

Eight Indicators of an Extraordinary Group

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Extraordinary Groups

is their first written collaboration. Geoff has worked with large organizations for forty years, fourteen as an internal consultant and manager, twenty-six as an external consultant. His work has focused on renewing large, mature organizations. In recent years, he has given much of his time to small, not-for-profit organizations in the Seattle area. Kathleen has practiced organization development since 1984 and has been identified as an organizational consultant with "an instinct for translating complex human behavior into practical concepts." Her current work focuses on organization culture change, executive coaching, and executive on-boarding.

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As consultants, we have invested years in working with groups in organizations. We share a curiosity about what makes some groups fantastic and others not. We've seen groups soar to high performance sometimes in part because of our help, and often in spite of our help! What is it that makes for the "magic" that transforms some groups we've worked with? And, can we capture just a bit of the magic and take it to other groups? Those questions were the focus of our four year study of sixty extraordinary groups. That study led us to conclusions that altered the way we work with groups.

We focused on extraordinary groups of two to twenty people and what makes them so wonderful. We interviewed members of these great groups, figuring why not learn from people who have lived through an extraordinary group experience? Four years later, we reached conclusions based on hearing stories from 1-2 members in each of the sixty groups. We learned about what motivates extraordinary performance, the feelings that result, and what they actually did. This article describes eight performance patterns most of those extraordinary groups share.

Keep one of your current groups in mind as you read the performance patterns we identified. Think about what you could say, ask, and do that would help create the eight patterns in your group. The more of these eight patterns are present, the more likely your group will deliver amazing results.

What Is An "Extraordinary Group"? We defined an "extraordinary group" as one which achieves outstanding results while members—individually and/or collectively—experience a profound shift in how they see their world. Note our emphasis on results; the group needs to deliver for their own satisfaction and the world they serve. A "profound shift in how they see their world" means they are aware of seeing through a new and more useful lens. Their perspective on their world has changed; they now see it both more realistically and as offering more opportunity—and this excites them!

What Do Extraordinary Groups Do?

Watch an extraordinary group in action and you will see...

1. **Compelling Purpose**, inspiring members, stretching them as they make the group's work the priority.
2. **Shared Leadership**, demonstrating members' mutual responsibility for initiating toward group success.
3. **Just-Enough-Structure**, moving the group forward together without becoming fixed or burdensome.
4. **Full Engagement**, showing in everyone's readiness to dive in with focus, enthusiasm, and passion--often chaotically.
5. **Embracing of Differences**, resulting in a widened group perspective, creativity, and more options for action.
6. **Unexpected Learning**, going beyond the immediate task and useful in other work, groups, and life.

7. Strengthened Relationships, coming from the trust, interdependence, and friendships within the group.
8. Great Results, including the tangible outcomes organizations value and the intangible outcomes treasured by group members.

These eight themes emerged regardless of whether the groups were for profit or not, volunteers or employees, face-to-face or virtual. Here is a more in-depth elaboration on each indicator.

1. Compelling purpose. Watch an extraordinary group at work and you will see that their inspiring purpose surfaces constantly. Commitment to shared purpose is central to their individual and collective work. They hold the purpose in their hearts; they post it on their walls; it's their primary guide for decisions; it shows in all they do.

2. Shared leadership. Leadership comes from across the group, shifting with the subject at hand and the expertise required. Anyone can input a question, a task, an issue, or a proposal. Members also share accountability for outputs. Designated leaders of extraordinary groups know they are one leader among many. They make sure the group is being led rather than always being the one to lead.

3. Just-enough structure. A group with clear purpose and shared leadership will find practical, organic, even chaotic ways of getting desired outcomes. Members create just-enough-structure just-in-time to support accomplishment. They are leery of structure, doing it only when necessary; they guard against over-structuring or structuring too early.

4. Full engagement. When fully engaged, members do not wait to be asked to contribute. In an extraordinary group, members may have trouble getting airtime. Intensity and excitement is more apparent than order. Extraordinary groups thrive on enthusiasm and passion. Complicated group dynamics, conflict, and disagreement are characteristic.

5. Embracing differences. Members are intrigued by diverse perspectives, backgrounds, and ideas within the group. They know that creative solutions require a broad range of viewpoints and the ability to blend positions--even contradictory ones. Respect for differences allows members to bring their full selves to the group.

6. Unexpected learning. Our sixty extraordinary groups typically learned beyond their own expectations. 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 to learn together. The "unexpected" comes when members learn not just new work skills, but team skills and life skills. They leave this team more confident and better able to deal with the next one.

7. Strengthened relationships. With these eight indicators in play, individuals feel respected by others leading to tighter relationships. When group members discover commonly held values, they become closer. When a group routinely relies on one another, friendships often result. Imagine the bonds forged through facing challenges together, through combining talents for a shared outcome.

8. Great results. Results, tangible and intangible, typically surpass members' expectations. And, the tangible results regularly exceed the expectations of the larger organization the group serves. Ask the group which results are most important, and they will point to the hard-to-

measure magic they created together. This is the more unique and extraordinary experience in their lives.

Acting on these eight performance indicators helps meet our human need to work with each other. The more of these indicators you attend to, the more likely your group will be energized to perform, connect to each other, and hopeful about what they can create together.

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