Extraordinary E-Groups

What to do to create amazing results.

by Geoffrey Bellman and Kathleen Ryan

IN TODAY'S WORK ENVIRONMENT, SMALL groups of two to twenty are the way work gets done. Many of these groups do not fulfill their promise. Yet, a rare number surpass expectations and inspire the use of words such as *amazing, magical,* or *once-in-a-lifetime.*

In our extensive study of extraordinary groups, we searched for answers to these questions: What allows some groups to do the exceptional? How do these groups differ from most others? What can we do to intentionally create these extraordinary experiences? And what about virtual teams: Can these groups also achieve peak levels of performance? And if so, how?

This article focuses on what we discovered regarding e-groups—those technologically linked teams comprised of members who work in different locations, time zones, national boundaries, or continents.

To discover the answers, we interviewed 60 people, ages 17 to 70, who told us they had had an "amazing group experience." Half of our interviews focused on workplace experiences; the others were divided between peoples' volunteer and personal lives. Seventeen percent met the criteria of our definition of a virtual group: groups that depend on technology for at least 75 percent of their interaction.

Here are examples of the extraordinary e-groups we learned about:

• Two instructional designers who had never met but live in the same region create a virtual curriculum design for a product life-cycle management course for a community college.

• Three consultants from three countries partner with a senior HR manager—from a fourth country—to design and implement a culture-changing diversity program in 180 countries and affecting 90,000 employees.

• A team of 25 people based in the US, Brazil, UK, Australia, and India work to provide contract human resource administration for an international company's operations in 45 countries.

• One American woman and a shipping coordinator team with a cargo expediter and a community activist in Kenya to procure, fill, and transport books, bicycles, school and medical supplies to vulnerable up-country Kenyan women and children—at no cost.

• Three people located in Moscow, Washington, D. C, and Texas work for three years to safely and efficiently move cargo across Europe to dismantle weapons of mass destruction in the former countries of the Soviet Union.

• A team of seven higher education professionals place graduate students from 14 universities in international internship positions in 40 countries. Students earn academic credit for these three-month solo immersion experiences.

Conclusions

Our story-data led us to conclude:
• People come to a group with a set of instinctive and often unarticulated set of needs—wishes that they hope will be fulfilled by the group experience.
• When group needs are met, the experience is described as *extraordinary, powerful,* or *unforgettable.*
• These groups manifest an identifiable pattern of indicators that helps to distinguish them from others.
• When it comes to e-teams, we find no discernable differences in these patterns to separate them from amazing groups that meet in-person.

Essential Elements

Three elements need to be in place for any group to fulfill its promise of a peak experience:

1. Satisfaction of group needs leads to peak performance. As individuals, we come to groups with a set of mostly unarticulated ancient needs that we long to meet through a group experience. Groups are central to who we are as we meet important needs within them. This is true of all groups, including the work, family, and community groups you are part of right now. This is true regardless of whether groups meet on-line or in-person. Think of your experience. When you are asked to join or are assigned to a group, you bring with you six needs that you hope this new group will satisfy. We offer them here, organized into three pairs:

• *Self*: *Acceptance* of yourself while moving toward your *Potential.*
• *Group*: A *Bond* with others that grows while pursuing a common *Purpose.*
• *World*: Understanding the *Reality* of the world while making an *Impact.*

2. These instinctive needs are related to each other and are at work at all times—the three pairs join and overlap. When multiple needs are met within a group experience the effect is synergistic and transformative. Those involved feel energized, connected, hopeful and positively changed because of what they have accomplished and how they have done their work together. *The Group Needs Model* illustrates how these elements come together.

3. When group needs are met, inspired members bring their best capabilities to the work of the group. A set of observable indicators emerge to create a self-reinforcing positive dynamic of peak group performance. Not every group evidences all indicators all the time, but eight are always at play:

• *Compelling Purpose* that inspires and stretches members to make the group and its work a top priority.
• *Shared Leadership* that encourages members to take mutual responsibility for helping the group be successful.
• *Just-enough Structure* to create confidence to move forward but not become bureaucratic or burdensome.
• *Full Engagement* that results in all members jumping in with enthusiasm, sometimes passionately and chaotically, regardless of role.
• *Embracing Differences* so that group members see, value, and use their diversity as a strength.
• *Unexpected Learning* that translates into personal and group growth.
• *Strengthened Relationships* among members characterized by trust, collegiality, and friendship.
• *Great Results,* tangible and intangible.

