



# Groupthink in temporary organizations

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Received 20 December 2008  
Accepted 20 April 2009

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of groupthink in temporary organizations. Only anecdotally has the literature touched upon how the temporary organization's structure may foster groupthink. Studies of faulty group processes are imperative since temporary organizations are becoming more common.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Following the design used by several authors who analyzed the Everest events, this paper is an historic in-depth case study based on accounts of several survivors.

**Findings** – Three out of four features of groupthink are found and analyzing the Everest events there are several symptoms to groupthink that may be present in any temporary organization.

**Research limitations/implications** – Groupthink as a theoretical idea is well developed but has received limited attention in a temporary organization (project) setting. More attention should be given to group dynamics in general and groupthink in particular.

**Practical implications** – Some practices are suggested to avoid groupthink. Furthermore, project managers find themselves in a balancing act between freedom, efficiency, and fast decisions. The context should be allowed to decide which the correct approach is. Finally, blowing the whistle should never be a problem and never be punished.

**Originality/value** – The setting of this paper is original although it is to the structure a common project. When life is at stake, features and symptoms of groupthink become more evident. The theoretical field is almost non-existent in a temporary organization setting hence there is a considerable value to the theoretical development of temporary organizations and groupthink.

**Keywords** Organizational structures, Mountains, Project management, Group thinking

**Paper type** Case study

## Introduction

In the context of the altitude, the setting, I'm reasonably comfortable", Hall answered, doing his best not to alarm her. "How are your feet?" "I haven't taken my boots off to check but I may have a bit of frostbite [..]" (Rob Hall, dying after a full night in the death zone at Mount Everest, over a satellite phone to his wife in Christchurch, New Zealand) (Krakauer, 1997, p. 234).

Rob Hall was an experienced climber and well-known guide who had been on the summit of several 8,000 metre high mountains and had successfully climbed Mount Everest several times. He died in 1996 shortly after having the conversation with his wife recorded above. Hall was not alone that year in dying on Mount Everest; eventually, 15 people ended up dead ([www.everestnews.com](http://www.everestnews.com), 2008). However, the story told in this paper, and the subsequent analysis, extrapolate beyond the deaths of the



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individuals and examine the group behavior and structural features of organizations which contributed to the events. The analysis regards the events as an example of a temporary organization (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995) failing to execute.

From an organizational point of view, a mountain-climbing expedition is a temporary organization (Hällgren, 2007; Kayes, 2004). It is constrained in time, cost and scope and presents a unique task that needs to be accomplished. Temporary organizations, like climbing expeditions, also commonly involve at least two people (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995). Further, climbing relies on extensive planning and control and taking calculated risks is the key to most routines (Akintoye and Macleod, 1997; Choo, 2002). Climbing expeditions, like temporary organizations, are multifaceted – they necessitate dealing with a combination of organizational and personal issues. The job of expedition leaders is like the job of project managers – they must manage transport, stakeholders, subcontractors and clients. In addition expedition leaders need to manage severe risks and high uncertainty which require sense making (Thiry, 2001). Adventure Consultants, one of the guiding companies to the top of Everest even claims that:

Our services include Project Management, Consultation and Co-ordination, Safety Auditing and Safety Plan construction. Get in contact with us today to see how we can help you achieve an adventure project (Adventureconsultants.co.nz, 2008).

Several of the survivors from the fatal 1996 climb have documented their experiences (Boukreev and Dewalt, 1998; Breashears, 1999; Krakauer, 1997; Weathers, 2000) and the events have subsequently been subject to extensive academic interest (Elmes and Barry, 1999; Elmes and Frame, 2008; Hällgren, 2007; Kayes, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2006; Roberto, 2002; Rosen, 2007; Tempest *et al.*, 2007; Useem, 2001). Together, the survivors' descriptions and the academic analysis have provided a unique setting for studying a temporary organization. Examining expeditions is useful to our understanding of temporary organizations because it represents the outer boundary of what is possible.

Among the features claimed to be a part of the 1996 tragedy's explanation are the group dynamics and organizational structure of the expeditions. These have been examined across various parameters including leadership (Roberto, 2002), goal setting (Kayes, 2006), and learning (Kayes, 2004). They all seem to point back to the group processes and the fact that no one interfered with the soon-to-be fatal process which can result from groupthink. Groupthink is:

[...] a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the member's strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action (Janis, 1972, p. 9).

Groupthink has not yet been fully analyzed in temporary organizations but it has been found to contribute to similar disasters (Allison and Zelikow, 1999; Janis, 1982; Loosemore, 1998; Loosemore and Lee, 2002; Snook, 2002; Thiry, 2001). More importantly, although central to the initial model of groupthink, provocative situational contexts have been neglected in the analysis (Chapman, 2006). Essentially, the question is whether the structure of a temporary organization carries features of groupthink? The purpose of the paper is therefore to contribute to the understanding of groupthink in temporary organizations.

