

Groupthink in the Sweat Lodge

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Abstract

The self-help industry is a booming business. By 2008 Americans were spending billions of dollars on self-help books, CDs, seminars, coaching, stress management, and retreats. Around this time, the self-help movement was reaching a crescendo when a group of spiritual seekers paid up to \$10,000 each to attend a five-day Spiritual Warrior Retreat in Arizona which ended in tragedy leaving two people dead and the self-proclaimed guru who played God and eventually was found guilty of negligent homicide

This paper will examine this incident from an ethical perspective and deduce what went wrong and how we can learn from the missteps of those in the self-help industry related to groupthink, excessive control, power, influence, and mismanagement. The paper will rely on scholarly and biblical literature and this author's own experience in a sweat lodge to inform the reader on what happened and how to prevent it in the future.

Keywords: ethical behavior, groupthink, self-help industry, moral dilemma, Native American sweat lodge ceremony, excessive control, spiritual enlightenment

Groupthink in the Sweat Lodge

A cursory search of the Internet will show that the self-help industry is booming. According to an article in Forbes magazine, Americans spent more than eleven billion dollars on self-help books, CDs, seminars, coaching, stress management, and retreats in 2008, and that is an exorbitant increase from the turn of the millennium when the Internet and all its promotional tools allowed just about anyone to call themselves a self-help expert. (What People Are Still Willing to Pay For, 2009). However, according to the article, it is mainly middle-aged, affluent men and women looking for one thing, “hope,” and these gurus are not selling their clients' features of a program. Instead, they are selling the image.

Around this time, the self-help movement was reaching a crescendo when a group of spiritual seekers paid up to \$10,000 to attend a five-day Spiritual Warrior Retreat in Arizona which ended in tragedy leaving two people dead and the self-proclaimed guru who played God and eventually was found guilty of negligent homicide, leaving an entire industry in its wake(Johnson, 2018). The much-examined incident is replete with ethical quandaries, power struggles, mismanagement, censorship, lies, and a miscarriage of justice. This paper will examine this incident from an ethical perspective and deduce what went wrong and how we can learn from the missteps of those in the self-help industry. The paper will rely on scholarly and biblical literature and this author’s own experience in a sweat lodge to inform the reader on what happened and how to prevent it in the future.

The Situation

By 2009 self-help expert and New Age guru James Arthur Ray, was the author of a best-selling book. His company, James Ray International, took in more than nine million dollars in the previous year (Johnson, 2018). The self-help industry was booming and many looked up to

figures like Ray, and others. Ray's position of influence in the self-help circle and his cause célèbre attracted many to follow his advice. In October 2009, a group of spiritual seekers paid upwards of ten thousand dollars to attend a five-day retreat in Arizona billed to push participants beyond their perceived limits. It included seminars, spiritual cleaning exercises, and other activities (Archibold & Berger, 2010). The week-long retreat culminated in a 36-hour vision quest and sweat lodge ceremony designed to be a life-changing experience and help participants make significant changes (Johnson, 2018). This was a typical sweat lodge ceremony participated for centuries by Native Americans and included participants sitting in a circle while Ray poured water on heated rocks.

This author knows how extreme and uncomfortable a sweat lodge ceremony can be. He has participated in dozens of these ceremonies and what the Johnson (2018) text describes is an accurate depiction of such an experience. In this type of ceremony, it is not uncommon for the "water pourer" or "lodge leader" to encourage the participants to let go or surrender and can easily be seen as a spiritual experience akin to a Sunday service at church that includes singing and quietly listening to prayers and sermons. The difference is the extreme heat in the sweat lodge. The Arizona incident, replete with many problems, became a catastrophe when Ray broke a vital tenet of the ancient sweat lodge ceremony to be sensitive to the condition of the participants and adjust the heat and length of the rounds accordingly (Mackey, 2010).

Mackey (2010) describes his experiences in sweat lodges much like this author recalls his experiences and those of the participants at the Arizona retreat. Johnson (2018) postulates why police and others wonder why participants did not leave the tent when they began to cook to death. Escalation of commitment, groupthink, and financial commitments could contribute to those looking for a spiritual breakthrough (Johnson, 2018).

