



## Part One

# **OVERVIEW**

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# 1

## WHY SMALL GROUPS ARE IMPORTANT NOW

Do you spend lots of time working in groups?

Are you frequently frustrated that groups are not more alive, more fulfilling, more productive?

Have you found yourself thinking, What a waste of time! Or, nobody listens! We never talk about what's important! I had really hoped to learn something here! We are so out of touch with each other! It takes us forever to do anything!

Affirmative answers to these questions suggest this book is for you.

Most of us find ourselves in groups in all aspects of our lives: teams, committees, task forces, clusters, pods, clubs, networks, boards, or councils. Regardless of what they are called, many fall short of their full potential. Plans are implemented half-way, if at all. Group members' talents and knowledge are only partially tapped. The work of the group does little to expand members' learning or sense of possibility. Interaction among members shows only periodic flashes of energy, creativity, or authentic connection.

Occasionally, we are involved in a group that transforms us, is "inspiring," "exciting," "life-changing," or "amazing." When our next group experience falls short of fantastic, we ask ourselves: What was different about that amazing group? What allowed us to work together so beautifully, so productively? How could I replicate that experience?"

The two of us have been living, watching, advising, facilitating, and leading groups for a combined total of ninety years. Each of us has written and taught others about groups and how to work with them. And we share the experience of one extraordinary group: The Community Consulting Partnership (CCP)—the group to which we have dedicated this book. Fourteen years ago, a handful of us founded CCP, and it has turned out to be extraordinary. Nine volunteers run this little organization. CCP helps create more successful not-for-profit organizations in our community while building consulting skills in citizens. We have learned much watching CCP evolve in purpose and structure, relationship and performance. Because of our participation in this group, each of us has been changed for the better.

Like so many people, we have been both excited and mystified by a handful of our own group experiences—those that transcend the normal and stand out as amazing. Three years ago, our curiosity pushed us into conversations about three questions: Why do some groups describe themselves in such exceptional terms, while most do not? What do these great groups have in common that sorts them from the rest? What might be done to create their extraordinary results more often? That's when we decided to write this book.

### **Learning from the Experiences of Others**

We began by going to the field and learning from others. From the beginning, people readily shared their remarkable group experiences with us. We discovered that extraordinary group experiences are widely known, seldom studied, and people want more of them! We sought out people from sixty different groups, people of ages from seventeen to seventy who declared they had been a part of amazing groups. They

told of groups in major corporations or institutions where people came together to streamline processes, better serve customers, save money or increase profitability. Other stories came from community or volunteer efforts, involving projects such as helping high school students improve their job interviewing skills, cleaning up neighborhoods, or building a new library. Quite another set of groups were more personal in nature, such as a group of family and friends that supported a dying woman and her children, or a women's book club, or a couple who recommitted to their marriage. And several of these groups—in all categories—relied heavily on technology to communicate or accomplish their goals.

Throughout this field study, we focused on stories in which groups of two to twenty came together and fulfilled the following conditions:

- The experience and the results achieved or surpassed expectations
- Those involved described what happened with words such as “wow,” “a big win,” “huge,” “surprising,” “meaningful,” or “amazing”
- The setting was within the workplace, volunteer activities, family, or spiritual or personal growth communities
- The circumstances were face-to-face or virtual; if virtual, at least 75% of the group connection and interaction was accomplished through technology

In each conversation, we searched for what sits below the amazing experiences people talked with us about. As our ideas and model developed, we shared them in conferences and workshops. The perspectives of over 600 executives, managers, and consultants helped shape our point of view. Our conclusion: exceptional experiences can be thoughtfully

nurtured and intentionally encouraged. We came to understand the dynamics of these groups, their impact, and what to do to increase the likelihood that they will occur. We share all of this in the pages ahead.

## What Is an Extraordinary Group Experience?

When it comes to recognizing an extraordinary group, the old adage of “you’ll know it when you see it” comes to mind—except that in this situation, it may be more of a case of “you’ll know it when you *feel* it!” People instinctively sense when a group experience is something special, something different from the ordinary, something that surpasses their expectations in a positive, remarkable, and hard-to-describe way. Here are two examples of such groups. On the surface, they are quite different, yet they share critical elements of an extraordinary group experience. As each story unfolds, put yourself in the place of those we interviewed and imagine your way into an intuitive sense of each of these exceptional groups.