In the paper, I start with developing the idea of mountain-climbing expeditions as temporary organizations and follow with a review of groupthink. Thereafter, it is

elaborated upon how features and symptoms of groupthink were prevalent in the Everest case in order to develop the analysis, implications, and conclusions of the paper.

### **Temporary organizations and mountaineering expeditions**

The concept of “temporary organizations” was coined by Lundin and Söderholm (1995) 14 years ago (drawing upon Bennis (1965, 1966), Goodman and Goodman (1972, 1976) and Goodman (1967)). The temporary organization is a form of organization which summarizes features of projects and project-like organizations. In fact, projects have been stated to be temporary organizations (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995; Turner and Müller, 2003). Essentially, the temporary organization is built upon the assumption that it will pass through four phases: action-based entrepreneurship; fragmentation for commitment building; planned isolation and institutionalized termination; and end at a certain point in time. This assumption makes the temporary organization action oriented (Ekstedt *et al.*, 1999; Lundin and Söderholm, 1995) in contrast to the permanent organization’s decision orientation (Cyert and March, 1963).

The action orientation makes the organization well equipped to handle all the uncertainties which follow a less routine development (Ekstedt *et al.*, 1999). Rather than changing an entire organization, the temporary organization may swiftly adapt to accommodate an unexpected event. In a project-like setting, these kinds of changes could be for example, the late delivery of material, the client changing the scope or a sub-contractor running late (Hällgren and Wilson, 2008). Although temporary organizations lack the stability of a bureaucracy this does not mean they are without stability at all. One of the mechanisms providing stability is the team and the individual roles in the project (Bechky, 2006, p. 5). These mechanisms are also central to high-altitude mountain climbing (Kayes, 2004, 2006; Tempest *et al.*, 2007).

Temporary organizations and mountaineering expeditions never seem to stop amazing some of us. Maybe, it is because there is an allure in the uncertainty and the adrenaline rush it produces. Maybe, it is because they are both non-routine and take taking well-calculated risks. In a way they both represent “man against nature.” Climbing is, however, constrained in time, cost and scope, attempting to accomplish a unique task and involves a team. These are features that are typical of temporary organizations too and is generally considered to an advantage and necessity (Christenson and Walker, 2004; Lynn and Akgün, 2001). On the mountain, different tools and methods are used for planning, control and risk management than are used in projects. These tools and methods include ropes, harnesses, crampons, ice axes, scouted paths, and reliance on one’s partner. Therefore, if one accepts that projects involve risks, climbing is very good for understanding them (Choo, 2002). On the other hand, off the mountain it is the same Gantt charts that are used, the same resource allocation that is needed and the same personnel and stakeholder management that is required (Kayes, 2006).

Furthermore, like a project manager, for example of a construction project, the task of managing a mountaineering expedition includes caring for transports of several hundreds – even tons – of kilos on bad roads; stakeholders (media and sponsors); sub-contractors (Sherpas) and in paid expeditions, helping clients to make it to the top and back (Boukreev and Dewalt, 1998; Elmes and Barry, 1999; Kayes, 2006). In addition, both types of manager face external pressures to deliver successfully in order to ensure future business (Rosen, 2007). Finally, failing to execute safely may end in disaster and contribute to the death of one or more participants (Krakauer, 1997) or a failed project

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(Project Management Institute (PMI), 2004). Thus, temporary organizations and expeditions match and one is able to talk about expeditions as temporary organizations (Hällgren, 2007; Kayes, 2004).

### **Groupthink and temporary organizations**

Groupthink behavior is associated with people retaining the status quo by minimizing their conflicts without critical assessment, analysis and evaluation. Motives may vary but essentially those involved seek to avoid standing out in the crowd and any risk of embarrassment. Essentially, groupthink developed in high-level policy situations where it was commonly observed. Examples include the Korean war debacle where the USA and North Korea were on a collision course (Allison and Zelikow, 1999) and in Iraq where 21 highly distinguished officers were killed in friendly fire because everyone in the system relied on another to make the call (Snook, 2002). It is also claimed that groupthink caused a block in management communication in the financial market with a subsequent loss of reputation (Eaton, 2001). The Everest disaster has previously been loosely associated with groupthink (Kayes, 2004; Mangione and Nelson, 2003).

