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Preventing Groupthink in Exercise Physiology

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If exercise physiologists do not learn from their relatively brief history, they shall be compelled to endure it.

Decades ago academic exercise physiologists got in the habit of thinking they needed to be deeply involved in a cohesive relationship with sports medicine. This resulted in such strong desire for unanimity that their individual motivation to think deteriorated to the point of failing to realistically appraise alternative ways of thinking. Such in-group pressure is consistent with what Janis [1] calls **groupthink**. It is a kind of mindlessness that has blinded exercise physiologists to everything except what they should be. Academic exercise physiologists aren't stupid, and yet they have allowed themselves to become influenced by non-exercise physiologists to the point of undermining their own credibility in academia.

To those who do not see the changes they want right now in exercise physiology or who are not willing to recognize that change is an ongoing process, they should study the power in persistence.

How has such a thing happened? In short, it is a difficult thing to happen. A major consideration that drives groupthink is when a group of individuals have a great desire to belong and to be accepted. This was the case with members of

physical education who transitioned into exercise physiology one of several ways. The most popular way has always been through research, particularly in the area of sports physiology and later with adult fitness and cardiac rehabilitation. After all, during the 60s and 70s, it was always more popular to be referred to as an exercise physiologist rather than a physical educator. Also, the icing on the cake, that is, research, helped tremendously with one's self-esteem.

Eventually, however, the ACSM's striving for unanimity to promote the organization became a barrier to good decision-making by exercise physiologists. In the simplest terms possible, academic exercise physiologists realized that they shouldn't introduce anything that might be interpreted as inconsistent with the plans and objectives of ACSM organization. In particular, it has become all too

All change is very slow, especially revolutionary changes. But, it is obvious that change is taking place. The ASEP leaders have put into motion something that is unprecedented -- the first-ever professional organization of exercise physiologists. It is the 21st century change agent.

obvious that anything that might be viewed disruptive, such as the founding of the ASEP organization, would be silenced by members who are in the position of power. Thus, the resulting behavior encouraged a narrow view of exercise physiology.

Silencing members is a powerful way to shortcut their openness to ideas and dissent. Without the opportunity to think critically and impartially, members are left

with little information and perspective to make the right decision. Members are therefore less likely to think about new ideas and/or alternatives to existing issues and concerns. That is why exercise physiologists who are members of ACSM are essentially closed to the discussion of why ASEP is important as a professional organization for exercise physiologists. It shouldn't be this way, but it is. The reason seems to stem partly from the original members from physical education and their self-esteem and/or standing in the academic community. Another reason for the groupthink trap is directly a function of the politics, power, and greed that drives organizations.

If the reader hasn't thought much about groupthink, there are several signs that it exist within an organization. Aside from the illusion of unanimity (i.e., the illusion that all members agree) and pressure to conform on any member who expresses a dissenting point of view, there are acknowledge mindguards that prevent new ideas from being discussed or ideas that might disturb the illusion of unanimity. Hence, there would be no room to discuss the benefits of exercise physiologists joining ASEP. Such thinking would be considered rocking the boat, and no one would be allowed to upset the inherent rights of ACSM thinking. Anyone who might dare to try would be in absolute opposition to ACSM and, therefore, would be defined as incompetent or less than credible [2, 3]. And yet, it is clear that ACSM is inadequate for the professional development of exercise physiologists.

Abraham Lincoln said it best: "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate for the stormy present and future. As our circumstances are new, we must think anew, and act anew."

Groupthink is all about closed-mindedness and collective rationalization [3]. Members are simply unable to think rationally and so they are willing to do whatever the collective leadership and members believe is the only appropriate path for them. As a result of the members preconceived positions, they aren't aware of things they should be doing. And, even if they were to think about the importance of exercise physiologists having their own professional organization, professional code of ethics, accreditation, board certification, and practice standards, they would be ridiculed or downplayed as incompetent or confused. The use of groupthink has convinced a lot of exercise physiologists that they are processing the right information when they aren't doing so.

The ASEP leaders believe that change creates opportunities, that conviction strengthens the will, and that action is imperative.

What is the solution? How can groupthink be reduced in organizations that slow the professionalization of exercise physiology? Lumsden and Lumsden [3]

present several approaches to avoiding groupthink. For example, encourage dissent and, in fact, welcome it. Be aware of the effect of the illusions of unanimity and moral superiority. Simply do not allow others to stereotype members with new ideas, suggestions, or relevant information. Entertain all ideas even if they run counter to the purpose of the organization. Moreover, it is important to key members to review protocol, to encourage new ideas, to test assumptions, and to keep all possibilities on the table to think critically and rationally.

It is equally important to learn new ways and behaviors of supporting each other within the context of the organization. This is why it is so important to keep an open-mind. ONLY with an open mind will exercise physiologists welcome new ideas and possibilities. Is there concern that ASEP leaders will make mistakes? Why not, they are human after all. Will the members have reservations about certain decisions? Yes, of course. Will there be disagreement on different issues? Why not? No one or group is infallible. But, the ASEP leaders believe in each other, believe in what they doing is right, and they have gotten the best advice they can get from colleagues, friends, and family. It is now a matter of openness, caring, objectivity, staying the course, and hard work [4].

References

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