

## ***Making Groups Wiser***

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*“This ‘group think’ dynamic led Intelligence Community analysts, collectors, and managers to both interpret ambiguous evidence as conclusively indicative of a WMD program as well as to ignore or minimize evidence ...  
“ Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2004*

**Groupthink** (Irving Janis, 1972): Highly cohesive, isolated groups with dominant leaders making risky decisions, under pressure ... fall prey to ... an illusion of invulnerability, biased and myopic information search, confirmatory thinking, and overconfidence.

**Three Easy Lessons:** Maybe we can learn something useful from examining cases where groups perform (surprisingly) well in tasks that involve simple estimation, conjunctive problem-solving, and Eureka! truth-wins solutions.

**Simple Estimation:** What is the temperature in this room? (What is North Korea’s nuclear weapons capability today?) – the power of **“error damping.”**

**Conjunctive Problems:** Where should we locate the next Starbuck’s on Capitol Hill? (Where is Bin Laden hiding?) – the power of **“complementary expertise.”**

**Eureka! Truth-Wins Tasks:** Why are manhole covers round? (What’s the best method to detect “carry-on bombs” on commercial flights?) – **the power of “demonstrability.”**

**A simple summary illustration: Why do groups do so well predicting the Oscars?**

Expected Implications: strength in (half-smart) numbers; value of task-relevant diversity and independent judgments; insulate idea-generation from solution-selection; ...

Unexpected Implications: avoid face-to-face meetings unless they are absolutely necessary (and they are not necessary as often as you think); don’t “chase expertise;” consider innovative (non-face-to-face) aggregation mechanisms – information markets; distributed, virtual teams; wikis; solution-contests; ...

Intelligence Applications (recurring analysis problems): predicting the behavior of an actor (What will Kim Jong Il do tomorrow?); detecting a pattern in a large heterogeneous database (“the 9/11 problem”); estimating a target variable with fallible indicators (What is Iran’s nuclear capability today?); predicting the occurrence of low base rate events (When and where will the next terrorist attack occur?)

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