Not so grand but nonetheless important, are the various connections made between groupthink and temporary organizations (projects). Thiry (2001) claims groupthink is produced by severe stress which leads to decisions that follow the least objectionable choice. Bourgeon (2007) associates the phenomenon with the beginning of the project and with staffing approaches; Bresnen (2007) with the breakdown of partnerships between organizations; and McElhinney and Proctor (2005) with entrapment and decision making in projects. The studies mainly contribute to aspects of project management and focus more upon groupthink than on understanding organizational structures and groupthink behavior within them.

Chapman (2006) argues that organizational structure has received limited interest and suggests that groupthink behavior is facilitated by emotions where people engage in control-denial-escape behavior. Emotions are commonly a vital part of a crisis. With regard to structure, Lindkvist (2005) notes that the temporary organization may be protected from groupthink by its very setup. He argues that the difference between the team members' knowledge bases contributes to flexibility and creativity whereas stability and being uninventive (features commonly associated with bureaucracies and permanent organizations (King, 1999)) contribute to groupthink.

Similarly, associating groupthink with structure, Snook and Connor (2005) argue that groupthink contributes to what they call structurally induced inaction. Structurally induced inaction is essentially a matter of the organizational structure putting the lid on any action that may have prevented a certain situation from eventuating. Rather than seeking the explanation from the group, they thus focus on the organization. A focus on structure would correspond to one out of three core creators of groupthink symptoms: group, structure and context (Chapman, 2006, p. 1394; Janis, 1972, 1982).

One might be tempted to think that groupthink is inevitable in some cases. Janis (1972, pp. 207-18) offers some remedies for avoiding it:

- use a critical reviewer;
- do not allow managers to express their preferences in advance;
- from time to time use independent groups;
- consider all alternatives;

- discuss the ideas with people outside of the group;
- invite experts to meetings; and
- use non-continuous devil's advocate examination of warnings and open sessions to reconsider alternatives.

### Methodology

Following most research conducted on the Everest disaster (Elmes and Barry, 1999; Elmes and Frame, 2008; Kayes, 2002, 2004, 2006; Roberto, 2002; Tempest *et al.*, 2007) this study is a retrospective study of survivors' accounts of the events and of subsequent academic analyses (see Useem (2001), Hällgren (2007) and Elmes and Frame (2008) for exceptions). Retrospective accounts typically focus on Krakauer's (1997) description of the events (Elmes and Frame, 2008) although it has been questioned by others (Boukreev and Dewalt, 1998; Weathers, 2000). By contrast, this paper considers the impact of both the context and the organization structure in the lead up to the events, rather than the disaster *per se*. This approach responds well to the methodological challenges of trying to catch groupthink in action. The alternative method would be interviews but given the availability of detailed published accounts, a thorough cross-account analysis of the events is possible and it compensates for the possible benefits of interviews.

### Features of groupthink

Janis (1972) relates groupthink to cohesiveness, structure (insulation, promotional leadership, faulty decision methods, homogenous members), and context (external threat and low self esteem from previous failures). These features of groupthink are shown in Figure 1 and thereafter considered in the light of the events. All features do not need to be present or in equal strength in order to reveal groupthink in action. The symptoms are discussed under a separate heading.

The story of reaching the top of Mount Everest starts with the successful climb of Mount Everest by the late Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay just before noon on

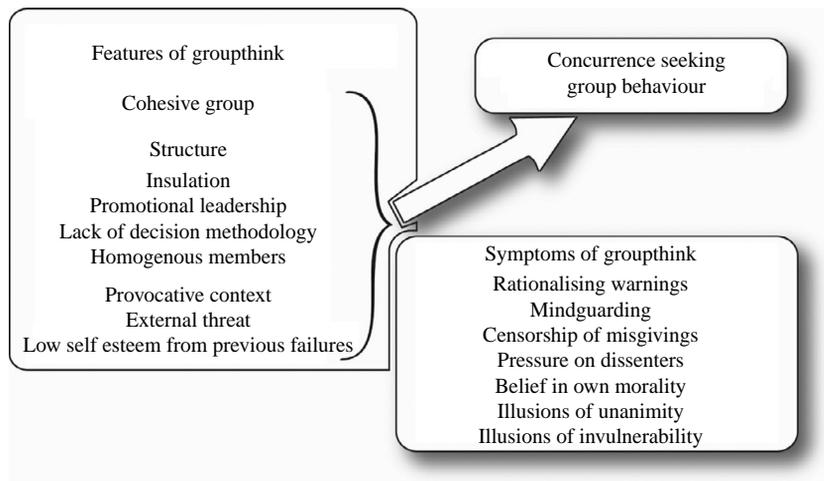


Figure 1.  
Features of groupthink

Source: After Janis (1972)

