Bennis

Organizing Genius.

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Take-Home Lessons

Life in Great Groups is different from much of real life. It's better. Bambi veteran Jules Engel recalls that the great Disney animators couldn't wait to get up in the morning to get back to their drawing boards. Fermi and the other geniuses of the Manhattan Project continued to work on the Gadget even when hiking in the mountains on their Sundays off. It wasn't simply that the work was fascinating and vitally important. The process itself was exciting, even joyous. On those rare and happy occasions when you are part of a Great Group, you know the truth of Noel Coward's observation that "work was more fun than fun."

Something happens in these groups that doesn't happen in ordinary ones, even very good ones. Some alchemy takes place that results, not only in a computer revolution or a new art form, but in a qualitative change in the participants. If only for the duration of the project, people in Great Groups seem to become better than themselves. They are able to see more, achieve more, and have a far better time doing it than they can working alone. Groups of the stature of PARC in its glory days and Disney Feature Animation are rare. But they could happen far more often than they do.

Most of us have experienced the terrible frustration of being part of a group that had the potential for
greatness but never quite gelled. The geometrical surge in ideas and energy that happens in Great Groups never took place, even though the talent was there, the drive was there, and the project seemed full of promise. Looking back at these stillborn opportunities, you experience a shudder of sadness and inevitably ask yourself, “What went wrong?”

A Great Group is more than a collection of first-rate minds. It is a miracle. But it is a miracle that can’t take place unless certain conditions have been met. Some of these are spelled out in an instructive scene in Roland Joffe’s 1989 film on the Manhattan Project, Fat Man and Little Boy. General Groves, played by Paul Newman, asks Oppenheimer, played by Dwight Schultz, what it will take to get the Gadget built. “Focus,” Oppie answers, naming a critical element of every Great Group. “You have all these great minds, but they’re all dancing to a different tune. Bring them together in one place. Isolate ’em—no distractions. You create an atmosphere of stress, creative stress, everyone competing to solve one problem. And you have one ringmaster.”

As the real-life Oppenheimer so clearly did, the screen Oppie knows his creative collaboration. There is no way to guarantee that any particular group will achieve greatness, but there are ways to maximize the likelihood. Each of the groups we have looked at has important things to teach us, some positive, some cautionary. These are the fifteen top take-home lessons of Great Groups:

1. **Greatness starts with superb people.** Bob Taylor, the leader of the Great Group at PARC, liked to say, “You can’t pile together enough good people to make a
great one.” He was right. Recruiting the most talented people possible is the first task of anyone who hopes to create a Great Group. The people who can achieve something truly unprecedented have more than enormous talent and intelligence. They have original minds. They see things differently. They can spot the gaps in what we know. They have a knack for discovering interesting, important problems as well as skill in solving them. They want to do the next thing, not the last one. They see connections. Often they have specialized skills, combined with broad interests and multiple frames of reference. They tend to be deep generalists, not narrow specialists. They are not so immersed in one discipline that they can’t see solutions in another. They are problem solvers before they are computer scientists or animators. They can no more stop looking for new relationships and new, better ways of doing things than they can stop breathing. And they have the tenacity so important in accomplishing anything of value.

2. Great Groups and great leaders create each other. Great Groups give the lie to the remarkably persistent notion that successful institutions are the lengthened shadow of a great woman or man. It’s not clear that life was ever so simple that individuals, acting alone, solved most significant problems. Our tendency to create heroes rarely jibes with the reality that most nontrivial problems require collective solutions. Edison worked hard at maintaining the illusion that his inventions had sprung fully developed from his fecund brain, but he had many collaborators, albeit unsung ones. In
our constantly changing, global, highly technological society, collaboration is a necessity. The Lone Ranger, the incarnation of the individual problem solver, is dead. In his place, we have a new model for creative achievement: the Great Group. Great Groups don’t exist without great leaders, but they are much more than lengthened shadows of them. Disney, John Andrew Rice, and Steve Jobs not only headed Great Groups, they found their own greatness in them. As Howard Gardner points out, Oppenheimer showed no great administrative ability before or after the Manhattan Project. And yet when the world needed him, he was able to rally inner resources that probably surprised even himself. Inevitably, the leader of a Great Group has to invent a leadership style that suits it. The standard models, especially the command-and-control style, simply won’t work. The heads of Great Groups have to act decisively, but never arbitrarily. They have to make decisions without limiting the perceived autonomy of the other participants. Devising and maintaining an atmosphere in which others can put a dent in the universe is the leader’s creative act.