### Micro-Credit for Millions



In 1996 when she was newly graduated from college, Barb was one of twelve staff members hired to organize a global summit that engaged 3,000 participants from 137 countries. The purpose of this global conference in Washington, D.C. was to launch a coordinated campaign to reach 100 million of the world’s poorest families with access to credit for self-employment—and all this by the year 2005. Unlike other summits of the 1990s, this one was convened by civil society—not by governments or the United Nations. Two years prior to Barb’s involvement, this effort was brought to life by

grassroots citizen activists committed to ending poverty. We interviewed Barb, her co-worker Jacki, and Sam, their visionary executive director.

Starting in June, 1996, the goal for the conference staff was to organize and then orchestrate this complex, politically sensitive, international multiday event that would take place eight months later. As a small example of the challenge they took on together, Barb remembers “trying not to panic when I had the White House on one line, the First Lady of Angola on another, and the president of Peru trying to call in all at the same time. Where was Emily Post’s book of protocol and etiquette on pecking order when I needed it?!” Operating out of a very tight office space—actually an old converted apartment building—“people came from all over the country to be involved. We were very eclectic.” They brought different ethnic backgrounds, personalities, cultural perspectives, education, professional identities, language skills, and reasons for being involved.

At minimum pay, they often worked eighteen-hour days managing the details of everything: coordinating security for visiting heads of state, lining up conference speakers, and making sure that there were enough copies of the program when, three days before the conference, registrations jumped from 1,600 to 3,000. At all hours, staff members worked the phones in multiple languages to secure the participation of key leaders from around the globe and their personal commitments to take action once the conference was over. With solid funding, Jacki remembers that “our biggest problem was that no one had heard of micro-credit.” Once people understood what it was, “everyone thought what we were doing was terrific and pitched in to help.”

Conflicts occurred “when we were tired and hungry and had not gotten enough sleep.” With only two private offices,

staff members gathered in one to sort things out. As an organization, “it was not hugely hierarchical—people were expected to come forward. Everything seemed to get an airing.” With a just-do-it attitude and respect for one another, “we’d work really hard, vent when we needed to, and then go out for a dinner or a drink together.” Jacki told us that “it was war. Us against poverty—and we had each others’ backs.” When the conference closed as a huge success, many of the staff ended up at one person’s apartment. “We couldn’t leave each other for a couple of days. How could we possibly disband? We had bonded for life.”

The team that put on the Micro-Credit Summit produced results that are amazing and transforming on multiple levels. When they began, they had hoped for 600 participants and 3,000 came! And more important, all delegates had agreed to the conference’s goals and made commitments about micro-credit loans prior to arriving for the meeting. Careful tracking of the commitments to extending the micro-credit revealed that it took two years longer than originally targeted to achieve the conference’s goals. But when reached, what an achievement! “This is a tremendous achievement that many people thought was far too difficult to reach. What makes it even more remarkable is that loans to more than 100 million very poor families now touch the lives of more than half a billion family members around the world. That is half of the world’s poorest people.”<sup>1</sup>

In addition to this astonishing global accomplishment, Jacki and Barb were deeply affected personally as members of this group. For Jacki, this was “one of the most important moments of my life . . . I’m now fearless when it comes to asking anyone for anything.” Barb speaks poignantly of a transformational moment that took place at the very end of the conference. Back stage, looking out at the 3,000 people

in the auditorium, she saw that “In the front row with queens and first ladies and heads of state, one person stood, then two others stood, arm in arm, singing our closing song. Then I saw an ocean of people standing up, arm in arm, and singing. I realized that in this room alone, we had the resources that could make our vision happen. My heart was blown open with deep appreciation and hope and a sense that I could make a difference. We were a squad of twelve people! In a disheveled office. Our small voice engaged the world. I could never be the same again.” Hold this in mind as you read about Laura.

### **A Moving Experience**

Twenty years ago Laura worked in information technology at a large advertising agency in New York City. She recalls the moment she was told she would be working eight weekends in a row, “I was less than excited. I thought that this was going to be a miserable two months. I couldn’t have been more wrong . . . It was a very powerful experience. At the time, I didn’t see it as transformative, but now I do. I try to emulate what we did then. I use it as my model for beautiful planning and collaboration.”



