

## THOUGHTS ON EMBRACING DIFFERENCES

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. This new view will enable you to take action to support your group's ability to be high performing in all ways—in achieving results and in the experience of working together. This article engages you in thinking more deeply about Embracing Difference, one of eight performance indicators of extraordinary teams. This profile served as the basis for the development of the *Extraordinary Teams Inventory*, to be published by HRDQ Press in 2014.

*Embracing Difference is when members see, value, and use their diversity as a strength.* In an extraordinary group you'll know that Embracing Difference is alive and well when members frequently...

- Offer different points of view
- Ask questions to better understand ideas or possible solutions
- Build off of each other's ideas
- Acknowledge how a team member's perspective has caused a change of mind
- Debate, argue over, and then reach a point of common agreement
- Call on each other's different backgrounds, education, or skill sets might inform a discussion or influence a decision
- Intentionally seek out a quiet person's point of view, to see if all perspectives have been heard
- Experience a moment of breakthrough—where because of an animated discussion, a totally new position is reached about how to move ahead

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 when it comes to Embracing Difference?

- What could you do or say within your team to encourage any of these behaviors?

Without the ability to Embrace Differences, groups cannot attain the breakthrough thinking that is so critical for innovation. Instead, those members with particular points of view will dominate the discussion, argue about who's-right until someone finally wears down, while other members check-out of the discussion. With most members bored or fatigued, the group will finally reach a point of perceived consensus that is a reinforcement of old thinking. Those left out of the discussion or those whose ideas are attacked or dismissed will feel disrespected and unmotivated to contribute in the future. Trust diminishes and differences are seen as a source of dysfunctional conflict as opposed to an asset that can open up possibility.

When differences are embraced, the knowledge, skills, and perspectives of each team member are available as resources for the team's strategizing and decision making. The discomfort of argument or passionate debate may still be present. But those most engaged bring a spirit of contribution and curiosity to their comments—not judgment or a desire to win-the-debate. People feel respected for their views because others consider them seriously. Members gain respect for one another's unique capabilities or backgrounds and employ each other's expertise. They learn from each other. When decisions are made, people feel confident that they've done their best at exploring all options. These are the dynamics that lead to breakthrough, that transformative shift that happens when one person says something that unlocks the mystery the team has been trying to solve.

For further thought:

- How easy or hard is it for you to embrace opinions or positions different from your own?
- When have you changed your mind because of something someone else has said? As you recall these moments, why did you shift? Is there any particular pattern you can see in what has motivated you to be open to competing points of view?
- What unique talent or perspective do you bring to any of the groups or teams in your life? How openly do you share these assets in your groups or teams?