3. Every Great Group has a strong leader. This is one of the paradoxes of creative collaboration. Great Groups are made up of people with rare gifts working together as equals. Yet, in virtually every one there is one person who acts as maestro, organizing the genius of the others. He or she is a pragmatic dreamer, a person with an original but attainable vision. Ironically, the leader is able to realize his or her dream only if the others are free to do exceptional work. Typically, the
leader is the one who recruits the others, by making the vision so palpable and seductive that they see it, too, and eagerly sign up.

Within the group, the leader is often a good steward, keeping the others focused, eliminating distractions, keeping hope alive in the face of setbacks and stress. One of the simple pleasures of Great Groups is that they are almost never bureaucratic. People in them feel liberated from the trivial and the arbitrary. Often, everyone deals directly with the leader, who can make most decisions on the spot.

Leaders of Great Groups inevitably have exquisite taste. They are not creators in the same sense that the others are. Rather, they are curators, whose job is not to make, but to choose. The ability to recognize excellence in others and their work may be the defining talent of leaders of Great Groups. Oppenheimer couldn’t do the individual tasks required to make the bomb, but he knew who could and he was able to sort through alternative solutions and implement the optimal one. Such leaders are like great conductors. They may not be able to play Mozart’s First Violin Concerto, but they have a profound understanding of the work and can create the environment needed to realize it.

The leader has to be worthy of the group. He or she must warrant the respect of people who may have greater genius, as Bob Taylor did at PARC. The respect issue is a critical one. Great Groups are voluntary associations. People are in them, not for money, not even for glory, but because they love the work, they love the project. Everyone must have complete faith in the leader’s instincts and integrity vis-à-vis the work. Great Groups don’t require their leaders to be saints. But they
do expect them to be absolutely trustworthy where the project is concerned. Kelly Johnson was a curmudgeon, but he was revered at the Skunk Works for his refusal to compromise about airplanes. On one occasion he returned millions of dollars rather than continue a project he didn’t believe in. Walt Disney was an irritable, often small-minded, man, but the people who made his classic animated films knew that his creative choices were almost always impeccable.

4. The leaders of Great Groups love talent and know where to find it. Great Groups are headed by people confident enough to recruit people better than themselves. They revel in the talent of others.

Where do you find people good enough to form a Great Group? Sometimes they find you. The talented smell out places that are full of promise and energy, the places where the future is being made. The gifted often catch the zeitgeist and ride it to a common shore. Certain schools and academic departments are lodestones for talent. Certain cities attract it as well. All roads lead to Seattle for many computer programmers and for the best rock musicians of a certain style. Cyberspace has also become a place where talented people gather, liberated from geography.

Word of mouth can draw new talent to a Great Group, as it did at Black Mountain. But the quality of a group often reflects the network of its leader. Many Great Groups start with great Rolodexes. Oppenheimer knew the physicists he wanted for the Manhattan Project because he was part of an international community of physicists who had trained at the best schools and kept abreast of each other’s work through scientific
Journals and international conferences. Bob Taylor knew the most gifted computer scientists of his day because he had evaluated their work for federal funding. Charles Olson relied on his wide circle of literary friends when he recruited for Black Mountain.

The broader and more diverse the network, the greater the potential for a Great Group. The richer the mix of people, the more likely that new connections will be made, new ideas will emerge.

Being part of a group of superb people has a profound impact on every member. Participants know that inclusion is a mark of their own excellence. Everyone in such a group becomes engaged in the best kind of competition—a desire to perform as well as or better than one’s colleagues, to warrant the esteem of people for whom one has the highest respect. People in Great Groups are always stretching because of the giants around them. For members of such groups, the real competition is with themselves, an ongoing test of just how good they are and how completely they can use their gifts.

