

THOUGHTS ON TRANSFORMATION

by Geoff Bellman and Kathleen Ryan

The most basic shift in extraordinary groups is made possible by moving from a more predictable, ordinary view of the group and its work to a “fantastic” view, a “wow” view, a “life-changing” view brimming with excitement and possibility. At least that’s what we heard in talking with people from sixty self-declared extraordinary groups. But what is that all about? Their comments attracted us, but don’t tell us what to do. We believed we could do better than collecting initial interview comments filled with words like “wonderful!...amazing!...the earth moved!...fantastic!...life-changing...and wow!” We wanted to do more than tell readers to create situations in which your group members say those words. So our interviews reached deeper, seeking more words and the words behind those words, all with the intent of moving closer to the heart of the extraordinary group experience. We collected hundreds of words and phrases, stirred them together, then sorted them again and again.

What is transformation?

Transformation is a fundamental shift in individual perception that accelerates behavior change and personal vitality. It’s an internal shift in how you see the world that results in you behaving differently and feeling more engaged. A small example: When someone begins to understand that showing up for work on time is not enough, that she wants to help her team get results. Another example: When a group leader sees he does not have to be central to every decision

and instead sees to it that necessary decisions are made. These shifts in perception affect everything to come. No new skills, but a new way of seeing that profoundly impacts action and motivation. That's transformation.

And, it happens one person at a time. Occasionally it happens simultaneously across an entire group, but it is still an individual experience. You can be transformed in this moment while a teammate continues oblivious. Because transformation is internal to each of us, we cannot see it; we can only see its effects. Others can see when you behave differently. They cannot see what motivated that change in you. We propose that you were transformed as some of your core needs were met.

What are core group needs?

We believe each of us comes to groups carrying a set of unexpressed and in some cases unknown needs that we hope to meet working with the group. This is true whether we are part of a recreation league sports team, a problem solving group at work, a non-profit board of directors, or a family gathered around the kitchen table. These core needs, these longings, are central to who we are as human beings and profoundly affect what we do. There are three pairs of needs:

- *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 making an *Impact*

In other words, in an ideal group, you would readily show your full self—both who you are and who you might become. You would be attracted to the group’s reason for being and feel yourself an integral part of the group. And, you would understand and accept the world in which your group operates, and what the group will do to change that world. These are not passive needs; they are at work in each of us; they affect what we do moment to moment and are rooted in the long, successful struggle for survival of the human species. We humans know that we got this far together, not alone. We know this in our genes—that’s how deep these core group needs go.

When is transformation most likely to happen?

If you want to be transformed, meet more of your six core needs. Though you cannot guarantee your transformation, you can encourage it. The experience of having your needs met allows you to give fuller expression to who you are, to bring more to your group, and through it to make a greater difference in the world. You will flourish, you will contribute, you will see your world differently. And all of that is at least fulfilling and at most transformative.

How do you know transformation has happened?

During our field study, we asked interviewees how they felt as a result of their great group experience. We began this article with a few (“amazing, fantastic, etc.) of the hundreds of exclamations we collected. We sifted through all those words and experiences and recognized the most people experienced four feelings. These four feelings fit with individual and group transformative experiences, with corporate planners, canoe trippers, ball players, software

engineers, soldiers, college professors, or motorcyclists. As varied as their purposes and uniforms, tools and context might be, this diverse array of people shared the same satisfactions. These feelings resulted from having their needs met, and would show in affirmative responses to these four questions:

- Did this experience *energize* you? Yes!
- Did you feel more deeply *connected* to your group or the world around you? Yes!
- Did you feel more *hopeful* about yourself, your group, or the world around you? Yes!
- Did you feel *changed* by this experience? Yes!

Four yeses point toward a transforming individual experience. And when those affirmative answers are widely and enthusiastically expressed across a group, a transformative experience has likely occurred for many. Look for comments like, “What an exciting group!...I love our meetings!...You guys are great!...Look at what we’ve been able to accomplish!” If the four questions seem far removed from what your group might currently affirm, that may indicate your distance from a transformation. Let’s consider each of these four key feelings drawing on our field study for support.

Energized! A sense of vitality increases as members engage with the group and the world. The sixty people we interviewed were all energized by recalling their experiences—even the one who didn’t think he had been changed by the experience, or the four whose groups fell short of their desired impact. These people became animated as they told their stories; they loved recreating the experience for us and for themselves. Just listening to them mirrored the high engagement and total investment that they experienced at the time. As you watch your

groups, this energy will show as the group interacts; you will notice how alive the group is from one moment to the next; members will notice their vitality as it is sparked or dampened in group exchange. Vitality becomes a common, quick measure of what is happening, as in, “Does this have life for us?” Or, “What about this project brings energy to you?”

Connected! People are often surprised at how connected they feel with their group. They were typically astounded by their feelings of being tightly bonded with other group members who at the beginning seemed so different from themselves. For some, it was the most accepting group they had ever been part of. They were uniquely, even permanently joined. It was not uncommon that people who told us about twenty-year-old experiences could put us immediately in touch with others who had been in the group. We heard these comments about the connections people felt with one another. “We bonded for life” ... “There was an informal heart-and-soul group made up of those who were willing to do whatever was necessary” ... “When I took this job, I thought I’d only be here for two years. The team and mission have kept me here for seven.” Members personally connect to each other, to the group itself, to its purpose, and to the difference they make together.

Hopeful! As people told their stories, we could hear the hope implied in all the group did as it moved toward creating a better product, place, or world. Because of what their groups did and because they were part of it, people leaned toward the future with a more optimistic outlook. They held the sense that they were making a difference on something important. Hopefulness is further fed by the fact a uniquely capable group is doing this together. If there were more

groups like this in the world, there would be less to worry about! Some examples of what we heard: “Each of us represented different nationalities. Somehow we met in the universe with different values and we discovered that we speak the same language and have so much in common!”... “There are no boundaries for what we can do. We can be in a completely free creation mode.”... “I have experienced the power of our ability to positively influence kids who could go either way. They are ready and willing when we give them the skills. We see it in front of our eyes. It’s quite incredible!”... “I can help others by helping myself and utilizing all of my skills. This has made me feel relevant and useful. Together we have a sense of how it can be different.” And the hope they have created here is contagious. It tells them what just might be possible in other realms of their lives.

Changed! All but one person we interviewed affirmed that they saw positive changes in themselves that could be tied directly to the group they told us about. For some, the change was dramatic and noticeable. For example: “It’s made my life livable.” For others, the change was more subtle: “It confirmed what I have believed for some time.” Some saw immediate impact: “I immediately knew that I was not alone. I had a global network of people I could call at any time—no matter what.” Others sensed the power of the experience over time: “The work didn’t seem like work anymore. My whole way of thinking about my work changed. I wanted to be the Charlie Parker of computer skills training. I wanted it to be like jazz—a bunch of really talented people working in chaos to make something beautiful.” Each quote is testimony to how things will never be quite the same again.

To summarize, when you feel energized, connected, hopeful, and changed, you've likely had a transformative experience. When you ask others in your group about how they feel, and their responses fit with these four feelings, your group has likely been through something transformatively terrific together!

How do needs, transformation, and feelings come together?

People respond positively when the circumstances surrounding them meet their underlying needs. You can be part of those circumstances. Meet others' needs for Self Acceptance and Potential, Group Bond and Purpose, World Reality and Impact. You and your teammates will behave differently than when these needs are not met. As their situation is more supportive of meeting their needs, they are likely to see their world as positively different, allowing them change faster. And as a result, they will more likely feel energized, connected, hopeful, and changed.