Ethical Dilemma

The Arizona retreat and later the sweat lodge ceremony put significant pressure on the participants to perform (Johnson, 2018). They were isolated, under the direction of an influential authority figure and subjected to substantial physical stress even before entering the sweat lodge (Johnson, 2018, p. 255). In addition, Ray allegedly pressured possible dissenters and discouraged members from leaving the lodge. Therefore, it is not surprising that the followers displayed symptoms of groupthink. Simply, groupthink is described as teams or groups of participants that are put in unanimous agreement ahead of reasoned problem-solving. (Janis, 1971; as cited in Johnson, 2018). Groups are more likely to fall victim to this syndrome when they (1) are highly cohesive, (2) find themselves insulated from other groups, (3) lack decision making ability, (4) are under the influence of directive leaders, (5) close themselves off from outside information, and (6) are under stress with little hope of coming up with alternatives to ideas offered by leaders (Johnson, 2018, p. 238).

Escalating commitment

The incident is an exacting example of groupthink that led to a disastrous conclusion. Ray ignored signs that something was amiss and urged the participants to “purge their body of what it does not need” and “we will deal with that in the next round” (Johnson, 2018, p. 255). Like the sweat lodge incident, groups forced into an escalating commitment pursue failed course of action and continue to pour additional resources when they should go in another direction. Instead of deescalating the situation by recognizing warning signs, they push on (Johnson, 2018). Johnson (2018) describes a similar problem on Mount Everest, where clients paid \$60,000 to \$70,000 to summit the mountain. Once they were near the top, it was very difficult to convince some of them to turn around after investing so much time, money, and effort. Alternatively, they

fell victim to “summit fever” and put themselves in grave (and sometimes fatal) danger (Johnson, 2018, p. 244).

Excessive Control

The retreat experience put a good deal of pressure on participants to conform, whereas participants were told: “we will push you beyond your perceived limits” (Johnson, 2018). This is a classic case of excessive control. In the first phase, newly formed groups develop their vision and values statements. These values then become the basis for making ethical decisions in the group. Next, members commit themselves to reaching shared goals and developing norms for putting their values into action. A group might implement its concern for customer service, for instance, by adopting the norm that it will do whatever it takes to ship products on time (Johnson, 2018). Instead, Ray went against all ethical standards and coerced the participants to agree to his teachings. The question is, why?

Power, Influence, and the Self-Help Guru

The business of the self-help genre can trace its roots back to the 1930s when Dale Carnegie published his seminal work, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (Lair et al., 2005). Countless other authors followed, and many self-help practitioners had no experience other than publishing a book. These authors offer eager audiences’ insights into success and encourage their followers to subject themselves to self-help management moments by engaging in meaningful activities (Lair et al., 2005). Moreover, this self-help movement drew from offering a programmatic set of strategies for individuals to improve their chances of success in many of life’s challenges, whether in business, finance, weight loss, or spiritual enlightenment.

Self-help materials, retreats, and frankly, the self-improvement industry enable individuals to take responsibility for self-management, working through the resources at a time

and place more convenient for them and fitting it in more easily around work and other commitments. This, in turn, can empower the individual by addressing the power imbalance between service users and professionals and can lead to an increased sense of control over one's difficulties (Mills et al., 2020). Unfortunately, James Arthur Ray took this a step further and used his influence and power of control to exhibit moral exclusion to the extreme at the Arizona retreat. Ray's influence on the participants created incidents of double standards, concealing harmful effects, and even sanitizing dangerous behaviors and outcomes.

Ethical Danger Signs

Ray simply refused to deescalate the situation by noting warning signs. His abrupt use of robust and concerted control put the participants in peril by not allowing the group to see the moral exclusion that they were exhibiting. The group became so closed-minded that they failed to rationalize to protect themselves from any assumptions they had collectively. This was perpetuated by stereotypes of self-help gurus and their influence over their followers (Mills, 2020; Lair, 2005). Ray exhibited pressure on his dissenters and evoked self-censorship by forcing the participants to keep their doubts about group decisions to themselves (Johnson, 2018).

