

## What's Happens in Extraordinary Groups?

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All groups are not created equal. There's the group you were recently frustrated with and there's another that you will meet with again soon, reluctantly. And then there are those few groups that you occasionally experience and often hear about, those that are over-the-top, mind-blowing fantastic! Somehow they raise members and results to a new level, often beyond what anyone imagined when they joined the group. These memorable groups attract us and often elude us.

We decided to learn more about these extraordinary assemblages of two to twenty people: What do they do that makes them so wonderful? A compelling enough question that we set out to interview members of sixty great groups. We figured that if we could learn from anyone, it would be those people who had lived an extraordinary group experience. Why go listen to another just average group when we could listen to members of amazing groups tell about what they actually did. It took us three years to find sixty groups, interview 1-2 members in each, sort through all their stories, and reach the conclusions we will summarize here. Following this introduction, we will lay out eight performance indicators shared widely among our sixty extraordinary groups. We will elaborate on each of the eight indicators and illustrate them with story from our field study.

### What *is* An Extraordinary Group?

Talking with many helped us come up with this definition: *An extraordinary group achieves outstanding results while members experience a profound shift in how they see their world.* "Results" includes the whole gamut from the outstanding difference the group makes out in the world to the outstanding differences made within the group itself. And results means tangible to intangible, objective to subjective, all as perceived by the group members. Others share those perceptions but we were more interested in member perception because of its impact on motivation and performance. Members "*experience a profound shift*" in how they see their world. Yes, and usually an unexpected shift; that's part of what makes it so profound. It's like, "When I got assigned to this project, I had no idea that it would completely change my beliefs about what a group can accomplish together!" Or, "I didn't



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know I was going to become part of these other people's lives and them a part of mine. My world has changed because of them." Yes, it is about how they "see *their world*." Not the whole world, but that part of the world that is most important to them.

Our field study reached far beyond the for-profit sector; we believed that extraordinary groups had much in common regardless of setting or purpose or membership. We were confirmed in that belief by the parallel experiences and excitement of the array of people we talked with. Notice what the definition does *not* say. It doesn't say "team": Many of the extraordinary groups we came across do not see themselves as teams, and many groups that call themselves teams are not. "Team" while popular in sports, the military, and corporations is not a natural fit for small groups of dedicated counselors, teachers, motorcycle riders, book club members, or philanthropists.

## **What Do Extraordinary Groups Do?**

Our field study yielded eight performance indicators linked to what we are calling "extraordinary". Watch an extraordinary group and you will see these eight indicators in action. Most of sixty groups we studied exhibited:

1. *A compelling purpose* that inspires and stretches members to make the group and its work a top priority.
2. *Shared leadership* that encourages members to take mutual responsibility for helping the group to be successful.
3. *Just-enough-structure* to create confidence to move forward, but not so much as to become bureaucratic or burdensome.
4. *Full engagement* that results in all members jumping in with enthusiasm, sometimes passionately and chaotically, regardless of role.
5. *An Embracing of differences* so that group members see, value, and use their diversity as a strength.
6. *Unexpected learning* that translates into personal and group growth.
7. *Strengthened relationships* among members characterized by trust, collegiality, and friendship.
8. *Great results*, tangible and intangible.



As we interviewed people, these themes surfaced again and again. Whether the groups were for profit or not, volunteers or employees, face-to-face or virtual, these eight indicators emerged.

We've selected one story to illustrate the indicators. Tom's story will be familiar to you if you work in a large organization. Without the indicators cited above, it would have had a very different outcome. We begin with an overview of Tom's situation, and follow that by linking it to each of the eight indicators.

### **They Need Their Own System!**

Tom, a young information technology(IT) executive, returned to a former employer in a mid-management position. The company, a large heavy equipment manufacturer, had IT centralized at corporate headquarters. Three smaller divisions—mining equipment, rail car, and winch manufacturing—were being asked to adopt the IT system designed for the much larger manufacturing division. Tom openly questioned the decision--a heretical act! He thought each division needed a system to match its own work, not one designed for a very different part of the company and tied to the corporate mainframe.

But he did manage to get the go-ahead to investigate an alternative approach. Six people joined him; each frustrated by the company's one-system policy and the slowness with which it was being implemented. The group included Fred, the manager of IT planning (who we also interviewed), a cost accounting manager, a materials manager, an assistant comptroller, an IT data processing manager, and an assistant vice-president from the corporate office "assigned to ride herd on what we were doing." Nobody reported to Tom and everyone had their plates full with other assignments. But, as Fred recalls, each member who chose to be involved was "top notch and well-thought of at the company level."