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May 29, 1953. Since then, hundreds of individuals have made it. Others have died in the attempt. In 1985, the wealthy Dick Brass climbed Mount Everest. That event is considered the starting point of the industry as it suggested that the highest point on earth is reachable with enough money and some training. In 1996, the mountaineering business was growing. Krakauer (1997) notes that there were in total 30 expeditions on the mountain. At that time, every client was paying roughly US\$65,000 for a chance to reach the top. By 2008, 52 expeditions were reported ([www.mounteverest.net](http://www.mounteverest.net), 2008) and the fees were roughly the same ([www.alpineascents.com](http://www.alpineascents.com), 2008; [www.jagged-globe.co.uk](http://www.jagged-globe.co.uk), 2008; [www.mountainmadness.com](http://www.mountainmadness.com), 2008; [www.mounteverest.net](http://www.mounteverest.net), 2008; [www.peakfreaks.com/](http://www.peakfreaks.com/), 2008). One might therefore be talking about a booming industry with increased commercialization (Rosen, 2007). One of the voices that is typically silent about the industry is any criticism of the macro level shift towards commercialization (Elmes and Frame, 2008) which is seen as one of the contributing factors to the events under study here (Elmes and Barry, 1999; Krakauer, 1997). Commercialization contributed to promotional leadership as the clients became increasingly dependent upon the guides and expedition leaders' reputation and future revenues became dependent upon the number of clients successfully reaching the top (Elmes and Frame, 2008; Krakauer, 1997; Mangione and Nelson, 2003). Moreover, in terms of structure at the micro level, there was a rise in less-experienced climbers and a demand for leadership and leader experience on the mountain which contributed to a tendency among clients to deny limitations and vulnerabilities (Elmes and Barry, 1999, pp. 173-81). This pointing at homogeneity among the team members. Although the clients had never met each other, they shared an ambition to make it to the top. Several of them had already tried and failed and others had invested serious amounts of money and time in the endeavor. These factors contributed to the cohesiveness of the group although they still reportedly lacked team feelings (Boukreev and Dewalt, 1998; Krakauer, 1997), resulting in an inability to voice their concerns.

The commercialization thus created fierce competition among the expeditions. In 1996, the competition stood primarily between above-expedition leaders: Hall and Fischer. Scott Fischer, a charismatic and easy-going experienced climber was leading his first commercial expedition to Everest. Fischer was known to cut his clients a lot of slack. Rob Hall was an extremely competent climber who had led numerous clients to the top and back. Hall was authoritarian and all decisions were centralized to him (Elmes and Barry, 1999; Krakauer, 1997). In both instances, clients relied on the expedition leaders to make community-related decisions and thus bureaucratizing any decision such as the vital turn-around time. In neither instance was the turn-around time clearly communicated. In any case, it would be hard to communicate any decision as only a few of the guides had any communication devices and the climbers would be spread out with hours between them. This would point to a faulty decision methodology. Except for a few occasions of more personal nature, each expedition member was alone while ascending (Boukreev and Dewalt, 1998; Krakauer, 1997; Weathers, 2000). Added to this, climbing is by its very nature an individualistic sport where a person's endurance, experience and competence are the determinant (Rosen, 2007, p. 149). Among others, Krakauer (who had a lot of climbing experience) notes that he would not like to put his life in the hands of other clients due to their inexperience (Boukreev and Dewalt, 1998; Krakauer, 1997). As Krakauer got to know his fellow expedition members, his confidence in them grew but his opinion about the other teams persisted. This points to the group being insulated from others and information.

Previous to 1996, Hall had failed to put several of his climbers on the top. At the same time, Fischer being a runner up had the fear of failure, thus in both cases indicating the existence of low self-esteem from (previous) failures (or fear thereof). In 1996, both leaders suffered from failure (or at least the fear thereof). Hall had to defend his position as the leading expedition company since several of his clients had not made it to the top while Fischer had to prove himself as a serious competitor and expedition leader (Elmes and Barry, 1999, p. 177). This also resembles an external threat (Janis, 1972, 1982) to both expeditions as it is not realistic to assume that everybody would make it to the top, especially considering that there were 30 simultaneous expeditions. To add to the pressure, the media coverage was extensive. Krakauer was writing for *Outside Magazine* and Pittman had an agreement with NBC and another non-climbing journalist covering for *Outside Online* who was reporting from the base camp. A third, non-commercial expedition, led by Taiwanese Makalu Gau, was also a major actor the events. Reportedly the expedition leaders had agreed that Fischer and Hall would have the first attempt on the top while Gau would wait for a few days. This agreement was broken by Gau partly causing the traffic jam that was one of the contributing factors in the way events unfolded (Krakauer, 1997). The features of groupthink that are discussed above are summarized in Table I. The organizational features of the context detailed in the table will be discussed in the analysis under separate headings.

