

Avoiding Groupthink & Strategic Blind Spots

What Is A Strategic Blind Spot?

A strategic blind spot is a factor that can have a positive or negative influence upon your organization and is known to those outside the organization but is not known to those within the organization and can be positive or negative in nature.

What Is Groupthink?

Few people would argue that strong cohesion within an organization provides a foundation for getting things done and can result in a comfortable and supportive environment. But that cohesiveness can become too tight at times and start to suffocate individual members as they try to assert their own opinions. When groups become too cohesive they run the risk of becoming victims of their own cohesiveness.

Some common characteristics of groupthink include:

- Rationalizing away information that doesn't fit into the currently held beliefs of the organization.
- Stereotyping other organizations as less effective, efficient or just don't know what they're doing.
- Censoring individuals to conform.
- Failing to raise opinions during a discussion so silence is viewed as consent.
- Believing that your organization is all-powerful.

What's The Link Between Groupthink & Strategic Blind Spots?

Strategic blind spots develop from a combination of an institutionalized process to solving a problem and common frames of analysis being used by the Board and / or management in addressing problems. The consequence is a shared perspective of the organization that has the ability to rationalize away evidence of contrary views.

Few people would argue that strong cohesion within an organization provides a good foundation for getting things done. The question is how does the organization provide a basis for getting things done without being so focused on their own view of themselves and the environment that they develop strategic blind spots and effectively just get to the wrong place faster.

When I've asked this question in presentations, many people say that their organization doesn't suffer from such strategic blind spots and that they have annual strategic planning retreats to avoid such occurrences. If you don't provide annual retreats to step back and truly examine both yourself and the environment, you run a considerably higher risk of developing strategic blind spots. However, even if your organization does conduct annual retreats, ask yourself the following questions before you immediately say that we don't suffer from strategic blind spots and jump on the "not in my backyard" bus.

1. Does our strategic planning process drive our budget process?
2. What percentages of the consensual good ideas that have been developed in your strategy sessions have been brought to the point of being recommended to the Board?
3. How often does your Board reject ideas outright because they don't appear to "fit" into your current mission statement?

4. Do you have Board members that don't appear to agree on the strategic direction of the organization but are shot down in board meetings if they voice that concern?
5. Does your organization look outside your company, sector or geographic area to fill key roles?
6. Do you have a system to share best practices with other organizations within your sector?
7. Does your organization encourage all employees to interact directly with those you serve?
8. Is your Board and Executive Director good at saying 'No' to ideas and explaining to people why they won't work, without dampening the individuals motivation or desire to continue to provide ideas in the future?
9. Is your organization good at providing a variety of working and learning opportunities, both inside and outside the organization?
10. Does your organization have an environmental scanning process in place that allows for the incorporation of that information into regular decision-making?

Incorporating the ideas from these questions into your planning process will help avoid groupthink and the development of strategic blind spots in your organization.

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