5. Great Groups are full of talented people who can work together. This may seem obvious, but talent can be so dazzling, so seductive, that the person who is recruiting may forget that not every genius works well with others. Certain tasks can only be performed collaboratively, and it is madness to recruit people, however gifted, who are incapable of working side by side toward a common goal. Joseph Rotblat, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996 for his lifelong effort to ban nuclear weapons, was the only scientist to quit the Manhattan Project on moral grounds—he was
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appalled that its scientists agreed to keep their discoveries secret from the Soviets and others. Despite his extraordinary ability as a theoretical physicist, he was utterly unsuited for the Manhattan Project because his strong personal vision was incompatible with that of the group. Those powerful convictions allowed Rotblat to create a remarkable group of his own, the London-based Pugwash Conferences, that reflects his commitment to open science and nuclear disarmament.

Although the ability to work together is a prerequisite for membership in a Great Group, being an amiable person, or even a pleasant one, isn't. Great Groups are probably more tolerant of personal idiosyncrasies than are ordinary ones, if only because the members are so intensely focused on the work itself. That all-important task acts as a social lubricant, minimizing frictions. Sharing information and advancing the work are the only real social obligations.

A good colleague may be defined differently in Great Groups than in ordinary ones. When your mission in life is to find a new way for people to interact with information or some other exalted goal, you may be willing to tolerate social obtuseness in a colleague who helps you do it. People who are engaged in groundbreaking collaborations have high regard for people who challenge and test their ideas. In such a group, ordinary affability may be no virtue. The young Richard Feynman was infamous for telling his older, more famous colleagues at Los Alamos that one or another of their ideas was stupid. But Feynman was valued in the project because the impolitic judgment was routinely followed by a probing question or penetrating insight that boosted the level of everyone’s thought. On
at least one occasion, Niels Bohr sought Feynman out, because Bohr knew Feynman would candidly evaluate his ideas and not be cowed, as so many others were, by Bohr's towering reputation. Whether Feynman's associates liked him or not, they recognized him as a good colleague: he advanced their common cause.

6. **Great Groups think they are on a mission from God.** Whether they are trying to get their candidate into the White House or trying to save the free world, Great Groups always believe that they are doing something vital, even holy. They are filled with believers, not doubters, and the metaphors that they use to describe their work are commonly those of war and religion. People in Great Groups often have the zeal of converts, people who have come only recently to see some great truth and follow it wherever it leads.

Great Groups are engaged in holy wars. The psychology of these high-minded missions is clear. People know going in that they will be expected to make sacrifices, but they also know they are doing something monumental, something worthy of their best selves. When you are frantically writing computer code, fueled by Coke and pizza, you don't wonder whether your work is meaningful. You are fully engaged, absorbed by the problem, lost in the task. But people in Great Groups are different from those who spend countless hours in thrall to video games or other trivial pursuits. Their clear, collective purpose makes everything they do seem meaningful and valuable.

A powerful enough vision can transform what would otherwise be loss and drudgery into sacrifice. The scientists of the Manhattan Project were willing to
put their careers on hold and to undertake what was, in essence, a massive engineering feat because they believed the free world depended on their doing so. Reminiscing about Los Alamos, Feynman told a story that illustrates how effectively the vision can give meaning and value to work. The army had recruited talented engineers and others from all over the United States for special duty on the project. They were assigned to work on the primitive computers of the period, doing energy calculations and other tedious jobs. But the army, obsessed with security, refused to tell them anything specific about the project. They didn’t know that they were building a weapon that could end the war or even what their calculations meant. They were simply expected to do the work, which they did—slowly and not very well. Feynman, who supervised the technicians, prevailed on his superiors to tell the recruits what they were doing and why. Permission was granted to lift the veil of secrecy, and Oppenheimer gave them a special lecture on the nature of the project and their own contribution.

"Complete transformation," Feynman recalled. "They began to invent ways of doing it better. They improved the scheme. They worked at night. They didn’t need supervising in the night; they didn’t need anything. They understood everything; they invented several of the programs that we used." Ever the scientist, Feynman calculated that the work was done "nearly ten times as fast" after it had meaning.

Able leaders inspire groups engaged in less momentous projects as well. James Carville was particularly adept at keeping the staff and volunteers in the 1992 Clinton War Room fired up. Like Steve Jobs at Apple,
he had a gift for finding the language that made hard
work seem both purposeful and fun. CEO Herb Kelle-
her makes fun a priority at innovative and wildly suc-
cessful Southwest Airlines. But he has also persuaded
his team that the airline has an exalted mission. South-
west doesn’t simply provide customers with cheap
flights from Dallas to Tucson. It offers passengers some-
thing far more precious—the “freedom of travel.”
Leaders of Great Groups understand the power of rhet-
oric. They recruit people for crusades, not jobs.

