

## THOUGHTS ON JUST-ENOUGH STRUCTURE

By Kathleen Ryan

Less is definitely more when it comes to structuring groups--especially if they want to be extraordinary. Thanks to the field study that shaped *Extraordinary Groups*, I now know that groups need Just-Enough Structure—and that this quality varies depending on group purpose and members.

Just-Enough Structure is one of the eight indicators of extraordinary groups. It is the just-right balance between boundaries and freedom. Enough structure to define the territory, to focus members, and to help them feel grounded in their participation. And then lots of room for creativity, breakthrough thinking, spontaneity, and passionate expression. In essence, *members develop only the plans, systems, roles and agreements necessary to help them move forward—but not so much as to become bureaucratic or burdensome*. Specifically, these elements of structure ...

- Support the achievement of the group's purpose, outcomes, and any larger organizational expectations
- Enhance the ability of members to be collaborative, flexible, creative, and adaptive
- Create an environment that is both respectful and tolerant of a wide range of strongly-felt opinions and positions

To help you recognize Just-Enough Structure when you see it, here are some questions that can guide your group observations.

To what degree do group structures (plans, systems, roles, and agreements)...

- Create a clear focus so that group members understand the work of the group and their basic responsibilities as a group member?
- Encourage collaboration and creative thinking?
- Help members be adaptive to changes in their environment?

- Fit with both the group's purpose but also the values and style of group members?
- Encourage passionate expression, spontaneity, and good humor?

How frequently do group members...

- Use unique interests and potential of members as a way to determine how their work will be organized?
- Shift roles as necessary to move the work forward?
- Change plans or strategies to best serve their purpose?
- Say things such as "I love the way we work together" or "These meetings are great—I've never gotten so much done and laughed so much before!"

One of the particular challenges of Just-Enough Structure for any group leader or facilitator is the need to lighten up on issues of control. For what it's worth, here are some shifts I've made in order to encourage Just-Enough Structure. When I'm facilitating or leading a group, I...

- Focus on outcomes and pay less attention to the timing or sequence of my agenda.
- Have fewer items on any agenda to make sure there is enough time for in-depth discussion and the wandering-around conversations that are so important for creative thinking.
- Am much more tolerant than I used to be of behavior and expressions that are spontaneous, appear to be off-point, or seem insensitive to me—as long as the group members stay attentive and engaged and are headed toward our agreed upon outcomes. I constantly monitor my own judgmental streak around political correctness.

**For further thought...**

- What might you do as a group leader or facilitator to open up more space in your meetings for spontaneity and passionate expression?
- Of all the elements of structure, which are the vital-few elements that must be present for a focused and respectful group environment?

- How do you behave in a group you lead when it feels “like things are getting out of control?”
- Are there other strategies you could employ that would raise the issue of focus and member respect without sacrificing the room for creativity and true collaboration?