Spread over four different locations in the West and Mid-West of the US and Canada, the team met in-person quarterly. In between, Fred recalls weekly phone meetings--in a time before easy internet connections. Tom remembers that the challenge of "getting everyone on the same page and believing that we could actually pull this off." Pressure was mounting



for the smaller divisions to adopt the corporate system. The work needed to move ahead quickly!

The group analyzed the systems' needs of the three smaller divisions. They investigated hardware, software, other companies, vendors, technical challenges, costs, and the interface with the corporate mainframe. After all their research, they recommended that the smaller divisions get mid-range computers with packaged software that could be quickly installed and provide maximum flexibility for the users. In less than eight months, they went from "stirring the water to getting the sign-off" on their recommendation. Tom says, "We ended up getting corporate approval for the three divisions to each have their own system, doing the first implementation in one year. The total projected cost was \$6.5M for the four divisions, including putting IT people in the divisions. We brought our first division in on time and under budget. In one division alone, the new system was responsible for annual savings of one million dollars."

## **An Amazing Group at Work**

Tom and Fred's group illustrates the unique behaviors exhibited in extraordinary groups. These behaviors don't happen in sequence; in some ways they are all happening at the same time. We will talk about each of the eight indicators at work in Tom's team.

### **1. Compelling purpose**

Watch an extraordinary group at work and you will see that their inspiring and shared purpose surfaces repeatedly. Motivated by their purpose, members make their group a priority among all the demands on their time. Members know that commitment to purpose is critical to their work together. They make purpose visible, they post it, they remind each other of it, they use it as their primary guide for decisions, they check with each other when they suspect that purpose is not commonly understood.

A clear and compelling purpose plays out obviously in task-oriented groups focused on changing their external world. Tom and Fred's team is a perfect example: High task orientation and a clear corporate world they wanted to change. Their team came together



to analyze information systems needs and shape a recommendation. Their doable goals required them to stretch and set in motion action plans, work assignments, and deadlines.

At the more purposeful level, they were really about doing what was right for part of the business—while simultaneously bucking the top-down system at the same time. Tom recalls that “the others [on the team] were interested in getting involved. They got caught up in the possibility of doing something that made sense and going against the centralized bull. They liked the idea of breaking that mold.”

## **2. Shared leadership**

Watch an extraordinary group in action and you will notice leader behavior across the group. These groups are not leader-centric. Leadership comes from many; the lead shifts with the subject at hand and the expertise required. Members know that anyone can initiate with a question, a task, an issue, or a proposal. Members lead together: initiating, facilitating, structuring, suggesting, all to move the group toward shared purpose. Members also share responsibility for outcomes. Everyone assists in getting what the group wants. Each member of Fred and Tom’s group was a manager in his own right and brought different expertise. They led according to what they brought. For example, the materials manager coordinated with his counterparts in the three divisions, keeping people in the loop, gathering data, and moving the assessment process ahead. As decision points surfaced, members relied on each other’s content expertise for guiding the group through the steps required to reach their recommendations.

Leaders of extraordinary groups see their roles differently from more traditional leaders. Extraordinary group leaders know their unique is important and that they are one leader among many. Often they make sure the group is being led rather than always being the one to lead. Or, they turn questions back to the group, asking what others would do rather than telling them what to do. And they attend to individual group members, seeing that their needs are addressed.

Tom is such a leader. Even after twenty years, he can recount what each member in his group did to advance the work and how their competence and enthusiasm came together to make a great team. Aside from being the point-person to buck the system, he “carried the



water for the troops. You've got to organize around people's excitement and their desires and abilities to get things done. It's important to keep it light and to care about people, especially when they are over-committed."

### **3. Just-enough structure**

Give extraordinary groups a clear purpose and they will derive ways of working governed more by outcome than structure. They will establish and honor systems, plans, roles, tasks, and working agreements—when those structures are needed for the challenges ahead of them. But they never forget that the main reason they are together is about fulfilling their purpose, and structure is a means to that end. In Tom and Fred's group, the "secret was to keep it human. We used some rudimentary project management tools--like a task list. We reviewed this in our weekly meeting and updated it together. That's the only way this sort of thing gets done. Keep it simple but make sure that everyone is informed and included."

