# Leading Beyond Invincibility, Group-Think, and Other Catastrophic Attitudes

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## Introduction

"*If you want to hear God laugh, tell Him your plans.  If you want to hear danger laugh, tell her you're invincible.*"

"*Pride goes before destruction; a haughty spirit before a fall.*"  (Proverbs 16:18, NIV)

How many times have we heard or read, "*It won't happen to me*"?  Maybe those words stir some story in your past, or something that you read in an accident account.  If the words weren't spoken, they were likely thought.  And it is true that they are often only identified in retrospect – after an incident has occurred, we recognize/acknowledge, "*Yeah, that's what I was thinking…*"

## Objectives for this session

1.  To more deeply sensitize ourselves to the broad area of human attitudes and their causative and contributory effects on outdoor accidents and incidents
2.  To reflect on and work toward correcting expressions of invincibility that may emerge in our individual leadership practice.
3.  To understand more specifically the social dynamic of group-think, and its potential presence in outdoor activity and expedition settings, and
4.  To identify implications and applications for outdoor leaders in diffusing group-think, facilitating sound decision-making, and ultimately leading and providing safer experiences for clients and friends in the backcountry.

## Invincibility

Someone once said, "*We all know were are mortal, but we don't always live like we know it.*"

Some faces of Invincibility (Ewert, Shellman, and Glenn, 2006)

1.  *One Size Fits All thinking*: what has worked in the past will work again.  Familiarity with terrain or a particular activity becomes casualness, the loss of vigilance over details, changes in weather, attitude, or client readiness sets the stage for a disaster.  Operationally, we are behaving like we think we are invincible.
2.  *Believing something that isn't true*.  Force-fitting information to the situation, rationalizing, and then bolstering decisions (to reduce anxiety).  "That which you desire most earnestly, you believe most

easily." (Stephen Covey)  When we do this, we are projecting that we are bigger than objective facts, and therefore, that we believe we are invincible.

3. *Ignoring red flags*:  We don't pay attention to the small ones, and then we suddenly see them cascade into the big one.  Near-miss and High Potential for Harm incidents are often predictors of future accidents.  Ignoring them, we are saying that we are bigger than the chain.

4. *Super Instructor syndrome*:  Pride becomes hubris, expertise becomes invincibility, and [we think] expressing personal need appears as weakness.

5. *Meeting the Train/Headin' for the Barn*:  undue attachment to a schedule creates a false sense of urgency that then tempts us to bypass safeties and minimize important issues.  Or, heading home (final day/final phase), we let our guard down, get casual, and then something happens.

Laurence Gonzales' three stages of enlightenment (2004):

1.  It CAN'T happen to me (denial, ignorance)
2.  It CAN happen to me (awareness)
3.  It can happen to me and IT PROBABLY WILL unless I change my approach (honesty, personal application, change)


Groupthink

Definition:  "*A deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures.*" (Janis, 1972, 9).  From this premise, Janis identified 8 symptoms of groupthink:

1.  Illusion of invulnerability
2.  Collective rationalization
3.  Belief in inherent morality
4.  Stereotyped views of out-groups
5.  Direct pressures on dissenters
6.  Self censorship
7.  Illusion of unanimity
8.  Self-appointed "mind-guards"

A Case in Point:  "*A legendary accident in Alaska involved a ten-man team of British soldiers, who set out to climb 20,320 foot Mount McKinley on June 4, 1998.  At their mandatory briefing, the rangers at Talkeetna recommended the easiest route, called the West Buttress, because some of the team members had very little experience with the glacier crossings and ice climbing that would be necessary on other routes.  Nevertheless, the army team ignored the advice and decided to climb the West Rib, which is Grade 4.  As they proceeded in three rope teams, one man fell, dragging the others on his rope down with him.  All three people on the rope were injured, but one, Steve Brown, suffered head injuries, went into shock, and became delirious.  In all, the group split up a total of seven times, as various members tried to climb down or rescue one another.  The expedition descended into chaos as several others fell and were injured.  The final rescue wasn't completed until June 22, nearly three weeks after the soldiers had set out, by which time two climbers had spent four nights partially exposed in bivouac bags during bad weather. ... The military uses groupness deliberately to create strong bonds among its members from the squad level right up through the entire organization.  Groupness is used specifically to reinforce self-confidence in the group's abilities.  That can-do attitude, along*

*with the tendency to reject information from the outside, no doubt contributed to the British team's decisions throughout the incident, from selecting the harder route to attempting various descending routes, despite having no practical knowledge of them. "* (Gonzales, 2008, 30)

<u>Additional Variables</u>

*"Research on conformity began in the 1930's and has consistently indicated that a person's judgment, when in the presence of others, will tend toward a group norm."* (Moore, 2000, 2) *"The nail that sticks up gets hammered down."* Moore points out that there are some additional variables to the intensity of groupthink; these relate to *task importance* and *task difficulty*.