### Timeline

On Everest, the area above 8,000 meters is called the death zone because the body is slowly dying due to lack of oxygen. Therefore, ascending is typically done with bottled oxygen over four stages in which the climbers go back and forth to acclimatize themselves. In this paper, the versions of the 1996 events by Krakauer (1997), Boukreev and Dewalt (1998) and Weathers (2000) have been compared with the following account given by Elmes and Barry (1999, pp. 168-9):

- (1) *1985*. Wealthy businessman Dick Bass finalizes the seven summit challenge, (climbing the highest peak on each of the seven continents), suggesting anyone can climb if they have enough money and training.
- (2) *1985-1995*. Commercial climbing companies emerge, providing climbing packages for about US\$65,000 and promising the top of the world to prospective buyers. Hall's company becomes one of the most successful operations.
- (3) *May 1, 1996*. Hall and Fischer assemble respective climbing groups.
- (4) *May 8, 1996*. Hall's and Fischer's groups begin acclimatizing on the lower parts of the mountain.
- (5) *Midnight May 9*. Hall's and Fischer's groups ascend to Camp 4. After some rest, the two groups begin their ascent to the summit close to midnight. Makalu Gau's Taiwanese group also departs (ahead of schedule and despite of earlier promise).
- (6) *Morning, May 10*. Missing ropes noticed. At about 9 a.m., a Sherpa refuses to fix ropes by himself, and a guide has to fill in for him. By 11.30 a.m. there is still a big queue because of this delay.
- (7) *Midday, May 10*. Krakauer, Beidleman, Harris, and Boukreev reach South Summit and wait for almost an hour for Sherpas to fix ropes up Hillary Step.

Groupthink features	Everest circumstance	Consequence	Organizational feature
Cohesive group	A group put together to reach the top but with individual goals and motivations. The majority of the group was rather inexperienced	Inexperience caused the majority of the group to become overly reliant upon the expedition leader and the guides for decisions	Gathering around a goal is known to create a certain culture of cohesiveness in the actions of a temporary organization
<i>Structure</i>			
Insulation	Each team was isolated from the others even though they made the summit push simultaneously	The clients knew little about mutual arrangements and the groups were treated as independent teams rather than one community	Temporary organizations are created with the sole purpose of achieving a specific task
Promotional leadership	The leaders felt the requirement to put clients on the top in order to secure future business	The leadership became partial, including taking unnecessary risks	Pressure of success
Lack of decision methodology	More or less all decisions going through the expedition leaders	Lack of information, ability to make own decisions and influence decisions	Despite best intention the methodology sometimes fail
Homogenous members	Highly motivated clients who all paid all lot to reach the top. Majority rather inexperienced	Few members could question any developments or decisions made	The temporary organization commonly consists of highly skilled experts
<i>Provocative context</i>			
External threat	Several commercial expeditions	Increased competition an unnecessary risks	A temporary organization is not an island of its own and commonly experience pressure from external stakeholders
Low self esteem from previous failures	The expedition leaders had both failed previously to put clients on the top	Severe pressure on putting clients on the top	Personal trait

**Table I.**  
Features of groupthink

Sherpa mentioned in event six above arrives but refuses again to fix ropes. The other four go ahead and do it. Lack of rope creates 100-meter danger zone.

- (8) *Early afternoon, May 10.* Boukreev, Krakauer, Harris, and Beidleman reach summit and descend (except for Beidleman). A 20-person queue waits to ascend. Krakauer (running out of oxygen) and Harris wait at the top of Hillary Step. Fischer's group ascends summit with Fischer dragging behind; Hall expresses disappointment at not getting more of his group to the top. Weather begins deteriorating.
- (9) *Mid-afternoon, May 10.* Several climbers (Krakauer, Adams, Harris, and Groom) reach South Summit. Hansen reaches top; short-rope by Hall, Hansen begins descent. Fischer, Lopsang, and Makalu Gau begin descent.

Lopsang short-ropes Fischer. Hansen and Hall reach Hillary Step. Hansen collapses. Hall radios for help and spends next 12 hours trying to get Hansen down.