7. Every Great Group is an island—but an island
with a bridge to the mainland. Great Groups be-
come their own worlds. They also tend to be physically
removed from the world around them. Los Alamos was
located in the high desert miles from Santa Fe and was
surrounded by a barbed-wire fence. The Skunk Works
operated as an independent community within Lock-
heed, its secret activities conducted behind unmarked
doors. People who are trying to change the world need
to be isolated from it, free from its distractions, but still
able to tap its resources. Great Groups aren’t cloisters.
As people so often do in isolated communities, partici-
pants in Great Groups create a culture of their own—
with distinctive customs, dress, jokes, even a private
language. They find their own names for the things that
are important to them, a language that both binds them
together and keeps nonmembers out. Such groups tend
to treasure their secrets.

People in Great Groups also have a great deal of
fun. The intensity sometimes becomes giddiness. For-
tune magazine caught the goofy quality at Netobjects, a
software start-up in Redwood City, California, where
the staff was racing against deadline to produce a superior web-site designer. Crowded into cubicles, the team never left the building for lunch or dinner but occasionally broke for morning Ping-Pong. They also sported fanciful balloon hats, given to each new staffer on his or her first day. Great Groups are not only fun, they are sexy. There is often an erotic element to working together so closely and intensely. In the charged atmosphere of these groups, people sometimes look across a crowded lab or cubicle and see more than a colleague.

8. Great groups see themselves as winning underdogs. They inevitably view themselves as the feisty David, hurling fresh ideas at a big, backward-looking Goliath. Much of the gleeful energy of Great Groups seems to stem from this view of themselves as upstarts who will snatch the prize from the fumbling hands of a bigger but less wily competitor. In marketing the Macintosh, which Steve Jobs did so brilliantly, he always contrasted his spunky little band of Mac makers with the staid industry giant, IBM. The Mac, he made clear, wasn’t your father’s computer. In 1992, the Clinton campaign staff successfully presented its candidate as a fresh alternative to the government-as-usual of George Bush. The fact that Bush was the incumbent, the insider, the representative of the Establishment gave added energy to Clinton’s campaign.

9. Great Groups always have an enemy. Sometimes, of course, they really do have an enemy, as the scientists of the Manhattan Project had in the Axis powers. But when there is no enemy, you have to make
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one up. Why? Because, as Coca-Cola CEO Roberto Goizueta has pointed out, you can't have a war without one. Whether the enemy occurs in nature or is manufactured, it serves the same purpose. It raises the stakes of the competition, it helps your group rally and define itself (as everything the enemy is not), and it also frees you to be spurred by that time-honored motivator—self-righteous hatred. Today, Microsoft billionaire William Gates is the face on the dartboard of every computer start-up. Research by social psychologist Teresa M. Amabile and others confirms Goizueta's wisdom. Com-petition with an outsider seems to boost creativity. "Win-lose" competition within the group reduces it.

10. People in Great Groups have blinders on. The project is all they see. In Great Groups, you don't find people who are distracted by peripheral concerns, including such perfectly laudable ones as professional advancement and the quality of their private lives. Ivy League colleges are full of well-rounded people. Great Groups aren't. Great Groups are full of indefatigable people who are struggling to turn a vision into a machine and whose lawns and goldfish have died of neglect. Such people don't stay up nights wondering if they are spending enough time with the children. For the duration, participants have only one passion—the task at hand. People in Great Groups fall in love with the project. They are so taken with the beauty and difficulty of the task that they don't want to talk about anything else, be anywhere else, do anything else. In the course of joining the group, such people never ask, "How much does it pay?" They ask, "How soon can I start?" and "When can I do it again?" But Great
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Groups often have a dark side. Members frequently make a Faustian bargain, trading the quiet pleasures of normal life for the thrill of discovery. Their families often pay the price. For some group members, the frenzied labor of the project is their drug of choice, a way to evade other responsibilities or to deaden loss or pain.

