

THOUGHTS ON COMPELLING PURPOSE

By Kathleen Ryan

In *Extraordinary Groups*, Geoff Bellman and I offer a set of core concepts as a lens, through which you can **see** and **be** in groups differently, allowing you to consciously act to support your group in becoming high performing. This article engages you in thinking more deeply about *Compelling Purpose: an inspiring and shared understanding of why group members come together*. In an extraordinary group, you'll know that the group's Compelling Purpose is alive and well when members frequently...

- Talk about the importance of their common purpose and why it is personally meaningful
- Regularly remind themselves of their purpose when making decisions, focusing agendas, or developing plans
- Set aside personal preferences in order help the group move ahead with its work
- Do what's necessary to help the group be successful, even when that is outside a person's normal role
- Come to meetings prepared, on time, and stay til the end
- Do what they say they will do because they are inspired by the group's purpose
- Let each other know when they cannot meet deadlines for commitments
- Take action that supports the work of others in the group when they need help
- Change their opinions because of something said by another member
- Express appreciation for what the group is accomplishing

Before reading on, consider:

- What themes do you see in this list?
- What behaviors could you add to this list that would be signs that one of your groups was truly outstanding?
- What could you do or say within your team to encourage any of these behaviors?

One of the strongest messages that came from our *Extraordinary Groups* field study was the importance of a Compelling Purpose. We humans NEED to join with others in a shared Purpose, to unite our energies to accomplish something important, something that we cannot achieve alone.

When that Purpose excites and inspires us, we are much more inclined to be fully engaged and to do two specific things:

- Make the work of that group a high priority within our busy lives
- Enthusiastically bring our full and best selves to the group—meaning our energy, talent, experience, skills, and knowledge along with our care for and respect of other group members

We do these two things because the group's Purpose is compelling in a personal way. It touches our values and brings forth passionate commitment because we see greater meaning in our individual and collective effort. In this way, a Compelling Purpose is a hugely important contributor that helps any group to become extraordinary.

Understandably, such an inspiring Purpose is much easier to find in circumstances where there is an urgent and obvious need or an important challenge with a clear and short-term deadline. But what about creating a compelling Purpose in a group that meets regularly, a group that comes together for more routine reasons? For example a standing committee, a weekly staff meeting, or a cross-functional team that works steadily toward a goal that seems attainable only at a hard-to-define future date. I'm guessing that these more every-day, less glamorous groups are far more numerous than those that are especially created.

For such a group, where the Purpose can seem as mundane as the work, here's an idea often helpful when the energy in a group is flagging or attendance is falling off. It's a group action you can initiate from any position: group member, leader, or facilitator. For this discussion, you will probably want to set aside one to two hours—or up to a full day, depending on the degree of alignment within the group. The goal of this exercise to revitalize the group by affirming commitment to the group's important Purpose. As such, it's a simple and very effective team building activity. Here are the steps to follow.

1. Explain the goal of the exercise.
2. Ask each person to write down his or her view of the group's Purpose. Then, moving from one person to the next, ask each to read his or her statement. Discourage any discussion until all have spoken.
3. Encourage group discussion by asking such questions as: *What observations or reactions do you have about our different versions of our group's Purpose? What was similar? What was different? Regardless of how the Purpose statements were expressed, are they in alignment with each other? If not, what questions do we need to talk about, so that we can be in alignment?* If there is a high degree of alignment, go on to step #5.
4. Once the alignment questions have been explored and addressed, ask: *How would we now state our Purpose?* Using a flip chart or white board, capture language that effectively states the consensus view of group members and the designated leader (if there is one).
5. Then, draw a 5-point continuum, along with this question: *On a scale of 1-5 (with 5 being high), how compelling is this Purpose statement to you? To what degree does it inspire you?* Then ask each person to mark the continuum, indicating his or her answer. Once this is done, ask group members to tell why they placed their marks where they did. Make sure you hear from everyone. Follow up questions can be similar to those suggested in step #3.
6. If the continuum indicates that the Purpose needs to be more compelling, shift the subject to the group's Impact by asking questions such as: *What difference do we want to make in the world? Two years from now, what will we be proud to hear others say about our work? What is the larger meaning of what we are really doing here together?*
7. When this discussion is complete, ask: *In light of this discussion, how do we want to reframe our Purpose statement?* Make changes as appropriate.
8. And finally, *given how we have reframed (or affirmed) our Purpose, what implications are there for how we go about doing our work? When we meet? Outside of our meetings? What changes should we make so that our experience working together matches the importance of what we are here to do?*
9. Reach agreement about those changes and follow through as planned.