

The Secrets of Great Groups

by Warren Bennis

Personal leadership is one of the most studied topics in American life. Indeed, I have devoted a big chunk of my professional life to better understanding its workings. Far less studied -- and perhaps more important -- is group leadership. The disparity of interest in those two realms of leadership is logical, given the strong individualist bent of American culture. But the more I look at the history of business, government, the arts, and the sciences, the clearer it is that few great accomplishments are ever the work of a single individual.

Our mythology refuses to catch up with our reality. And so we cling to the myth of the Lone Ranger, the romantic idea that great things are usually accomplished by a larger-than-life individual working alone. Despite the evidence to the contrary -- including the fact that Michelangelo worked with a group of 16 to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel -- we still tend to think of achievement in terms of the Great Man or the Great Woman, instead of the Great Group.

As they say, "None of us is as smart as all of us." That's good, because the problems we face are too complex to be solved by any one person or any one discipline. Our only chance is to bring people together from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines who can refract a problem through the prism of complementary minds allied in common purpose. I call such collections of talent *Great Groups*. The genius of Great Groups is that they get remarkable people -- strong individual achievers -- to work together to get results. But these groups serve a second and equally important function: they provide psychic support and personal fellowship. They help generate courage. Without a sounding board for outrageous ideas, without personal encouragement and perspective when we hit a roadblock, we'd all lose our way.

The Myths of Leadership

Great Groups teach us something about effective leadership, meaningful missions, and inspired recruiting. They challenge not only the myth of the Great Man, but also the 1950s myth of the Organization Man -- the sallow figure in the gray flannel suit, giving his life to the job and conforming to its mindless dictates.

Neither myth is a productive model for behavior, and neither holds up to current reality. In fact, I believe, behind every Great Man is a Great Group, an effective partnership. And making up every Great Group is a unique construct of strong, often eccentric individuals. So the question for organizations is, How do you get talented, self-absorbed, often arrogant, incredibly bright people to work together?

The impetus for my current work in groups was a meeting more than 40 years ago with anthropologist Margaret Mead. I had heard her speak at Harvard, and afterward I asked her whether anyone had ever studied groups whose ideas were powerful enough to change the world. She looked at me and said, "Young man, you should write a book on that topic and call it *Sapiential Circles*." I gasped, and she went on to explain that *sapiential circles* meant knowledge-generating groups. Like a lot of good ideas, it took a while to gestate, but over the

years the power of groups became a recurrent theme for me. Recently, work by leading thinkers like Michael Shrage in the nature of technology and collaboration, Hal Leavitt and Jean Lipman-Blumen in *Hot Groups*, and Richard Hackman in the remarkable Orpheus Chamber Orchestra highlights the significance of this inquiry.

To see what makes Great Groups tick, I studied some of the most noteworthy of our time, including the Manhattan Project, the paradigmatic Great Group that invented the atomic bomb; the computer revolutionaries at Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center (PARC) and at Apple Computer, whose work led to the Macintosh and other technical breakthroughs; the Lockheed Skunk Works, which pioneered the fast, efficient development of top-secret aircraft; and the Walt Disney Studio animators. Every Great Group is extraordinary in its own way, but my study suggests 10 principles common to all -- and that apply as well to their larger organizations.

- *At the heart of every Great Group is a shared dream.* All Great Groups believe that they are on a mission from God, that they could change the world, make a dent in the universe. They are obsessed with their work. It becomes not a job but a fervent quest. That belief is what brings the necessary cohesion and energy to their work.
- *They manage conflict by abandoning individual egos to the pursuit of the dream.* At a critical point in the Manhattan Project, George Kistiakowsky, a great chemist who later served as Dwight Eisenhower's chief scientific advisor, threatened to quit because he couldn't get along with a colleague. Project leader Robert Oppenheimer simply said, "George, how can you leave this project? The free world hangs in the balance." So conflict, even with these diverse people, is resolved by reminding people of the mission.
- *They are protected from the "suits."* All Great Groups seem to have disdain for their corporate overseers and all are protected from them by a leader -- not necessarily the leader who defines the dream. In the Manhattan Project, for instance, General Leslie Grove kept the Pentagon brass happy and away, while Oppenheimer kept the group focused on its mission. At Xerox PARC, Bob Taylor kept the honchos in Connecticut (referred to by the group as "toner heads") at bay and kept the group focused. Kelly Johnson got himself appointed to the board of Lockheed to help protect his Skunk Works. In all cases, physical distance from headquarters helped.
- *They have a real or invented enemy.* Even the most noble mission can be helped by an onerous opponent. That was literally true with the Manhattan Project, which had real enemies -- the Japanese and the Nazis. Yet most organizations have an implicit mission to destroy an adversary, and that is often more motivating than their explicit mission. During their greatest years, for instance, Apple Computer's implicit mission was, Bury IBM. (The famous 1984 Macintosh TV commercial included the line, "Don't buy a computer you can't lift.") The decline of Apple follows the subsequent softening of their mission.
- *They view themselves as winning underdogs.* World-changing groups are usually populated by mavericks, people at the periphery of their disciplines. These groups do not regard the mainstream as the sacred Ganges. The sense of operating on the fringes gives them a don't-count-me-out scrappiness that feeds their obsession.
- *Members pay a personal price.* Membership in a Great Group isn't a day job; it is a night and day job. Divorces, affairs, and other severe emotional fallout are typical, especially when a project ends. At the Skunk Works, for example, people couldn't even tell their families what they were working on. They were located in a cheerless, rundown building in Burbank, of all places, far from Lockheed's corporate

headquarters and main plants. So groups strike a Faustian bargain for the intensity and energy that they generate.