Members create just-enough-structure just-in-time to support accomplishment. They are leery of structure, doing it when necessary and guarding against over structuring or structuring too soon. To them, structure represents constraint on people's thinking and roles so it should be used cautiously. Agendas are never more important than the outcomes they are designed to meet; roles and plans shift as circumstances call for reaching toward purpose in a new way.

### **4. Full engagement**

The space created by compelling purpose, shared leadership, and just-enough structure pulls members toward full engagement. When fully engaged, members readily contribute their knowledge, skills, and talents; they do not wait to be asked. In a group like this, rather than holding back, members may have trouble getting airtime—waiting for others to breathe so they can dive in. Depending on what's being discussed, the intensity and excitement of engagement can be more apparent than order. Ideas flow, tumbling one over another like a river seeking its course. People pitch-in, adapt, inform, exclaim, and resolve issues together. And, engagement doesn't end when a meeting is over; people do what they say they will do. When a member commits to taking action, others know that person



will follow through. People work hard and intensely, often for hours, days at a time; they do so because they are committed to their purpose and don't want to let each other down.

Tom and Fred's group had at least one of these intensely focused times. They got the word that the company CEO had finally agreed to consider the group's proposal when Tom's boss called and said 'show up tomorrow morning.' This offered the group the hope of both approval and bypassing some of the normal rules and procedures. Tom said, "The team was completely together on this. We stayed up until 2AM to get ready for the presentation the next day." When the next day came, "we were ready and we nailed it!"

Extraordinary groups thrive on member enthusiasm and passion. Complicated group dynamics, conflict, and disagreement are often characteristic. Laughing, good humor, playful energy, and a joyful spirit also show up—even in the face of very serious circumstances or tense moments. Irreverence or spontaneous play can erupt, breaking the tension and helping members understand that all is not seriousness and struggle. Joking and kidding are rooted in positive intent and appreciation of one another. Fred remembers the group really had fun. Tom recalls, "We frequently went down the street after work and shared a pitcher of beer...We laughed a lot and hammered out what we needed to do next. We had a good time together—and we all gained a great deal of respect for each other throughout this time."

## **5. Embracing differences**

In extraordinary groups, people are intrigued by the diversity of information, perspectives, backgrounds, and cultures within the group. They respect each other for who they are as human beings as well as for the skills, knowledge, and talent they apply to the group's purpose. Members know that creative solutions require a broad range of viewpoints and the ability to blend positions—even contradictory ones. With this frame, they experience their unique ideas being respected, listened to, and talked about in service to group purpose. Fred remembers that this group "was a true team, where everyone had input and egos didn't get in the way. There was no 'I'm doing this my way.'" A culture of deferring to the subject matter experts developed. "Beyond deferring details to them, we developed a consensus approach for the bigger issues. We wanted to go forward with a plan that had



everyone fully committed. We couldn't afford to have members of the team questioning our decisions or our decision-making process after the fact."

Respect for diversity makes it easier for members to bring their true selves to the group. People feel appreciated for who they are; they know that acceptance in the group does not require them to pretend to be someone else. As a result, people are more spontaneous, more likely to take risks, and generally give expression to sides of themselves often not shown in ordinary groups. Members readily acknowledge what they don't know without apology and what they do know without bragging.

These dynamics create an environment of safety and trust. Members challenge each other, push boundaries, work through differences, share personal experiences—including ones that are painful. They worry less about their intentions being misinterpreted or suffering reprisal for something they say. They discuss "undiscussable" issues; they offer and ask for feedback from each other. And they collaborate—willingly and openly sharing ideas, building off each others' perspectives and information, stretching toward breakthrough thinking and reaching powerful decisions together.

Tom remembers that "there was a high degree of mutual respect. Some of our best work came out of arguments. People felt safe defending a position and safe compromising when needed. The willingness to compromise was helped by that mutual respect. For my part, I reminded everyone that we were not trying to solve world hunger; we were simply trying to convince a conservative corporation to start doing business in a new way."

## **6. Unexpected learning**

Of course people in groups expect to learn, but our extraordinary groups were characterized by learning that went beyond their expectations. You can almost hear learning happening as the group stretches to become more together. It's one thing for a member to be uniquely challenged by the task; it's quite another when the entire group takes up the challenge together. Excited by the work before them, members unite in learning together. Often what they learn together has wider application than this project with this team; it applies in their careers and lives.



