

# Avoiding “Group Think” in Strategic Planning

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To achieve the best work product from strategic planning sessions, it is imperative for leaders to foster group collaboration and seek input from multiple stakeholders with different backgrounds and skill sets. Even when a diverse group of participants are selected, it can be difficult to obtain input from all participants if one or a few individuals dominate planning conversations.

The strong opinions of these dominant individuals can lead to “Group Think” and limit participation from others. To prevent this from occurring, the planning process needs to be structured to promote participation from all stakeholders. Here are a few strategies that can be utilized during planning retreats, steering committee meetings, or workgroup sessions to help avoid “Group Think”:

## BEFORE MEETINGS:

- **Ensure that the planning committee is made up of diverse stakeholders:** Engaging staff from different departments will likely generate more varying opinions on a particular issue. In assembling the committee, look for ways to add staff with different roles and responsibilities throughout the organization. If a group is specifically convened to include similar stakeholders (within a department, entity, etc.), ensure the discussion material will draw varied perspectives from the participants.
- **Cater to different work styles:** Provide meeting materials ahead of time, giving participants an opportunity to formulate opinions or conclusions in advance. Some individuals might be more comfortable speaking up after gathering their thoughts prior to the meeting.
- **Prepare for potential issues:** Sometimes it is best to address the issue of dominance head-on with the most likely offenders before the meeting. Explain the importance of group participation and ask these individuals to cooperate, holding back enough to allow for productive conversation. Since the development of true consensus will help facilitate implementation of the strategies selected, it may be in the best interest of these individuals to encourage free expression of opinion.

A frank discussion of any organizational political or cultural issues that might impact group participation can also be helpful in planning for a strategy session.

- **Bring in an external facilitator:** If it is difficult to preserve open but respectful discussion during the planning process, an external facilitator can be extremely helpful in guiding it and ensuring that meetings run smoothly.
- **Equalize participant input:** Utilize techniques that require the same participation from all stakeholders, such as electronic voting and nominal group processes.

#### **DURING MEETINGS:**

- **Force leaders to share thoughts last:** Asking leaders to speak last will encourage others to voice their opinions more freely.
- **Build in time for small group discussion:** Some individuals are more comfortable than others speaking up in a large group setting. Break-out groups are a great way to increase participation levels from all individuals.
- **Require participation from each participant:** This strategy will allow all stakeholders to respond to the question at hand.

By using some or all of these strategies in structuring your next planning process, you can prevent “Group Think” and maximize the “intelligence” derived from the planning process. ●