- (10) *Late afternoon, May 10.* Beidleman, Madsen, Fox, Pittman, Schoening, and Gammelgaard reach South Summit. Boukreev starts back up, attempting rescue with four oxygen bottles. Boukreev turns back. Blizzard conditions begin. Namba runs out of oxygen and refuses to move; Beidleman starts dragging Namba to Camp 4.
- (11) *Night, May 10.* Storm becomes hurricane force. Mixed group of climbers reaches South Col but, unable to find camp, stop. Sky clears briefly and Beidleman, with Schoening, Gammelgaard, and Groom set out for Camp 4 leaving Weathers, Namba, Fox, Pittman, and Madsen behind. Beidleman *et al.* find camp; Boukreev goes to find others and, after two trips, leads – and in some cases carries – clients back to camp.
- (12) *Morning and afternoon, May 11.* Hall, frostbitten and hypothermic, makes it to South Summit. Hansen had slipped and died earlier. Hall is unable to move despite repeated urgings to do so. Rescue attempt fails. Gau is brought down by Sherpas; Fischer is left to die. Weathers wakes from comatose state and arrives at Camp 4 that afternoon.
- (13) *Night, May 11.* Hall is patched through to his pregnant wife in New Zealand and says last goodbye.
- (14) Weathers is thought to have died in his tent overnight but is miraculously found to be alive despite a torn apart tent and a sleeping bag that has come off.
- (15) *After May 11.* Five have died: three guides (Hall, Harris, and Fischer) and two clients (Namba and Hansen). On May 14, Weathers and Gau are helicoptered off the mountain.

### **Symptoms of groupthink**

Janis (1972, 1982) identified eight symptoms related to groupthink: rationalization of warnings, mind guarding, censorship of misgivings, stereotyping, pressure on dissenters, belief in own morality, illusions of unanimity and invulnerability (Figure 1). Each of these symptoms and their relation to the events on Everest are examined below and detailed in Table II, except for stereotyping, which was not found.

In this case, rationalization of warnings (collective effort to discount warnings) occurred when Fischer states that “it is not the altitude, it’s the attitude” that is the difference between success and failure of climbers and that “any reasonably fit climber” would be able to make it to the top of the world (Krakauer, 1997, p. 85). This kind of attitude was found among several of the expedition’s climbers and guides and encouraged inexperienced climbers to climb a mountain which they may not have been able to climb or organize.

Mind guarding (self-appointed person who protects the members from adverse information) is represented when Boukreev strongly disagreed with Fischer regarding the clients’ acclimatization. The discussions were heated as Boukreev thought that Fischer’s careless approach (the clients were told to set up their own regimen) to acclimatization caused an unnecessary risk. Finally, Boukreev succumbed to this

Symptom	Everest event	Consequence
Rationalising warnings	Inexperienced climbers allowed on the expedition	Traffic jam and inexperience in handling the circumstances that evolved
Mindguarding	Boukreev succumbing to the will of Fischer after an heated argument about acclimatization	The climbers were not properly acclimatized which made them less prepared for the challenges of the summit
Censorship of misgivings	Krakauer expresses his concerns of the fellow climbers' experience	Inexperience causes traffic jam, inability to help, and make decision by oneself
Pressure on dissenters	A climber who were struggling were pushed by the expedition leader to continue because he disappointingly had turned around close to the top last year	Turned around to late on the top and were forced to descend in deteriorating weather and darkness
Belief in own morality	Gau leaving a fallen climber in order to make it to the top	The injury of Gau's team mate and pressure on other teams
Illusions of unanimity	Clients were not allowed to voice objections and their silence were treated as compliance by the guides	The turn around time was not communicated properly and climbers kept coming despite well after 2 o'clock
Illusions of invulnerability	Hall pushing clients to make it to the top both prior and during the events	The clients ran out of time and were forced to descend in the dark and unluckily in deteriorating weather

**Table II.**  
Symptoms of groupthink

pressure but it was noticed that he was be bothered about doing so and by the fact that one client slept with supplementary oxygen even in base camp.

In his prize-winning book, Krakauer (1997) voices his concerns about his fellow climbers' inexperience which ultimately led to the group climbing individually rather than as a group even though climbing at this altitude usually involves two people helping each other. Krakauer (and others) failed to voice their misgivings and this could be perceived as a censorship of misgivings (an inclination to minimize one's views for the benefit of the group consensus).

Pressure on dissenters (strong pressure on a person who offers counter-arguments to the group's commitments) is found in several situations. One of the more notable is Beck Weathers being pushed by Hall to continue despite failing vision and who was told later to wait until Hall came down. The event caused Weathers to come back from the dead twice (Timeline events 13 and 14) (Weathers, 2000).

Leaving a dangerously ill person in order to reach a peak seems morally dubious to most of us. However, the very same behavior noted on this occasion has been observed in expeditions elsewhere. In 1996, Gau left his fallen comrade in order to continue to the top. The comrade was without any assistance or agreement about care responsibilities being devolved to other expeditions. This would point at a belief in an own morality. It should be mentioned, however, that such behavior is in no way typical of climbers.

Shared illusions of unanimity occur when no one gives their opinion. It is partly created by self-censorship as silence is viewed as consent. The leaders on Everest (Fischer and Hall) explicitly did not want any discussion on the mountain and therefore

said that any objections would be treated after the climb. This resulted in the clients not raising any concerns regarding the communication about the turn-around time which in the Fischer case was discussed but not confirmed, and in the Hall case, was centralized. Thus, the clients' silence was treated as consent to the rule.

