



The law firm leader's bookshelf: Wiser

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The [March/April 2017 issue of Harvard Business Review](#) features an item on managing people. Undoubtedly, this responsibility and the concomitant function of managing teams of these individual people, is a recurring or ongoing focus of attention for many leaders. And as this HBR Spotlight illustrates, the topic is invariably timely.

One of a leader's key functions is to manage personalities and working styles. We identify and capitalize on individual strengths, and we ameliorate (or at least neutralize) challenging behaviours and approaches to work and thought. And this responsibility often engages the more discrete challenge of creating and managing teams or groups of individuals, each with a unique perspective. We must facilitate interactions in a way that is productive for the group and in furtherance of the larger organization's goals.

The book *Wiser: Getting Beyond Groupthink to Make Groups Smarter*, a publication of Harvard Business Review Press, is an invaluable resource for the leader. In fact, it offers a solid grounding to the approaches discussed in the HBR Spotlight. *Wiser* counsels us in strategies to lead teams that will be most likely to make sound and successful group decisions and, conversely, shows us the pitfalls of group decision-making that can lead to failed projects. A witty and highly readable book, it is a good companion for a commute, flight, or waiting room, or a quick weekend read.

In *Wiser*, Harvard Law professor Cass R. Sunstein and University of Chicago business professor Reid Hastie review and synthesize research from a variety of disciplines and geographic regions to produce observations and predictions about group behaviour. They offer strategies to help us create and lead groups that function well, make sound decisions, and avoid common yet scientifically predictable errors: in short, to create wiser groups.

First, though, they explore some of the reasons groups fail. Contrary to familiar assumption, groups commonly amplify rather than correct the errors of individual members. I recommend a close read of Chapter 1, "From High Hopes to Fiascoes," which is replete with illustrations of group-facilitated decision errors.

They also present descriptions and illustrations of group decision heuristics and fallacies that explain why the group often amplifies individual errors rather than correct them. The authors discuss the *availability heuristic*, which means we give greater attention to widely publicized events or failures than is due. The result can be direction of resources to solving yesterday's – not tomorrow's – challenge. The *representativeness heuristic* brings out instinctive, stereotyped views based on recognizable characteristics (of people or situations rather than views based on

data and individual elements. *Egocentric bias* is likely familiar to us all – we often assume the typicality of our personal preferences and choices. Unless the group has a diversity of people who are able and willing to contribute informed views, shared egocentric biases can cause the group to make decisions that do not align with, for example, the market or jurisprudence. The *planning fallacy* is surprisingly common and independent of experience level: “Projects small ... and large ... invariably run over budget and take much longer to complete than the original plans.”

So what can leaders do? At minimum, they should be aware of *information signals*, which can influence group members to believe the view of their respected and experienced leader must be the correct one, and their own differing views therefore incorrect and unsuitable to share. “Leaders often seem to have a halo, which makes them appear unusually sharp and smart,” the authors say. Groups therefore should include at least some members who have an “anxious” work temperament—and despite its usual, less appealing connotations, the authors use this word favourably: Anxious group members are willing to wonder, and expressly inquire, whether the leader is correct.

The other influence the authors identify is *social pressure*. Rather like familiar peer pressure, social pressures can lead people to self-silence, perhaps subconsciously, to avoid either the disapproval of others, or appearing disagreeable or foolish.

These influences can lead group members to withhold valuable observations, ideas, or concerns. Such self-doubt or self-silencing can occur as part of an information *cascade*, as ideas are successively shared – and perhaps withheld or skewed -- as contributions flow around the discussion table. The result can be a decision that, though made smoothly, overlooks key knowledge and insights that could mean the difference between success and failure.

Some of the key takeaways are:

- The wise leader will be vigilant for the amplification, rather than neutralization, of the biases of individuals. This leader will not expect or encourage “happy talk” or optimism as a default perspective: “Smart leaders are anxious;” that is, they are skeptical – they consider pitfalls, risks, and unforeseen contingencies from various tangents before making major decisions or planning a project.
- Aware of the influences that can lead to self-silencing, the wise leader will be silent and allow other group members, regardless of hierarchy, to speak first. Valuable information or a knowledgeable view—and perhaps not quite aligned with that of the leader—will surface, when it might have been self-suppressed had the leader spoken first.
- The wise leader will reframe the conception of a team player from someone who supports the views advocated by most of the group members – or worse, the leader – to a group member who adds valuable information.
- The wise leader will see that the goal of such approaches is not to protect those with differing views, or even to protect speech or knowledge, but rather to protect the very group itself from failure.

Wiser: Getting Beyond Groupthink to Make Groups Smarter, By Cass R. Sunstein and Reid Hastie. (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2015) 253 pp. Includes notes, index. ISBN 978-1-4221-2299-0 (hardcover) eISBN 978-1-62527-050-4. \$30.00.

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