*Task importance*: the extent to which making correct or accurate judgments mediates important rewards and punishments for participants (Baron, Vandello, and Brunsman, 1996, 915)

<table>
<tr>
<td rowspan="2">TASK DIFFICULTY</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>*"Over the mountain or through the swamp?"*<br><br>Medium conformity pressure</td>
<td>*Challenging river crossing, or maybe evaluating a vague medical complaint*<br><br>High conformity pressure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>*"Pasta or burritos?"*<br><br>Medium conformity pressure</td>
<td>*Practicing lightening drills*<br><br>Low conformity pressure</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
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<td></td>
<td colspan="3">TASK IMPORTANCE</td>
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<u>Destructive Goal Pursuit</u>

More recently, Kayes (2006) has done some thinking about the psychology of goal-setting, and how personal and shared goals can become destructive forces. He uses the 1996 Mount Everest disaster as his case study.

*"Pursuing the summit of Everest becomes part of who you are. Your self-image become inseparable from the summit. Contingencies, unintended consequences, and other obstacles attempt to get in your way but ultimately fail to distract you. And distractions they are, since such obstacles only remind you to focus on what is important – achieving your goal. You focus on the summit. You become determined to meet your goal. The goal itself is straightforward: summit the mountain. You know, at least in theory, how this can be done. You put trust in the expedition leaders, and they reassure you they have it all figured out. Stay the course, don't get distracted, and listen to their guidance. Don't worry about the inevitable setbacks, such as the lack of sleep, the uncomfortable cough, the egos of your climbing partners. Focus on attaining your goal. You don't need to worry about finding excuses because you will have success. Your sense of self and the goal have become inseparable."* (2006, 41)

*Goal:* an idealized future state, an optimal outcome

*Theodicy*: people who hold strong beliefs often seek to maintain those beliefs even in the face of contradictory information.  Individuals rely on future desired states to rationalize current suffering.

*Goalodicy*: destructive goal pursuit  *"The more a person, group, or organization relies on a future as yet unachieved goal as a source of identity, the more likely they will persist at pursuing the goal beyond what is reasonable."*

*"The goal serves not only as the destination but also as the means to justify the continued pursuit of the goal."* (2006, 44)

*"Goalodicy emerges as leaders and their followers begin to ignore new information, especially when this information contradicts current beliefs about achieving the goal.  Goalodicy provides a tool to maintain the motivating power of goals, even when new information may indicate that the goal cannot be achieved.  The problem of goalidicy lies in the following complication: Goals motivate leaders and their followers to continue to put more effort into achieving a desired outcome.  In many cases, however, the additional effort will not lead to goal achievement.  Goalodicy describes a situation in which the more effort that is put into achieving the goal, the more likely the goal will become destructive."* (2006, 44)

Straw (1993) refers to this as *"an escalation of commitment to a failing course of action."*

Put this together with Janis' ideas about Groupthink.  What we observe is that **when group identity and goal striving are intertwined, leaders may in fact wittingly or unwittingly evoke group-think to maintain commitment to both group and goal**.

Ahlfinger and Esser (2001) call these "promotional leaders" (leaders who promote their own preferred solutions, or strongly advocate one particular course of action).  They found that groups with this kind of leader produce more symptoms of groupthink, discuss fewer facts, reach decisions more quickly, and hence practice poorer decision-making processes and produce lower quality decisions than groups with non-promotional leaders.

Taken together, I would offer a few observations:

1.  Reinforcing group norms is not just a matter of a few exerting their will on a group – it is about reinforcing group identity – something, incidentally, that we tend to give considerable time and attention to early on in our program groups and expeditions.  Are we sowing the seeds of goalodicy?
2. "Tightly coupled to a weak chain."  *"Any mountaineering party can only accomplish what its weakest member is capable of"* (Fredston, Fesler, and Tremper, 2000, 4).  By reinforcing group identity, we have more tightly coupled ourselves to the weak link in the chain, making escape even more difficult.
3. Let's not forget about "risk shift" – that well researched phenomenon in which being in a group impels people to take riskier decisions than when they are alone.

<u>What about group-think and its effect upon **the leader**</u>; how susceptible are we to this influence?

There is not much research here, but the small amount that there is suggests that the more demographically and sociologically similar the leader is to the group members (age, cultural background), the more susceptible that leader is to being influenced by the group as a whole.

