

EDUCATION

# Penn State Cover-Up: Groupthink in Action

How do smart, principled men wind up defending a child abuser in their midst? Blame the phenomenon of groupthink

By Lawrence J. Cohen and Anthony T. DeBenedet, M.D. | July 17, 2012

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The recent, scathing report by former FBI director Louis Freeh detailing the cover-up of child-sexual abuse at the highest levels of Penn State's leadership has been parsed a million ways, but the question still remains: How could these intelligent and dedicated men have failed so dramatically to defend young children, while going overboard to protect their public image, their football, their Jerry, their JoePa?



Abby Drey / Centre Daily Times / MCT / ZUMA PRESS

A man points at the image of the late Penn State football coach Joe Paterno, which is part of a mural in downtown State College, Pa., on July 14, 2012

While Big Football certainly played a role, what happened at Penn State is best explained by a psychological phenomenon known as groupthink, whereby sound decision making is impaired by the bigger concern of group unity and preservation. Insider groups — private clubs and fraternities, religious groups and sometimes corporations — are particularly prone to groupthink, and it's hard to imagine a more inside group than university president Graham Spanier, senior vice president Gary Schultz, athletic director Tim Curley and revered football coach Joe Paterno. The characteristics of groupthink, first described by social psychologist Irving Janis in 1972, are that the group sets itself above the law, avoids transparency and oversight, and protects itself at all costs. Instead of trying to find the best solution, it encourages the conformity of opinion, often around the wrong decision.

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Groupthink also helps explain why the leadership protected Sandusky — one of their own — instead of vulnerable children. As Janis said his book *Victims of Groupthink*, the phenomenon "is likely to result in irrational and dehumanizing actions directed against out-groups." The outsider status of Sandusky's child victims was most likely exacerbated by the fact that many were poor. The e-mails detailed in the Freeh report show that this particular insider group managed to twist logic to the point where they thought that it was more "humane" to cover up the repeated allegations of Sandusky's abuse than to report them to the police. The "only downside" they saw to this decision was that *they* would be vulnerable if the truth came out. The humanity — and vulnerability — of the abused children and potential future victims didn't come into the discussion.

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Janis first described groupthink as the dynamic behind foreign policy fiascos like the Bay of Pigs, and the concept is still applied to political decisions. Some of Janis' recommendations to prevent groupthink have been widely followed, such as appointing a devil's advocate, introducing outside voices and allowing brainstorming to occur without judgment or criticism. Over the years, his original concept was also criticized, especially what he described as the conditions necessary for groupthink to emerge: internal cohesion, crisis, pressure, group insulation and members with similar ideologies and backgrounds. More recent research has actually found that groupthink can occur when group dynamics aren't as optimal, which means that it's more ubiquitous than Janis initially thought, and in this sense, perhaps more dangerous.

In the end, the Freeh report reminds us not only to guard against groupthink but also to emulate the courage of people who speak out against the abuses of power, like Vicky Triponey, the former Penn State vice president who ran up against "the Penn State way" when she tried to discipline football players for various infractions and eventually lost her job. As she said in a recent interview about her former employer, "The culture is making decisions based on how others will react, not

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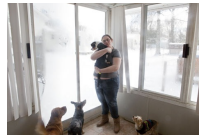
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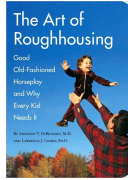
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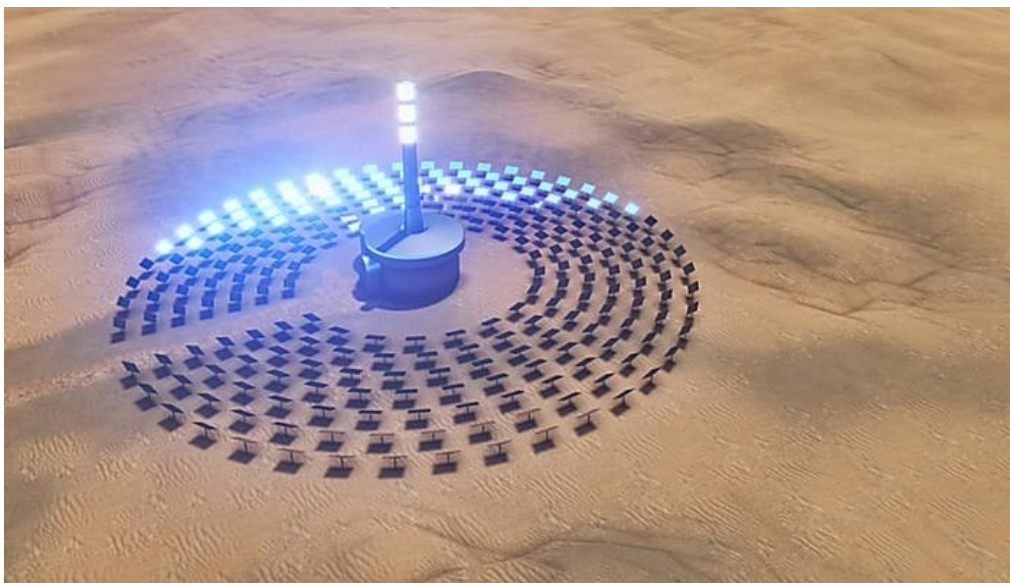
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