

BUILDING EXTRAORDINARY E-GROUPS

By Kathleen Ryan

More and more of us are gathering virtually to get things done. Virtual teams are those who communicate with each other via technology at least 75% of the time. Members of these groups are in different locations that can cross regions, time zones, countries or continents. Given the challenges that we humans have in collaborating with one another when we are face-to-face, it makes sense to wonder, "*Is it possible for an e-group to be extraordinary?*"

The answer is a resounding *Yes!*

When Geoff Bellman and I conducted our field study that led to *Extraordinary Groups*, 17% of our collected stories were about virtual groups. After examining the patterns in our interview data, we found no discernible differences between virtual and face-to-face groups in the larger patterns that we discovered. Consider Natanya's story.

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. When Natanya, our interviewee, joined the program, it was facing the "imminent doom" of a grant running out. Thanks to the effort of her team of colleagues, "We have been completely self-funded since 2001." Even while sitting within a bureaucratic university, "We had to be very entrepreneurial—being virtual is a part of this." Now thriving, she reports that the program doubled in size in the last four years prior to our interview. Student numbers are growing such that "we are putting money into a reserve and we have a vibrant, dynamic team." A self-organizing group with no designated leader, seven members live in six different states. Members rely primarily on email streams, Go To Meeting, Skype, and screen sharing technology to do its work. The group has weekly phone meetings and meets, in person, for only 8 days per year.

Listen to how Natanya's words fit with our Group Needs Model. (If you're not familiar with our model, see the visual image on the Home page. In *Extraordinary Groups*, you'll find an overview in Chapter Three.)

**Based on Bellman & Ryan's *Extraordinary Groups: How Ordinary Teams Achieve Amazing Results* (Jossey-Bass, 2009)
For more information, go to www.extraordinarygroups.com**

1. *Group Purpose and Bond*: "I enjoy my team so much and am inspired by the student's experiences. The team and the mission have kept me here much longer than what I ever would have imagined."
2. *Self Acceptance and Potential*: This experience "has made me more cognizant of where and how I need to work on personal relationships and nuances. I'm trying to overcome my own culture training of being task-oriented and to understand that just because something is okay with me doesn't mean it will be okay with others. I want to understand how to work better with others and get them on board."
3. *World Reality and Impact*: "Each of us on the team has a slightly different understanding of reality. We all understand different pieces of it. This gives us the ability to stay balanced, remain focused, and choose an effective strategy that works!"

Of the eight indicators of an extraordinary group, five stand out in Natanya's experience:

- *Compelling Purpose*: Building cultural competence among graduates that "puts everything into a global perspective. This is so critical to the future of our country. Knowing that everyone cares so much about the program enables us to grapple with our differences. It's what keeps us going."
- *Embracing Differences*: "We want to avoid group-think and so we hire people who are different. This difference pushes us in new directions."
- *Shared Leadership*: Group members work as colleagues, each directing one portion of the program's placements; decisions are made by consensus.
- *Full Engagement*: "We know we will have to revisit decisions later if we don't hear why people are hesitating. This is one of our ground rules—to get things out in the open early on without worrying that people might be against your position."
- *Great Results*: The obvious and tangible growth of the program, including contributing to the increasing acceptance of project based learning as worthy of earning academic credits. Natanya is also aware of a huge intangible result of being on this team--her ability to be a more self-aware and effective member of a team. Collaboration is "more than cut-to-the-chase. Nothing can replace the phone call, the personal touch. We all want to be heard and to know that the

other person is actually listening and responding to what we say. This goes well beyond the office—to my friendships and to how I am raising my daughter.”

As she reflected on the elements that have enabled this group to be such a peak experience, she identifies four factors.

1. Bring in people with different personalities and backgrounds to expand the diversity and capability of the group.
2. Establish a culture of respecting differences, so that the group’s diversity can translate into breakthrough thinking and innovation.
3. Pay attention to people and who they are in the whole of their lives.
4. Maintain your sense of humor as a way of taking the edge off conflicts and being adaptable to what individuals need.

If you lead or are a member of an e-team, Natanya’s suggestions are well worth consideration. There’s an interesting connection between them. Let’s dive into them a bit more deeply.

To benefit from the diversity brought to a group, members must appreciate and respect those differences. One way to do that is by paying attention to group members as people—not just as co-workers. When group members learn more about each other as whole people, they begin to understand and respect each other’s values, backgrounds, interests, and life circumstances. This understanding creates the context for seeing someone’s passionately expressed perspective or opinion. Opinions that in other situations might sound confrontational are heard as a differing point of view worth exploring. Because the person offering that perspective is understood and appreciated. Openness to new ideas encourages good humor and a lightness of spirit that enable a group laugh together and not take themselves or their dynamics too seriously.

Question: What’s one simple way that a virtual group begin to build what Natanya calls “a culture of respecting differences?”

Answer: A personal check-in at the beginning of most, if not every, meeting.

Natanya told us that her group realized that their weekly phone meetings were too “tasky,” that there was no time for connecting as people. Since they were seldom in the same physical location, they missed the easy opportunities for finding out about each other and each other’s’ lives. So, they instituted a quick verbal check-in at the beginning of each meeting. Members would offer a brief statement about how they were doing on that day or what was going on in the rest of their lives. They found that this ten-minute start enabled them to learn more about each other and gain a sense of the factors that might influence how any member participated in the call. Overtime, through this simple and short method of starting a meeting, members gained an increased sense of one another and came to appreciate and respect each other in new ways.