Where does this happen for us?  Probably not with a 5<sup>th</sup> Grade environmental science classes or middle school backpacking trips.  Much more likely scenarios might be **college freshmen trips led by upper-class students**, **camp outings led by older teenagers**,  or **your adventure outings with buddies**...


<u>Some Thoughts for Leading beyond Groupthink and Goalodicy</u>

<u>Group formation</u>: Instead of fashioning a group identity based upon our ability to achieve --- to overcome the obstacles we will encounter, early on, we should fashion an identity based upon our responsiveness, flexibility, willingness to listen, and group ability to learn.

<u>Personal and group relationships</u>  Edmondson's (2003) study of surgical teams found that higher performing teams intentionally:

1.  Fostered inclusiveness; encouraged active participation by each team member.

2.  Minimized power differences; emphasized teaming over individual ability.

3.  Had leaders who communicated humility; *the leader can still learn*.

<u>Diagnosing Toxic Goals</u>

1.  Narrowly defined goal; only one measure of success.

2.  Public expectation; elevating the stakes

3.  Face-saving behavior; maintaining status; avoiding admitting something embarrassing

4.  Idealized future; fulfillment; the ultimate achievement; success will fill in personal gaps

5.  Goal-driven justification; "*I can endure present hardships because once I achieve my goal, these hardships will go away*…" (Kayes, 2006, 75)

6.  Achieving destiny; my only meaning in life

<u>Fostering multiple goals</u>: balancing the importance of making the summit with the necessity of a safe descent. This more closely reflects reality out in the field, and it can force "judgment-call conversations among group members.

<u>Functioning in the field</u>

Several of Janis' suggestions for minimizing the negative expressions of group-think:

1.  Each group member has permission to be a critical evaluator.  The leader must model acceptance of critique, even of his or her own judgment.

2.  Leaders should withhold their own preferences and judgments early in the decision-making process. Kathryn Dant, in Groupthink – the Dark Side of Teaming and How to Counteract it, suggests limiting the early influence of a senior leader.

3. Several groups can be assigned to work independently, and then bring their own conclusions about the question or problem. Dant again calls this, "creating constructive conflict within the group."

4. Outside input can be sought, and then reflected back into the group decision-making process (not particularly workable in an expedition context).

5. A group member can be assigned the role of "devil's advocate," both the question prevailing ideas, and to be a partner for any indigenous group member who wants to challenge the majority perspective.

6. A session can be spent "thinking like the enemy," and devising concomitant scenarios or strategies. In a backcountry expedition setting, time can be spent brainstorming about alternative weather, logistical, or injury scenarios.

7. When a preliminary consensus has been reached a "second chance" meeting can be held in which members are encouraged to express any residual doubts and rethink the issue before committing to a definitive plan.

Kayes' (2006) offers some ideas about becoming a *learning group* instead of a *performing group*:

- Group learning is "a combination of reciprocity (receptiveness) to new information, with a readiness to revise past assessments of a situation (Mills, 1967, 98)
- "*Learning is thinking about experience*." (John Dewey)
- "*Those who refuse to learn from history are doomed to repeat it*." (George Santayana)
- In the field, validate flexibility and changes in plans as evidence of becoming a learning group (don't want to be a "disciple of death.")

<center>Take-aways</center>

1. Debrief your own (or your organization's history). Can you identify any of these elements in incidents of which you have been a part? Walk through them, writing out key elements/ingredients.

2. Cathye Haddock (1999) tells us that the epic stories we tell are often actually HIPO events (near misses, incidents with a High Potential for Harm) that we have camouflaged with glory and heroics. Are you courageous enough to unearth your epic stories; is there some truth-telling that needs to happen? What can you learn from looking honestly and deeply into your past experiences? What is the humor hiding?

   "*On the occasion of every accident  that befalls you, remember to turn to yourself and inquire what power you have for turning it to use*." (Epictetus)

3. Use actual cases to get staff members and trainee leaders talking about and identifying the human antecedents to disasters (*Label it, Analyze it, Elaborate upon it, Personalize it*).

4. Create 2 leadership training scenarios to both illustrate the particular dynamics and to give trainees practices in intervention. Write a role-play script for each with an open-ended conclusion.

5. These dynamics can affect leaders in the field (not just clients). How might this influence our staff hiring protocol? Should you add a few relevant questions into your interview format about either historical or hypothetical situations? How can an interviewee demonstrate to you their receptiveness and ability to learn from their experiences?

6. Creating mechanisms so we can learn from our history: does your incident report format invite accommodate documentation/interpretation of the human elements a causative or contributing factor? By modifying the document, might you start to gather information about incidents that can subsequently be used for reflection, organizational learning, and leadership training?

<div align="center">Sources</div>

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