

Extraordinary E-Groups: An Overview

by Geoff Bellman and Kathleen Ryan

In today's work environment, small groups of two to twenty are the way work gets done. We all know, unfortunately, that 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 2006, my colleague, Geoff Bellman, and I began our study of such extraordinary groups—all in search of the answers to a set of questions:

- What allows some groups to do the exceptional?
- How do these groups differ from most others?
- What can any of us 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 this last question—that of e-groups, those technologically linked teams comprised of members who find themselves working in different locations, time zones, national boundaries, or continents.

Our Pursuit

To discover the answers to our questions, we conducted in-depth structured interviews with sixty people, aged 17-70, who told us they had had an “amazing group experience.” Using a networking method, half of our interviews focused on workplace experiences; the other half was divided between peoples’ volunteer and personal lives. Seventeen percent of our stories met the criteria of our definition of a virtual group: groups that depend on technology for at least 75% of their interaction. Here are some examples of the extraordinary e-groups we learned about:

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

- Three external consultants from three different countries partner with a senior HR manager—from yet a fourth country, to design and implement a culture-changing diversity program in 180 countries and affecting 90 thousand employees.
- A team of 25 people based in the US, Brazil, the UK, Australia, and India work together 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 expeditor and a community activist in Kenya to procure, fill, and transport a shipping container of 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 together 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 core team of seven higher education professionals place graduate students from fourteen universities in international internship positions in 40 countries around the globe. Students earn academic credit for these intense 3-month solo immersion experiences.

Conclusions

An examination of our story-data led us to the following conclusions:

- 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 those Group Needs are met, the experience is so fulfilling that is described with enthusiastic words such 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 found no discernable differences in these patterns to separate them from amazing groups that meet in-person.

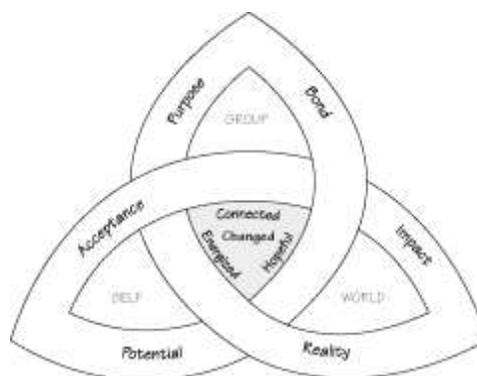
Briefly, here is an overview of what we now see as the essential elements that need to be in place for any group to fulfill its promise of a peak experience.

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 human beings; we meet important needs within them. This is true of the whole array of groups we learned about. And it's true of the work, family, and community groups you are part of right now. This is true regardless of whether your groups meet on-line or in-person. Think of your own experience. When you are asked to join or are assigned to a group, we suspect that 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*

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.



The Group Needs Model

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 several are always at play. They include the following.



- *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 so much as to 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

What You Can Do to Create an Extraordinary E-Group

If you think about your own experiences 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 will encourage elements found on the other. Specific to e-groups, here is a set of suggestions pulled from the virtual group experiences of our field study. Notice how each could satisfying a Group Need or support an indicator of peak performance.

1. Frame an inspiring vision; create a way for people to know and understand what this vision means in a personal way.
2. Make sure you've got the necessary and complimentary skill sets and knowledge within the team membership; deliberately seek out 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 unique skills, knowledge, perspective and leadership.
 6. Trust each other.
 7. Encourage and support people’s individual learning and growth. Celebrate each others’ successes.
 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 important 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 collective sense of humor.

If you agree with us, 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 ten suggestions offered by our interviewees to reframe and revitalize your virtual teams.

Geoff Bellman and Kathleen Ryan are co-authors of *Extraordinary Groups: How Ordinary Teams Achieve Amazing Results* (Jossey-Bass, 2009).