Unlike the enormous scope of Barb’s group, Laura and her nine colleagues were tasked with a very immediate mission: disconnect then reinstall the electronic equipment of employees on sixteen floors, moving from an old building to a new one across town. Transfer two floors a week, beginning each Friday morning, completing by Sunday night. Do so with a level of accuracy that would allow employees to be at their work stations on Monday morning with all phones, computers, printers, copiers, and fax machines working. Without a hitch. And, in fact, that’s what happened.

Proudly, Laura recalls that “we had a 99+ percent success rate—fewer than 1 percent voiced complaints on Monday mornings.” Careful planning and organization, clear goals and roles allowed the moving team to excel both individually and collectively. “We each knew what we were supposed to do so we could go ahead and make our own decisions about how to get our work accomplished.” People would do their own jobs, then move on to help others in “true collaboration.” One night, the printers wouldn’t work consistently. The whole team pitched in and finally got them working perfectly. “We had this unspoken rule that if one of our subgroups was having a problem we all stayed to help. No one went home earlier than the others saying ‘my part is done.’”

Picture this high-performing group. Already putting in a full week’s work, they’d start on Friday mornings, work til 2 A.M. Saturday, then come back around 10 A.M. and work til after midnight. “We worked til 2 A.M. in order to have the rest of Sunday off,” Laura explained. For eight weeks. Imagine the office floors in the new building, filled with only empty work stations. Then the high-energy team arrives, focused individuals moving from task to task, helping others wherever needed. Learning each other’s favorite foods to order in. Playing baseball with broom sticks and paper wads in the middle of the night to let off steam. Then, in the early morning hours, waiting to make sure everyone was safely on their way home.

With each floor, there were different technical challenges. “For the first few weeks it was exciting. At weeks five and six, we still had the same level of commitment—and we were better at it!” A competent and caring leader helped make the project fun and gave people confidence. “We never had to deal with negative attitude—even though there were plenty of frustrations that people faced individually.” Looking back on

the repetitive installations, the long and late hours, and the spurts of intensely focused problem solving, Laura sees that “there was pure joy in doing something hard—together. The magic was in the group. This was a happy surprise—that it went so smoothly and was really fun!”

### **Defining Extraordinary Groups**

Barb’s and Laura’s experiences are quite different in terms of the scope of their groups’ goals and achievements. Yet they have several elements in common that mark them as members of two extraordinary groups. Consider their experiences as you read these definitions:

- A *group* is a collection of individuals, typically of two to about twenty, who come together around a common purpose.
- *Extraordinary groups* achieve outstanding results, and members—individually or collectively—experience a profound shift in how they see their world; they are transformed.
- *Transformation* is a fundamental shift in individual perceptions that accelerate behavior change and personal vitality.

When there is a shift in perception, things are never quite the same again. Barb and Laura each worked with about a dozen people in a very concentrated, intense, and time-driven way. For Barb, the transformative shift had to do with seeing herself as capable of making a difference in the world. Laura gained a model for joy-filled planning and collaboration.

However large or small, visible or intangible, such transformative shifts happen because the group experience satisfies core needs that members intuitively bring to any group they join. Each of us brings these same needs to every

group situation; we seek opportunities to meet those needs. Our work and our field study suggest there are six needs, forming three pairs related to one's self, the group, and the world in which the group exists. These six elements combine in a model we call the Group Needs model:

*Acceptance* of self while moving toward one's *Potential*

A *Bond* with others that grows while pursuing a common *Purpose*

Understanding the *Reality* of the world while collectively making an *Impact*

Whether at work, at home, or in the community, when your group experience meets two or more of these needs, it will stand out for you. You are more likely to exclaim about it, to see it as memorable, and you will also find it hard to describe. You will probably be uncertain about how it came about, perhaps see it as “chance,” and assume that this unusual occurrence cannot be intentionally created. Our experience suggests otherwise.

### **What to Expect from *Extraordinary Groups***

In the following chapters, we explain our Group Needs model in detail, share stories of extraordinary groups in action, and offer guidance to help you encourage extraordinary experiences in your groups. This book comes in three parts.

Part One: We present an overview of the key elements of our model, including the defining indicators of an extraordinary group and the connection between the Group Needs model and transformation.

Part Two: Each pair of the Group Needs model is described in its own chapter along with reflective exercises and suggestions

for actions you can take in your groups to increase the chances of the six Group Needs being met. Chapter Seven illustrates transformative shifts that occur when multiple needs are met at once.

Part Three: In this section, we offer specific content on how to embrace differences within a group so that they become an asset rather than a barrier to success. We provide special guidance to group leaders, then bring the book to a close with a final chapter.

