

WHAT MAKES A TEAM EXTREME? HAROLD J. LEAVITT AND JEAN LIPMAN-

Blumen, coauthors of the recent book *Hot Groups*, have spent more than 20 years exploring why some teams fly while others crash and burn. "You don't go out and create hot groups," Lipman-Blumen explains. "They grow themselves. Look at organizations, and you'll see the beginnings of hot groups almost everywhere. They're like weeds. But organizations that are bureaucratic and orderly don't like the idea of hot groups, so they go around and spray weed killer on those groups. The issue is not how you create hot groups but how you keep them from being stamped out."

In an interview with *FAST COMPANY*, these two extremely well-informed professors offered their perspectives on extreme teams.

Work matters. "People who are part of these teams are searching for meaning in their work. They don't want to go to work and spend eight or nine hours working on trivia," Leavitt says. "They want to feel that what they do will make a difference—not just in their paycheck, but in the world. For a long time, HR people have been pushing the notion that they're trying to develop a satisfied workforce, a happy workforce. But happiness alone isn't the Holy Grail here. People are also looking for an opportunity to do something worthwhile. Those two kinds of motivation are very different."

Titles don't matter. "Hot groups don't care about people's status within an organization," Leavitt says. "It doesn't matter if somebody is a senior VP and somebody else is a new recruit. Hot groups are very democratic and very informal. They are quite antibureaucratic, and that's both a strength and a weakness. It helps them to jump over the walls that sometimes imprison teams. But, on the other hand, it creates a lot of resentment and animosity in the rest of the organization, and you have to deal with that."

People bond in the heat of battle. "These groups tend to grow around their task, rather than around relationships," Lipman-Blumen says. "That's the opposite of the way most groups get started. When people launch project teams, they usually call in consultants and take everyone on a retreat to do the wilderness team-bonding thing. But it's the contributions that people make to a task that lead other people to respect them, to like them, to want to be around them. When people see someone bring something important to a task, they get excited about that. Long-lasting relationships grow out of that kind of respect for other people's ability to make a task happen."

Teams take care of their own. "Within hot groups, people can be very individualistic," Lipman-Blumen says. "They can express their creativity, and they feel protected while doing so. They are shielded by the group. In the past, individuals were isolated, and they had to do things on their own: If they succeeded, great; if they didn't, they were cut off at the knees. The hot-group mentality makes it safer for people to experiment."

you must also be part of a complete team. If your team loses even just one member during the race, you lose.

Some of the world's most physically qualified teams have lost races because they lack the particular brand of teamwork that adventure racing demands. While most events draw teams of Navy SEALs or Army Rangers, no military team has ever placed in either of the top two slots at any major adventure race. Why not? "In the military, showing weakness is itself a weakness," says Robert Nagle, 41, one of EcoInternet's founders. "But in racing, we practice asking for help. We're all really good athletes in our own right, and we've had long, successful careers. But we're all able to make that switch and say, 'Right now, I'm the weakest person on the team. And in order for the team to move faster, I should ask for help.'"

Nagle, who is director of software development for InterSystems, based in Boston, knows what he's talking about. He and the other members of EcoInternet—including an Australian entrepreneur, an American firefighter, and a window washer from New Zealand—have won all three of the major adventure races at least once. So far this year, they have had two first-place finishes and one second-place finish. They are the New York Yankees of adventure racing. And they're experts on teamwork in extreme settings.

The founders of the team, Nagle and Ian Adamson, first met via the Internet in 1994. The following year, they put together the nucleus of their team. The squad has since grown to include about eight people from all over the world (they rotate on and off the team throughout the year, depending on the race). All of the members are world-class athletes in at least one sport, but they say that it isn't the physical challenge that draws them to adventure racing—it's the mental challenge. "Your limits are constantly being pushed by the surprises that are built into the race, and then there are other surprises that are based on your execution," Nagle explains. "You may make a poor navigation choice, or forget to bring a critical piece of gear, or lose your maps, or run out of food. You have to deal with all of those situations. And that type of test is completely different from the test that's imposed by the physical prerequisites."

So how does the team work? Every decision is made by consensus. If that means that the whole team stops to spend an hour debating which way to head through a canyon, so be it. "Over the course of six or seven days of nonstop competition, you can't look to the same person for everything," Nagle explains. "Part of our success lies in having tremendous redundancy within our team. So we just allow leadership to flow, hour by hour, to whoever is strongest at the time."

The same holds true for many of the "hot groups" that Leavitt

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