



# Book Extraordinary Groups

## How Ordinary Teams Achieve Amazing Results

Geoffrey M. Bellman and Kathleen D. Ryan  
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### Recommendation

Consider the great things that small groups have accomplished. The 1969 Apollo 11 crew, the first humans on the moon, comprised only three members: Neil Armstrong, Michael Collins and Buzz Aldrin Jr. In 1976, three guys – Steve Jobs, Steve Wozniak and Ronald Wayne – formed Apple Computer. In this necessary guide to groupthink, authors Geoffrey Bellman and Kathleen Ryan contend that small, exceptional groups – not big organizations – account for many major achievements. They describe such teams, discuss what makes them special, and offer suggestions on how to benefit from small group agility and creativity. *BooksInShort* finds that this book is a useful blueprint for leaders who want to develop and sustain superior small teams.

### Take-Aways

- Small groups – not big organizations – are the primary fonts of achievement.
- Throughout history, people have felt most comfortable in small groups.
- Groups larger than 20 work less efficiently than smaller groups.
- Small groups enable new work experiences and new learning.
- Individual members of small teams benefit through enhanced confidence, increased motivation, more meaningful peer connections and faith in their organizations.
- The “Group Needs” model targets the important elements of any exceptional group: “acceptance and potential,” “bond and purpose,” and “reality and impact.”
- All members of extraordinary groups act as leaders.
- Members assume communal responsibility for their actions and outcomes.
- Groups cannot excel unless participants appreciate each other’s differences.
- Small groups maintain their bonds long after a project is completed.

### Summary

#### The Advantages of Small Groups Over Large Organizations

Case history: In 1996, after graduation from college, Barb joined 11 other individuals to organize a world conference about microcredit involving 137 countries. The goal was to help millions of abjectly poor families across the globe. Barb and her colleagues had only eight months to organize the conference. The logistics were challenging. Barb recalls juggling phone calls from the White House, Angola’s first lady and Peru’s president.

“The clear and powerful purpose of the group creates a common framework in which decisions are made relatively easily, basically by consensus.”

Barb and her colleagues received only minimum compensation. However, despite the long hours and low pay, they accomplished their goals and more. They hoped to get 600 attendees at the conference; 3,000 participated. Those present made firm commitments about granting microcredit loans. Thanks to Barb and her co-workers, more than 100 million poor families received low-cost loans. These families represent 500 million individuals – half of the most destitute people in the world. This group experience was magical for Barb and her colleagues. She put it this way: “We were a squad of 12 people...Our small voice engaged the world.”

### Transformation

Barb and her co-workers were part of an extraordinary small group. Remarkable teams like this one often accomplish great things. Barb's crew describes their experiences as "a big win," "surprising" and "amazing." Members of such small groups often experience a transformation.

"Extraordinary groups achieve outstanding results, and members – individually or collectively – experience a profound shift in how they see the world."

This transformation involves a shift in team members' personal perceptions. It supercharges a positive change in behavior, increasing both individual vitality and group exuberance. In numerous interviews of members of extraordinary groups, people agreed that the group experience energized them, made them feel strongly connected and increased their hopefulness. Their group experience changed them for the better.

### “The Group Needs Model”

How does such magical transformation occur among extraordinary small groups? These groups satisfy the “core needs” of the individual members. The six elements of those needs are:

1. **“Acceptance”** – Understand and embrace who you are.
2. **“Potential”** – Develop fully as a human being.
3. **“Bond”** – Connect with other group members.
4. **“Purpose”** – Know why the group was formed and why you are working.
5. **“Reality”** – See your immediate situation clearly.
6. **“Impact”** – Appreciate the positive effect of your efforts.

"Human beings function better on a scale they can understand and influence – small groups that bring the right people together in the right ways."

If your team fulfills even two of these core needs – often expressed in pairs: self-acceptance plus potential, bonding plus purpose, reality plus impact – your group experience will be memorable.

### Small Groups Feel Right

People feel more comfortable in groups than in compartmentalized organizations. Some 200,000 years of history have made human beings “group creatures” who are more apt to meet their goals working jointly, not in hierarchies. This is particularly true when team members individually suited for different tasks come together. Group members inspire one another to exploit their talents. Teams foster networks, enable collaboration, and help people build their abilities and know-how.

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." (Margaret Mead)

Individual members of small teams benefit through enhanced confidence, increased motivation, better morale, more meaningful peer connections, deeper development of knowledge and new capabilities, and increased faith in their organizations. Considering these benefits, organizations must work to make their teams as extraordinary as possible. The primary characteristics of extraordinary groups are:

- **“Compelling purpose”** – An important goal impels group members to work at their maximum.
- **“Shared leadership”** – Group members assume communal responsibility for their actions and outcomes. They might name a formal leader to facilitate rather than direct.
- **“Just-enough structure”** – Extraordinary groups concern themselves more with outcomes than with internal organization. A lean team does not get bogged down.
- **“Full engagement”** – Great zeal may at times create anarchy, but excitement fuels committed work. Work roles or rank can get jumbled up as the group attacks its goal.
- **“Embracing differences”** – The diversity of group members energizes rather than divides them.
- **“Unexpected learning”** – “Ready...Set...Stretch!” Working together teaches the group members about themselves and their goals in new ways.
- **“Strengthened relationships”** – Group members become friends, rely on one another and stay connected long after their groups disband.
- **“Great results”** – Members grow personally as they meet or surpass concrete goals.