- *Great Groups make strong leaders.* On one hand, they're all nonhierarchical, open, and very egalitarian. Yet they all have strong leaders. That's the paradox of group leadership. You cannot have a great leader without a Great Group -- and vice versa. In an important way, these groups made the leaders great. The leaders I studied were seldom the brightest or best in the group, but neither were they passive players. They were connoisseurs of talent, more like curators than creators.
- *Great Groups are the product of meticulous recruiting.* It took Oppenheimer to get a Kistiakowsky and a Niels Bohr to come to his godforsaken outpost in the desert. Cherry-picking the right talent for a group means knowing what you need and being able to spot it in others. It also means understanding the chemistry of a group. Candidates are often grilled, almost hazed, by other members of the group and its leader. You see the same thing in great coaches. They can place the right people in the right role. And get the right constellations and configurations within the group.
- *Great Groups are usually young.* The average age of the physicists at Los Alamos was about 25. Oppenheimer -- "the old man" -- was in his 30s. Youth provides the physical stamina demanded by these groups. But Great Groups are also young in their spirit, ethos, and culture. Most important, because they're young and naive, group members don't know what's supposed to be impossible, which gives them the ability to do the impossible. As Berlioz said about Saint-Saens, "He knows everything; all he lacks is inexperience." Great Groups don't lack the experience of possibilities.
- *Real artists ship.* Steve Jobs constantly reminded his band of Apple renegades that their work meant nothing unless they brought a great product to market. In the end, Great Groups have to produce a tangible outcome external to themselves. Most dissolve after the product is delivered; but without something to show for their efforts, the most talented assemblage becomes little more than a social club or a therapy group.

New Rules for Leaders

These principles not only define the nature of Great Groups, they also redefine the roles and responsibilities of leaders. Group leaders vary widely in style and personality. Some are facilitators, some doers, some contrarians. However, leadership is inevitably dispersed, sometimes in formal rotation, more often with people playing ad hoc leadership roles at different points.

Furthermore, the formal leaders, even when delegating authority, are catalytic *completers*; they take on roles that nobody else plays -- cajoler, taskmaster, protector, or doer -- and that are needed for the group to achieve its goal. They intuitively understand the chemistry of the group and the dynamics of the work process. They encourage dissent and diversity in the pursuit of a shared vision and understand the difference between healthy, creative dissent and self-serving obstructionism. They are able to discern what different people need at different times.

In short, despite their differences in style, the leaders of Great Groups share four behavioral traits. Without exception, the leaders of Great Groups:

- *Provide direction and meaning.* They remind people of what's important and why their work makes a difference.

- *Generate and sustain trust.* The group's trust in itself -- and its leadership -- allows members to accept dissent and ride through the turbulence of the group process.
- *Display a bias toward action, risk taking, and curiosity.* A sense of urgency -- and a willingness to risk failure to achieve results -- is at the heart of every Great Group.
- *Are purveyors of hope.* Effective team leaders find both tangible and symbolic ways to demonstrate that the group can overcome the odds.

There's no simple recipe for developing these skills; group leadership is far more an art than a science. But we can start by rethinking our notion of what collaboration means and how it is achieved. Our management training and educational institutions need to focus on group development as well as individual development. Universities, for instance, rarely allow group Ph.D. theses or rewards for joint authorship. Corporations usually reward individual rather than group achievement, even as leaders call for greater teamwork and partnership.

Power of the Mission

It's no accident that topping both lists -- the principles of Great Groups and the traits of group leaders -- is the power of the mission. All great teams -- and all great organizations -- are built around a shared dream or motivating purpose. Yet organizations' mission statements often lack real meaning and resonance. Realistically, your team need not believe that it is literally saving the world, as the Manhattan Project did; it is enough to feel it is helping people in need or battling a tough competitor. Simply punching a time clock doesn't do it.

Articulating a meaningful mission is the job of leaders at every level -- and it's not an easy task. In Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 1*, Glendower, the Welsh seer, boasts to Hotspur that he can "call spirits from the vasty deep," and Hotspur retorts, so can I, so can anybody -- "but will they come when you do call for them?" That is the test of inspiring leadership.

I learned firsthand how critical a sense of mission -- or its absence -- can be to an employer. Several years ago, I had an assistant who handled the arrangements for my speeches and travel; at night she did volunteer work for a nonprofit, self-help organization. Her work for me was acceptable but perfunctory. It was clear that she was much more involved and committed to her unpaid work. Frankly, I was jealous. I came to resent the fact that I was not getting her best efforts; after all, I was paying her and they weren't. We talked about it, and she was very honest about the fact that it was her volunteer work that had real meaning for her; there she felt she was making a difference. So you can't expect every employee to be zealously committed to your cause. But you can accept the fact that part of the responsibility for uninspired work lies with the leader.

Great Groups remind us how much we can really accomplish working toward a shared purpose. To be sure, Great Groups rely on many long-established practices of good management -- effective communication, exceptional recruitment, genuine empowerment, personal commitment. But they also remind us of author Luciano de Crescenzo's observation that "we are all angels with only one wing; we can only fly while embracing one another." In the end, these groups cannot be managed, only led in flight.

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