Create an Extraordinary Group

What can you do to create a great group? If you think about your experi-

ences with amazing groups, you'll find a tight relationship between the six group needs and the eight indicators of extraordinary groups. The more that your individual needs are met, the more likely it is that your group will demonstrate the indicators of peak performance. Intentionally nurture items on either list, and you'll encourage elements found on the other.

Ten Suggestions

Here are 10 suggestions:

1. Frame an inspiring vision; create a way for people to know what this vision means in a personal way.

2. Ensure you have the necessary and complimentary skill sets and knowledge within the team membership; seek members with diverse perspectives and backgrounds. Intentionally utilize that diversity as you do your work.

3. Pay attention to people on the team—how they are doing with the work and how they are doing as individuals; show compassion and kindness to one another; get to know each other as people. Make sure that you have some opportunities for face-to-face meetings and time together.

4. Recognize and talk about the interdependence of members—that none can accomplish the vision alone that you need each other to be successful. Acknowledge how you work together in this way.

5. Encourage accountability and ways that each person can contribute skills, knowledge, perspective and leadership.

6. Trust each other.

7. Encourage and support people's learning and growth. Celebrate success.

8. Be honest and straightforward in your communications with one another. Take the time to listen to each other, to repeat what you hear each other say, to check out possible hesitations or worries that might reveal elements of reality that could block progress.

9. Build and use the appropriate technology to be both efficient and effective. Minimize the structures or bureaucracy that can become barriers to creativity or momentum.

10. Maintain your sense of humor.

If you agree that life is too short to spend time in groups that do not fulfill their promise, use the *Group Needs Model*, the list of indicators of extraordinary groups, and the 10 suggestions offered by our interviewees to reframe and revitalize your virtual teams. **LE**

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ACTION: Revitalize your teams.

Culture of Leadership
People can't be managed, only led.

by Tom Schulte

BY CREATING AN ENVIronment conducive to growth—a *culture of leadership*—leaders can leverage their greatest asset—their people. But since people are sometimes cranky, late for work, unproductive, and disappointing, many leaders conclude that it is not worth their time to invest in people or the culture in which they work. Many leaders who govern the time, energy, and resources of others tend to treat people like things to manage.

People can't really be managed—they can only really be led. Since leading people is required to leverage their talents, skills, and energies, what is the key to unlocking the elements that can best contribute to the purpose of the organization? What is the best way to provide effective leadership for a disparate group of individuals who come with their own assets, issues, experiences, dispositions, and baggage?

The answer to these questions of how to lead people most effectively is to create an environment where individuals can motivate and manage themselves with an *intraprenurial* mindset that allows them to think beyond self interest and engage in something larger for a group's goal. It is in creating a culture of leadership where people willingly give of their discretionary effort to their teams and to their boss. It is about unshackling people and allowing them to blossom. It is about getting better results through better working relationships.

How can you unlock those unique elements for a team and encourage people to think outside of self-ambition? It's surprisingly easy to get people to engage if you have and follow the right roadmaps—and the payback is huge. How? Think strategic and tactical.

Strategic: Think like a bio-genetic engineer. If you had to raise 30 types of plants under one roof, how would you do it? You'd understand each variety of plant and make the growing environment conducive for each one. When you lead a team of people, the trick is to understand what makes them tick and create an culture that is favorable for each person's growth. This is simple—if you have the right tools.

Since people are emotional creatures and make most of their decisions on an emotional (not logical) basis, use your relationship with them to create the proper culture for them. This gives them license to *want* to follow you because you make it comfortable for them to grow. Find out what is most important to them and honor that when you speak with them. Communicating in the language of other peoples' values is like getting the pH in the soil correct for them. Their roots will grow, and they'll want to stay there for continued nourishment. Because human beings can pretty much take care of themselves, use that self-management aspect and allow them some freedoms to do so. You lead them based on their values, and let them manage all that other stuff that comes with being human.

Tactical: Understanding the specific motivational recipes for everyone you lead can be made simple, easy, and effective. Engaging in a fun, non-threatening, and high-energy session that uncovers the top drivers of individuals is the best way to get those recipes that are the keys to unlocking super performance. You do this by understanding people's top values in an authentic way. People's values are the roadmaps you will need to lead each individual most effectively. Having a list of someone's values is like having an instructional manual or personal recipe cards for leading them.

With a values-sorting/prioritization exercise, individuals and teams can determine what is most important to them. Introspection is the first step to identify the top drivers for each team member. Honor those values in context with team communications and goals.

Such work is needed to properly utilize the talents, skills, and energies of people on a team. Leading people based on values-alignment is like creating an individual garden under the roof of a larger greenhouse. Each person can feel satisfied, contribute, and produce more abundantly this way. **LE**

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ACTION: Create a culture of leadership.