Finally, an illusion of invulnerability causes extreme risk taking. This risk taking was prevalent in the late arrival at the top by a majority of the climbers, including experienced leaders and guides. Turning around at 1 p.m. is risky and 2 p.m. is really pushing it. Thus, arriving at the top as late as 5 p.m. as some individuals did, is close to suicide. The late arrival caused the climbers to descend in the dark and in deteriorating weather. The symptoms and their mountaineering equivalent are summarized in Table II. All in all, the symptoms are indicative of a situation suffering from groupthink behavior.

### Discussion

The question posed in this paper is whether the structure of temporary organizations does, or does not, contribute to groupthink behavior. The events of the 1996 disaster on Mount Everest have been used to reflect on the type of organization and the features that contribute to the behaviors associated with groupthink as they are extreme and common enough to assist understanding. Examining expeditions is useful to our understanding of temporary organizations because they represent the outer boundary of what is possible. In addition, mountaineering "has particular significance for [...] short-term project teams that typically form and dissolve after one time events" (Kayes, 2004, p. 1280). At first glance, one might be tempted to dismiss the case because it is not a typical project management one. That is, the empirical data are not gathered from the construction industry or software development, rather than from a traditional project management sector. Nevertheless, the annual turnover in the mountain climbing industry is counted in billions of dollars (Elmes and Frame, 2008; Rosen, 2007) and the organization shows of all the classical traits of projects, being limited in time, resources and scope. In addition, climbing involves risk management practices and teams (Choo, 2002; Hällgren, 2007; Kayes, 2004). One of the companies offering climbing expeditions even puts project management as one of their core services (Adventureconsultants.co.nz, 2008). Mountain climbing expeditions are thus a fruitful source of information when seeking to understand aspects of the organizational structure of temporary organizations. Examining the 1996 Everest events is therefore a legitimate approach to understanding failure in a temporary organization.

Following Chapman (2006) and Snook and Connor (2005), the following analysis will focus on structurally induced features of groupthink with less emphasis on project cohesiveness and context. To reiterate, groupthink is caused by the structure through insulation, promotional leadership, faulty decision methodology and homogenous members (Janis, 1972); all features represented in the Everest events.

#### *The isolated temporary organization*

Lundin and Söderholm (1995, p. 447) call one of the four phases in temporary organizations "planned isolation." The isolation does not end until it is met by "institutionalized termination." Similarly, in mountaineering, the project starts when the clients arrive and start preparing and it ends when they have made it back from the climb. The next project starts and ends in the same way. The boundaries between the

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two phases of the temporary organization are defended from unwanted external influence, effectively excluding any unplanned changes in the scope due to clients' changing their minds or any diversion from normal business in the organization. The temporary organization is set up this way in order to avoid the entire organization changing its production for one client (Ekstedt *et al.*, 1999).

Moreover, there are several testimonies to the effect that the temporary organization becomes the overarching purpose of the project team which causes them to set aside both organizational and personal considerations. This proves the point that the environment outside of the project is regarded as an enemy from which the project needs to be shielded.

#### *Promotional leadership in temporary organizations*

Promotional leadership occurs when the leader has a personal gain to make. On Everest, it was a question of future revenues. The potential revenues caused the expedition leaders to push their clients unnecessarily hard, causing them to take too great a personal risk. Considering the level of expertise among the group, these were bad decisions concerning the welfare of their teams. In a temporary organization, the project manager is typically evaluated against his or her ability to follow the plan (Christensen and Kreiner, 1991). Thus, it becomes crucial to achieve the set goal in order to stay at the top. Such a situation may cause the project manager to take unnecessary risks in order to succeed.

One is reminded of the motto "who dares wins." That is, a project may sometimes be considered quite impossible and thus require at least some calculated risks in order to succeed. Gray and Larson (2008) bear witness to this when they state that "project management *is* risk management" and Thiry (2001) ascribing uncertainty and sense making as essential features of projects. The PMI (2004) puts risk management as a cornerstone of project management and experienced project managers state that projects are all about deviations and changes!

Thus, although there is no clear intention to be partial in the leadership it is quite easy for a project manager to fall into the trap of putting the project before normal considerations, especially since the project manager's goal and the tasks involved are commonly quite easy to see as well as open to scrutiny.