Time and time again, people we interviewed reported being changed, increasing personal confidence, and *learning so much!* Fred reported, “I learned lessons that I didn’t know before. About how to get the right people on the team, how to work together so that egos don’t get in the way, how to do a process from end-to-end.” Fred left the company soon after the installation of the systems his group recommended, and, “I was a project leader for my whole career.” The lessons gained from this extraordinary group served him for years.

As a pattern, members of extraordinary groups give more than they originally signed up for: More hours, more energy, more expertise, more patience, more sweat, more empathy, more study, and more risk. In this stretch, individuals grow their skills, knowledge, frameworks, self awareness, and sense of potential. Members expand their beliefs of what a group can accomplish together and they take this experience to future groups.

## **7. Strengthened relationships**

Relationships between members of extraordinary groups take shape in two primary ways. Some groups form around established relationships; members so enjoy being together that they search for shared purpose and activity that allow them to go on spending time together. Continuing, deepening, and strengthening what they already have in their relationship is a high priority. Other groups—like Tom and Fred’s--draw together first around group purpose. As members join they meet new people, initially attracted more to purpose than to each other. Relationships grow from the work together sometimes resulting in lasting friendships.

When group behavior causes individuals to feel respected, enhanced relationships result. Groups that help members discover common values or interests feed friendship. When the norm is to rely on one another, to commit, and to follow-through, what else would we expect? Add to this the bonds formed through facing challenges together and the fun of daily work and celebrating accomplishment. Tom says, “When we got the whole team in one place, we were together for all of our waking hours for two to three days in a row.” The friendships that evolved out of such intensely focused work lasted years. Even now, over twenty years later, Tom knew how to reach two members of the team for interviews. And they value that great, shared group experience.



## 8. Great results

Results that surpass members' expectations regularly happen in extraordinary groups. Over two-thirds of those we interviewed identified impressive *tangible* results. With Tom's team, the operating costs for the mining equipment division alone were reduced by \$1 million per year. The company's later sale of the division eased because its information system was not tied to the corporate mainframe. Though proud of these accomplishments, Tom sees them as confirmation that something important happened here. What *really* happened that excites him even today is the magical way that team worked together along the way. That's the more unique and valued result.

Among our other groups we heard many stories of remarkable accomplishments—a library built, software developed, research completed, conferences held, strategies planned, a beach cleaned, a neighborhood beautified, candidates screened, championships won, markets gained, military missions accomplished, students sent abroad, cargo transported, and lives saved. All impressive. But results not readily measured in numbers, dollars, percentages, or units turn out to be tremendously important to extraordinary groups—more important than their tangible outcomes. Why?

As with Tom and his team, tangible results are seen as an indicator of the success of what they did, not the success itself. The more unique and valued success is usually associated with how the people got there together. Learning, increased confidence, and enhanced relationships are the most significant outcomes of these extraordinary groups. Members also glow in their pride of accomplishment, their sense of community. Dramatic testimony to the importance of the intangible came from people who had life-changing experiences like altering a career path, or redefining the meaning of family, or a shift in self-esteem, or being the center of support that allowed to care for a dying child.

These intangible results transformed the lives of individual group members. After this, a person's internal experience and external view of her world are never quite the same again. After three years of studying and thinking about extraordinary groups, we know that when someone says "That was an amazing experience!", a powerful intangible shift has most likely taken place. As impressive as tangible results might be, they take second place to the changes in people's internal lives.



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Attending to these eight indicators highlighted dramatically increases the likelihood that groups will achieve the tangible outcomes they seek. Our field study showed that about ten percent of the groups focused on external change were unsuccessful achieving their goals. And those we interviewed still described their group experience as amazing. Their enthusiasm comes directly from valued, *intangible* results of their group experience.

### **Summary**

Looking back on his experience, Tom knows that his extraordinary group experience enabled him to shift how he saw himself in the world. “It gave me legitimacy. I already knew what it meant to do this kind of technological change, but this experience showed me I could rise above personal fears and redefine my success. I didn’t have a history of bucking the system and I’ve never really liked confrontation.” During the presentation to the CEO, the comptroller asked, “How confident are you that this is a good idea?” Tom replied, “I’ll bet my job on it.” What he learned propelled him to seek leadership roles with increasing scope and responsibility, the transformative shift he described to us stayed with him and shaped his leadership in years to come. When we spoke with him, he was a company president.