

# Is NCAA a Victim of Groupthink? Examining a Flawed Decision-Making Process

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Human beings are interesting creatures.

We go about our lives with our individual strengths, our personal histories, our weaknesses, our thoughts and ideas, and our emotions.

We make decisions, solve problems, react to our environment and interact with others.

And then, we become members of groups.

Social scientists have studied the group phenomenon for centuries. When individuals come together and identify as being part of a group, how does that impact or change the people in the group? What can and do we do as a group that we won't or can't do as individuals? How does being part of a group make us better – or make us worse?

The group effect. A group of average athletes comes together and are able to beat teams with players who are more skilled and more athletic.

The group effect. Thousands of university students combine their efforts to raise money for pediatric cancer research and support of children with cancer.

The group effect. A group of high school football players in New Jersey take hazing of the freshmen members on their team to such an extreme that they are charged with sexual assault and the school district makes the decision to cancel the season.

The group effect. The executive officers of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) collude behind the scenes to "bluff" a member organization into accepting sanctions that were not within the purveyance of the organization's by-laws.

We got another glimpse into the group dynamics of the NCAA this past week when, in response to continued pressure from legal proceedings initiated by Senator Jake Corman, emails between executives at the NCAA from the summer of 2012 were released to the public. Those emails reinforce for many that decisions made by the NCAA in relation to the sanctions against Penn State were flawed in both process and outcome.

What are the conditions by which a group of seemingly educated and intelligent professionals in collegiate athletics would collectively decide that it is okay to use Penn State's "embarrassment" as rationale for their overreach?

Social scientists call it groupthink.



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The research has shown that groups that are highly insulated (i.e. with limited input from outside the group) are more susceptible to groupthink. Groups with a centralized power structure and for whom the leader doesn't allow new or contradictory ideas to be put on the table are more at risk. Groups whose members come to believe that their moral character is above those of people in the out-group can fall into groupthink. Groups that find themselves facing external pressure (such as the press) or who lean on stereotyping and biasing of people outside the group often make faulty and group favoring decisions. Groups who fall in to "us versus them" are at risk.

The NCAA is the governing body of collegiate athletics. It has the power to make or break a university's sports program. It reportedly maintains the integrity of intercollegiate athletics in the areas of recruiting, eligibility, competition and, most importantly, money. With super-star salaries, unfettered power. With perks for employees akin to Fortune 500 CEOs, and revenue that parallels big business, the NCAA has evolved from the governing body of college sports into a universe all its own. With recent stumbles in its institutional oversight (the fake classes at University of North Carolina as just one example) the NCAA has exceedingly been under the microscope of criticism from the press and the public.

Power. Heightened sense of morality. Insulation. Pressure from the outside.

It might be suggested that Penn State's success in both wins and in athlete graduation rates, referred to in the emails as our "pristine image," only served to fuel the us versus them attitude.

Groupthink is never associated with good decisions.

In court proceedings last week, it was announced that an additional 477 internal NCAA emails will be reviewed by a judge. Will those emails shed more light on the convoluted logic of vacating wins and taking away scholarships from coaches and student athletes who had nothing to do any of this? Why were the viewpoints of those in the NCAA who raised concerns about liability and risk in the decisions on sanctions for Penn State ignored? Why are some of the individuals who raised those opposing views no longer with the NCAA?

Many believe that with this proof of the organization's overreach and the admission that the sanctions went beyond NCAA authority, the NCAA has lost its ability to effectively govern. The member organizations are again raising concern about President Mark Emmert's power, his objectivity and his leadership in a decision to "bluff" a member organization.

So how do groups protect themselves from groupthink? First, is by understanding that consensus and groupthink can look and sound very similar. Do people really agree with a decision or have they felt coerced or pressured into going along? A group's willingness to accept feedback from outside and to allow for open expression is another way to protect itself. We know that groups whose members feel comfortable questioning process and raising concerns are better protected against the trappings of the group effect. A group whose leader seeks the truth through a participatory process and objective information is less likely to make bad decisions.

Kudos to Senator Corman for pushing through when others have said "It's time to move on." It is exactly that take-a-stand position or the person who continues to raise questions and who refuses to go along with the status quo that can help that group ward off groupthink.

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