,000-10,000/10,000-20,000/20,000+. The three individual comaprisons were for: (a) Gender: Male/Female, (b) Age: 25-35/36-50/51-65/66+, and (c) Attendance at Executive Meetings: Yes/No.

The six subgroup comparisons were examined for pattern similarities and differences and for theory support. The first comparison, Insitutional Control, showed that both public and independent produced similar patterns in each major area. Regarding support for the theory, both public and independent showed moderate support for environmental stress, but strong

support for the relationships involving cohesion, symptoms, defects and prevention. Public institutions tended to be slightly stronger than the independents.

The second comparison, Institution Type by Highest Degree, indicated expected pattern similarities between 2-year and 4-year institutions. However, there were differences with doctoral institutions in four of the five major areas: stress, cohesion symptoms and defects. Unlike the 2-year and 4-year schools, the perceptions at the doctoral institutions basically contained the positive responses of Quadrant I, with few or no responses in Quadrants II-IV. In the fifth major area, prevention, the three institution types differed from each other. The 2-year schools had few responses in Quadrants I and IV. The 4-year schools fit the standard pattern very well, low cohesion/high prevention and high cohesion/low prevention. Doctoral schools contained most of the responses in Quadrant I, low cohesion level/high prevention level. In regards to theory support, there was again moderate support for environmental stress and strong support for cohesion and symptoms. For detects and for prevention, the 2-year schools exhibited moderate support while the 4-year and doctoral institutions reflected strong support.

The third comparison, Institution Size, indicated that the smaller institutions (<3,000 and 3,000-6,999) were often similar to each other, but different from the general pattern, in that many times the extremes of a quadrant were missing. The 7,000-9,999 and 10,000-20,000 institutions generally fit the expected pattern. Institutions >20,000 were completely different from the expected pattern with most responses in Quadrant I. Regarding

theory support, environmental stress again received only moderate support. All other major areas had strong theory support.

For the fourth comparison of Gender, respondents exhibited similar patterns for all five major areas. The only minor difference was that for women, there were no very high perceptions of cohesion levels. There was still high cohesion but women did not perceive it to be as pronounced as the men did. As for support for the theory, again, environmental stress is only moderately supported while all other areas were strongly supported.

For the fifth comparison, Age, the various categories showed similar patterns for each of the five categories. Since 66+ had only one response, it was eliminated from further consideration. Support for the theory was again moderate for environmental stress and very strong for each of the other areas.

The sixth subgroup comparison, Attendance at Executive Meetings, shows markedly different patterns between those who attend and those who do not. Basically, the response pattern for those who attend meetings was positive, and was displayed only in Quadrant I. They did not perceive any of the negative components of the model. Those who did not attend meetings perceived both the positive and negative aspects of the model, and responses were displayed in both Quadrants I and IV.

Those who attend executive committee meetings perceive: low environmental stress, low executive cohesion, low groupthink symptom, low defects in decision-making and high prevention techniques. Those who do not attend executive committee meetings perceive both low and high levels of environmental stress

executive cohesion, groupthink symptoms, defects in decision-making and prevention techniques.

In summary, both of these groups exhibit strong support for the theory of groupthink. Those who attend executive committee meetings support it for all the positive components. Those who do not attend meetings support the theory by perceiving both the positive and the negative components of the model. As with the other five subgroups, the environmental stress area was only moderately supported.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The theoretical model of Groupthink proposed by Janis (1972) has been supported by this survey of Institutional Researchers' perceptions of Executive decision-making. While present, the environmental stress component does not have the anticipated impact on the remainder of the process. This may occur because the stress level at most institutions is not high enough to trigger the Groupthink syndrome. It is also possible that environmental stress only makes defective decisions more likely, and while it may be a necessary condition, it is not sufficient by itself.

The components of executive cohesion, groupthink symptoms, decision defects and prevention techniques show the anticipated relationships. The subgroup analyses to determine additional characteristics about the existence of groupthink were largely in vain. Institutional Control, Degree Type, Institution Size, Respondent Gender and Respondent Age did not provide meaningful differences. The only analysis that did indicate differing perceptions was based on Attendance at Executive meetings.

Institutional Researchers who regularly attend Executive meetings do not see any of the negative Groupthink components. One possible explanation could be that an Executive group interested in having an information professional among them could be more disposed to an open decision-making process. Another possibility exists that Institutional Researchers are not immune to groupthink characteristics. Thus, in cohesive groups, the Institutional Researcher might be part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

This study has just scratched the surface of potential research in this area. While perceptions suggest that Groupthink exists in Higher Education, there is no direct evidence related to specific decisions. The issue now is to develop case study results of participants in decision-making positions. This type of research can serve to broaden the role of Institutional Research to include the analysis of decision-making at the highest levels of the institution.

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