Appendices: Here you will find content that will help you apply all that we propose in the main part of the book: exercises to practice what you learn in Chapters Four, Five, and Six; a summary of the key content points; a list that describes how we intentionally behaved toward one another during our collaboration to ensure an extraordinary experience; and intriguing references about related topics.

We have written *Extraordinary Groups* to help you see your groups differently. So that you can consciously behave in ways that will encourage your groups to be extraordinary. This is possible regardless of your role: member, designated leader, or facilitator of a group. From our interviews, we'll provide twenty inspiring examples from amazing groups, groups that have much in common. Some of the stories will reflect the experiences of ongoing groups; others describe one-time events or projects. You'll find a small version of our Group Needs model in the margin next to each story we share. We also talk to you directly, asking you to do your own thinking about what we present. Please engage with us by practicing what you read. Keep track of your learning in a journal or notebook. If you do, reading *Extraordinary Groups* could become a powerful—even transformative—experience for you.



## Why Are Small Groups So Important Now?

Margaret Mead's famous exhortation speaks to us: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." "A small group"—say two to twenty. "Committed"—to a common purpose. To "change the world"—their world. Perhaps your group and your world. But why small groups now?

Individuals regularly feel the constraints of being in organizations; organizations are regularly frustrated in dealing with individuals. The small group is the most constructive place for individuals and an organization to achieve mutual satisfaction and accomplishment. The group is the best place to resolve issues for both. The group is the meeting ground where most work gets done—at work and in our communities.

Our attraction to groups is instinctual; two hundred thousand years of human history have formed us into the group creatures that we are. We are genetically informed to look to groups to meet many of our needs; we are not informed to look at organizations in that way. The deeper motivations for why we join with others are hardly touched upon in popular leadership and team literature. As a result, the tools and techniques they employ often miss and cannot touch these underlying drives.

Readers do not need yet another book about improving groups through team building, leadership training, or meeting management. As helpful as all those books have been, they bring us tools that only scratch the surface of the world we live in. We need to dig deeper, into the wants, needs, and motives that cause people to work together. How do we capture the energy flowing from people trying to meet their needs, rather than shut it off? How might we direct all that

power? What work, paid or volunteer, lends itself to capturing that energy for the benefit of all? We think small groups are a logical place to demonstrate the answers to these questions. Currently, they are underappreciated, underutilized—and essential to work and play, family and community life.

The world currently reels with the weight of enormous challenges: wars, financial crisis, collapsing institutions, record unemployment, and climate change. All big, all global, all systemic. All requiring many perspectives, collaborative effort, and shared commitment from the global to the local level. When it comes to making progress on such issues, large organizations have regularly been found lacking; we are still learning better ways of bringing people together than by working within hierarchy and silos. In this book, we propose that human beings function better on a scale they can understand and influence—small groups that bring the right people together in the right ways can meet the challenges before us.

For organizations and individuals, we see many benefits to paying attention to creating exceptional group experiences—and then taking action to make more groups come alive like Laura's and Barb's. Organizations benefit from intentional development of peak group experiences because

- Goals set for groups are achieved and frequently surpassed
- Group performance releases talent and energy not usually available to the organization
- People develop superior skills, knowledge, and insight together, thereby increasing the capacity of the organization
- Enduring relationships and networks grow and set the stage for future collaborations

- Loyalty to the organization increases along with the sense that “this is a great place to work”

For individuals, the benefits are powerful and personal. Through extraordinary experiences with others, individuals find

- Increased confidence in their abilities and performance
- Higher motivation and morale
- Restored faith in and increased appreciation for organizations
- New and deeper connections with others
- New skills and knowledge that lead to a larger sense of personal empowerment
- Individual effort that is both rewarded and multiplied by working in groups

All of this leads the two of us to a clear point of view: Life is too short to spend time in groups that do not fulfill their promise. Our own personal lives and years of consulting have shown us that everyone benefits when people experience the pride, energy, and fulfillment that come from being part of an extraordinary group. Anyone in a group, regardless of role, can help move that group toward a transformative, never-to-be-forgotten experience. Extraordinary groups may be the exception, but they are widely experienced and largely unexamined. The two of us want to change that and we invite you to join us in this effort.

## Notes

1. Mohammad Yunus. *MicroCredit Summit Newsletter*, January, 2009. Vol. 7, Issue 1.