A sweat lodge is designed to be an illusion of unanimity by all rights. Participants were sitting in a dark structure and asked to sing and pray. Participants trust the lodge leader to respect their wishes and collective safety as the ceremony is conducted from one round to the next (Mackey 2010). Unfortunately, since the members are mostly kept quiet, the group mistakenly assumes that everyone agrees on a course of action. This group pressure forced the participants not to follow preconceived notions. As a result, they were less likely to reexamine an alternate

course of action when it was not working. In addition, they did not carefully weigh the risk or work out contingency plans (Johnson, 2018).

Mismanagement

The incident at the Arizona retreat is a classic case of an ethical miscarriage of justice. Ray claimed that what happened at the sweat lodge ceremony was a tragic accident, not a crime and that he did not know anyone was in distress (Johnson, 2018, p. 255). At his criminal trial, he and his attorney argued that the participants were warned of the dangers, waivers were signed, medical personnel was on site, and people were free to leave the lodge when they wished (Johnson, 2018). Ray was ultimately acquitted of manslaughter charges but was convicted of negligent homicide and spent two years in prison. However, like any self-proclaimed guru, he mounted a comeback. He declared that this is precisely where I should be” and is currently coaching entrepreneurs and plans to write another book (Johnson, 2018).

The retreat and sweat lodge incident is a definitive case of mismanagement and moral failure on the part of Ray. He contends that he did nothing wrong and asserts that he does not have to accept responsibility (Johnson, 2018). Yet, we have a moral obligation and a choice on how we respond. Legal and academic scholars may never know what provoked Ray to do what he did. Was it a lack of training, experience, or even awareness of what could potentially occur, or was he ignorant of the group's needs? Possibly he was in the throes of groupthink himself and became closed-minded as to the group pressures of the participants to get what they paid for (Johnson, 2018). Perhaps Ray was tempted to engage in moral exclusion by placing the participants outside the prevailing cultural norms of society or even the ancient Native American practice of a sweat lodge ceremony.

Conclusions

Whenever self-help is offered, whether it be through a best-selling book, a seminar, or a spiritual retreat, many distressed individuals can be expected to present with some risk or danger to themselves or others (Borgueta et al., 2018). Risk can come from a lack of training by the practitioner or the groupthink of the participants based on their desire for an outcome that they have preconceived. The self-help industry is built on the ideation of feelings of hope. While other risk factors may be external such as the obligation for transparency on the part of the practitioner, the managing of risk is an ethical and legal issue that should be used as a guide for anyone who is on the frontlines of intention and guide that person that is most likely to interact and make persuasive decisions on behalf of the participants (Borgueta et al., 2018).

Moral justifications are always prominent. That is why scholars study ethical behavior, but it is our responsibility as practitioners. The actions of James Arthur Ray are inexcusable and can be an exacting study of ethical behavior in the self-help industry. This author postulates that Ray was in another reality. Albeit unjustified, Ray's experience as a lodge leader developed into an ethical failure that cost people their lives, which is abhorrent. Mackey (2010) postulates that the sweat lodge embodies an intense spiritual connection with nature and is deeply symbolic. As Kokul (2017) describes there are many routes that we can achieve enlightenment, but the path that Ray chose was not the way.

Instead of Ray espousing the Christian worldview of the flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to Spirit (*New International Version*, 2011, John 3:6), he took on the role of a New Age version that embraced us as the spirit in the flesh and that mankind is in power and wisdom (Kokul, 2017), and that was his downfall. As this author notes and Mackey (2010), in a sweat lodge ceremony, the stones are a thanks for giving up their life for the participant's

spiritual renewal. The stones and the water of the sweat lodge are analogous to the Christian sacrament but on a more primal and participatory level. Unfortunately, Ray took this participation to an inconceivable level, costing people their lives. Sadly, Ray did not learn from his mistakes. He may continue down the path of self-help through spiritual enlightenment regardless of the ethical implications.

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