### “Reflection Questions” and “Sample Actions”

The Group Needs model can help you better understand extraordinary groups, how to manage them and how you might fit within them. To this purpose, ask reflection questions and undertake sample actions in each area of the Group Needs model.

"Our attraction to groups is instinctual; two hundred thousand years of human history have formed us into the group creatures that we are."

In the area of self-acceptance, which is crucial to becoming an effective group member, ask: "What do you regularly appreciate about yourself?" "How could you be more accepting of yourself as you are right now?" Sample actions in this area might include asking a friend to describe some of your personality traits, particularly aspects of your personality that worry you. Ask your friend to explain how he or she deals with these characteristics. Another action might include reflecting on a co-worker who irritates you. Ask yourself how giving in to that irritation helps or hinders you, and how that irritation might fuel some negative aspect of your self-image. Single out for praise someone in the group who is self-critical. Let that person know how much the group values his or her participation.

"In extraordinary groups, people are intrigued by the diversity of information, perspectives, backgrounds and cultures."

To discover yourself and your potential, ask: "How would you describe yourself in 25 words or less?" Or, "how much do you prefer working with others versus working alone?" The more self-aware you are, the more effective you can be within a group. Utilize pivotal sample actions or exercises to increase the value of your group experience and your value to the group. For example, write down the character strengths and personal qualities you bring to the team. Consider what core needs

the group satisfies for you.

“Extraordinary groups are drawn to discovery, moving from known toward unknown.”

Reflection questions concerning bond and purpose might include: “What did you do to help your group, a group meeting or other group members be more effective?” “What [will] you do next time to help [your] group progress?” Sample actions include demonstrating support for other members of the group. Always address team members by name. Solicit their opinions. Let others within your team know that you are confident in their abilities and in your ability to work with them. Speak well of their efforts.

“Complex problems or opportunities will require the attention of small groups because no one person has the capacity to address such issues alone.”

Some helpful reflection questions regarding purpose are: “Who among our group seems to have the right skills or talents for the various things that need to get done?” “What do we currently use to structure our work?” “How are those elements working for us?” Some sample actions: Suggest that group members discuss how the group is doing. Recommend a group discussion concerning important team particulars, such as what role each person will play. Make sure everyone is satisfied with how these individual elements are working. Make every effort to ensure that group discussions are collaborative.

“Life is too short to spend time in groups that do not fulfill their promise.”

Consider reality and impact: Effective group membership requires that individuals within the group be in touch with their world (reality) and fully accept it. Everyone should recognize the value of each teammate and accept one another. Team members must be in accord regarding their collaborative environment and how it works. At the same time, each person should want to make a contribution, and team members should encourage that input. Communal contribution – a sum much greater than its parts – is the point and purpose of the group.

“People...sense when a group experience is something special, something different from the ordinary, something that surpasses their expectations.”

As with all pairs of linked group needs – acceptance and potential, bond and purpose – a “creative dynamic” exists between reality and impact. For example, reality implies that fanciful expectations about work and the group do not cloud your efforts. Impact implies that you and the group understand what you seek to achieve. A reflection question might be, “What have other successful groups done that enabled them to change their worlds?” A sample action: Discuss with your group members how you and they can improve the world – or your portion of it. Celebrate the differences among the members of your group. Diversity makes extraordinary groups special. To develop a great group, heed these tips:

- **“Commit to your group”** – The more commitment within your group, the more it will accomplish.
- **“Maintain a positive bias”** – Believe and behave as if your group will attain or surpass its goals.
- **“Be a learner and explorer”** – Value the diversity of your group and learn from its individual members. Remain open to new experiences and knowledge.
- **“Lean toward risk”** – The more you venture, the more you can achieve.
- **“Provide less control and more space”** – Make sure each group member gets enough work freedom and psychological legroom.
- **“Model authentic communication”** – Be as open as possible when speaking and working with your team.
- **“Meet group needs”** – Your team members share your core needs. Make sure your co-workers get what they require.
- **“Structure the group's work”** – Set up the right organizational context: location, ground rules, work roles for each group member, and so on.

## Leading Exceptional Groups

While the members of extraordinary groups share leadership roles, normally one person will function as the designated leader. These leadership ideas can help you guide your team:

- **“Frame an inspiring purpose”** – Make sure that all members feel connected to and enthusiastic about the group's goals.
- **“Design and facilitate meetings with the group's needs in mind”** – Ask yourself, “How will this meeting meet the needs of acceptance and potential, bond and purpose, reality and impact?” “Where and how can we use our differences as a group strength?”
- **“Lead with a light touch”** – Facilitate your group members' desire to participate; make everyone feel welcome and valued.
- **“Keep issues discussable”** – Enable all members to feel comfortable speaking about their individual ideas, concerns and needs.
- **“Manage the world around your group”** – Like radar, constantly scan the external environment for any potential obstacles that might knock the group off its course.
- **“Put the right team together”** – Great, diverse members make great, diverse groups.

## The Small Group: Your Trump Card for Effective Action and Positive Change

Small groups are humans' natural environment. When extraordinary small groups operate at maximum efficiency, people feel at home within them. Such feelings do not occur easily in large organizations. The bottom line: When small groups come together, magical transformation takes place...and all things become possible.

## About the Authors

**Geoffrey Bellman** wrote *The Consultant's Calling*. **Kathleen Ryan** is the co-author of *The Courageous Messenger* and *Driving Fear Out of the Workplace*.

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