#### *Lack of decision methodology in temporary organizations*

There were obvious flaws in the decision methodology present at Everest, including all decisions being bureaucratized and centralized without the possibility of communicating them due to lack of communication devices and group features. The purpose of the communication arrangements was clear – it was to ensure decisions were made by the professionals by avoiding any discussion with inexperienced climbers. In theory, this arrangement may seem reasonable and useful. In practice, the lack of communication devices and more general mind guarding and censorship of information made the centralized decision making a potential death trap. And so, it proved, as the risk was triggered. Similarly, in project management, the decision methodology may seem proper and sound but in practice may prove to be hazardous.

Project management takes great pride in its rational approach to operations. Even though practices are not always rational and do not always follow the recommended

techniques, it seems that the decision methodology remains an inherent problem in temporary organizations.

*Homogenous members in temporary organizations*

In the Everest case, climbers came from all around the world. They all had different levels of climbing experience, different educational, ethnic, and professional backgrounds but what they did share was a determination to make it to the top. A similar set of circumstances is found in the explanation of the Bay of Pigs debacle where a new group was formed to resolve the situation. The members of that group were partly duped by the CIA representatives (Janis, 1972). Similar behaviors were found in the escalation to war in Korea (Allison and Zelikow, 1999).

In temporary organizations, the members are typically experts in their field who come together to conduct a project. There may be civil, mechanical or electrical engineers or individuals with a social science background. Being different is not necessarily the same as saying that the group is heterogeneous. The project has a goal which these professionals share. A vision is typically seen as something positive (Christenson and Walker, 2004; Lynn and Akgün, 2001) but it can also, as noted in this paper, contribute to groupthink.

*Groupthink in temporary organizations*

Caution should be exercised before generalizing the results of one case to all temporary organizations. Nevertheless, considering the bureaucratic organizational structure under discussion, there are some implications if groupthink is to be avoided. Thus, the following section will focus on the lessons that project managers can learn from. The case and the literature (Christensen and Kreiner, 1991; Ekstedt *et al.*, 1999; Janis, 1972; Lundin and Söderholm, 1995; PMI, 2004) suggest that there is reason to be cautious around temporary organizations as their structure may create features of groupthink. This effect is contrary to what has been argued (Lindkvist, 2005). The structural features of temporary organizations are found in all four instances in this case study where groupthink occurs.

Janis (1972, pp. 207-18) suggested some practices to avoid groupthink including: using a predetermined critical evaluator; refusing to allow the permanent organization to voice objections about personnel; using several working groups; examining all alternatives; discussing the task with people outside of the project; inviting experts to contribute; using a non-continuous devil's advocate; examining warnings and including open sessions to reconsider alternatives. In a typical project setting, not all of these options are available but this analysis suggests that under some circumstances project managers should be aware of the inherent danger of the structure and therefore consider the options above.

It should also be noted that avoiding groupthink is a balancing act between freedom, efficiency and fast decisions, which is seldom easy in a crisis situation. Too much freedom, for example, may enable close scrutiny of a goal but hamper fast decisions. Therefore, evidence from this case study suggests that some aspects of project decision making in a temporary organization should be deliberately open whilst others are closed to influence. The context decides what and when each strategy is applicable. For example, it may be wiser to make a fast decision in a situation where waiting for confirmation would result in severe delay and the answer is reasonably

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certain. On the other hand, if there is no reason to assume that the answer will go in a certain direction the project manager may be better off waiting.

Finally, no one should ever be punished for whistle blowing (Near and Miceli, 1985). Avoiding groupthink means that everybody should be free to express an opinion, including people outside of the temporary organization. In the bureaucratic organizational setup of the Everest events, whistle blowing was almost impossible (King, 1999, p. 324).

Only the relationship between temporary organizations and groupthink is scrutinized in this paper. Groupthink is of course, not a phenomenon restricted to temporary organizations. Several of Janis (1972) examples in fact emerge in permanent organizations. Whether temporary organizations are more likely than permanent organizations to develop groupthink is, however, impossible to say considering the scope of the paper. One very interesting avenue for further research would however be to investigate the similarities and differences in regards to groupthink in the two types of organization. Furthermore, the relationship between temporary organizations and groupthink need further investigation as so far the linkages have been shown but not properly investigated in depth.

### Conclusions

As the literature suggests, the structure of the temporary organization was observed to be a possible contributor to groupthink. Not all temporary organizations suffer from groupthink but there is reason to be cautious. All four structural features of groupthink were found in the case which carried several symptoms of it. On Everest in 1996, nothing was done to attend to the unrecognized problem of groupthink which ultimately killed several people. The fact that such deaths are still happening and projects still fail shows that the causes such as the possibility of groupthink in a temporary organization deserve further investigation. Projects do not always kill people but to an organization a failed project can be fatal. Therefore, this paper provides a reasoned argument to suggest extreme caution needed due to naturally existent features of groupthink when managing temporary organizations (projects).

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