11. Great Groups are optimistic, not realistic. People in Great Groups believe they can do things no one has ever done before. The term for that isn’t realism. Such groups are often youthful, filled with talented people who have not yet bumped up against their limits or other dispiriting life lessons. They don’t yet know what they can’t do. Indeed, they’re not sure the impossible exists. According to psychologist Martin Seligman, depressed people tend to be more realistic than optimistic ones. And the optimists, even when their good cheer is unwarranted, accomplish more. They do better in school, for example. As Seligman explained to Fortune magazine, the people most likely to succeed are those who combine “reasonable talent with the ability to keep going in the face of defeat.” In a study Seligman did for insurance giant Met Life, he found that optimistic salespeople outsold their pessimistic colleagues by more than a third and that optimism was a better predictor of productivity than any of the company’s standard measures. If optimism is a major factor in selling insurance, it is even more important when people are attempting to do extraordinarily difficult things under pressure. Great things are accomplished by talented people who believe they will accomplish them. (Henry Ford, or one of his ghostwriters, put it nicely: “If you think you can’t, you’re right. And if you think
you can, you’re right.”) People in Great Groups are simultaneously analytical and confident. As Alan Kay once observed, “The way to do good science is to be incredibly critical without being depressed.” Great Groups don’t lose hope in the face of complexity. The difficulty of the task adds to their joy.

12. In Great Groups the right person has the right job. This, too, may seem obvious, but the failure to find the right niche for people—or to let them find their own perfect niches—is a major reason that so many workplaces are mediocre, even toxic, in spite of the presence of talent.

Too many companies believe people are interchangeable. Truly gifted people never are. They have unique talents. Such people cannot be forced into roles they are not suited for, nor should they be. Effective leaders allow great people to do the work they were born to do. Despite the terrible pressure to finish Little Boy and Fat Man, Oppenheimer let Edward Teller drop a vital computational project to pursue a personal line of research that would eventually lead to the hydrogen bomb but had little impact on the urgent work at hand. Oppenheimer reasoned that a happier Teller would make a greater contribution than a disgruntled one to the intellectual life of the community.

Many projects never transcend mediocrity because their leaders suffer from the Hollywood syndrome. This is the arrogant and misguided belief that power is more important than talent. It is the too common view that everyone should be so grateful for a role in a picture or any other job that he or she should be willing to do whatever is asked, even if it’s dull or demeaning (at this
point in the casting process the starlet is told about the nude scene). When the person and the task are properly matched, the work can proceed with passion. Great Groups allow participants to find their workplace bliss. No steward of a Great Group ever felt, as Xerox executive Bob Sparacino apparently did, that “People shouldn’t work because they love it. They should work because it hurts.” Talented people working because it hurts is a formula for organizational disaster.

13. The leaders of Great Groups give them what they need and free them from the rest. Successful groups reflect the leader’s profound, not necessarily conscious, understanding of what brilliant people want. Most of all, they want a worthy challenge, a task that allows them to explore the whole continent of their talent. They want colleagues who stimulate and challenge them and whom they can admire. What they don’t want are trivial duties and obligations. Successful leaders strip the workplace of nonessentials. Great Groups are never places where memos are the primary form of communication. They aren’t places where anything is filed in triplicate. Time that can go into thinking and making is never wasted on activities, such as writing reports, that serve only some bureaucratic or corporate function outside the group.

As one Great Group after another has shown, talented people don’t need fancy facilities. It sometimes seems that any old garage will do. But they do need the right tools. The leaders of PARC threatened to quit if the lab was not allowed to build the computer it needed, rather than accept an inferior technology. Cutting-edge technology is often a key element in cre-
ative collaboration. The right tools become part of the creative process.

All Great Groups share information effectively. Many of the leaders we have looked at were brilliant at ensuring that all members of the group had the information they needed. Bob Taylor's weekly meeting at PARC was a simple, efficient mechanism for sharing data and ideas. Oppenheimer overcame the strong objections of the army to ensure that all his scientists were able to share any and all information with each other. He, too, had weekly colloquia. The impulse behind this openness wasn't solely a democratic one. Great Groups require ideas—the more the better. One idea sparks another. One individual in the group may have the insight or data that causes another's half-idea to click.

Great Groups also tend to be places without dress codes, set hours, or other arbitrary regulations. The freedom to work when you are moved to, wearing what you want, is one that everyone treasures. The casual dress so typical of people in extraordinary groups may be symbolic as well, a sign that they are unconventional thinkers, engaged in something revolutionary. Jeans and a T-shirt have become a uniform for people in innovative groups. Wearing a suit and tie to an interview at a hot start-up company is as sure a way to guarantee not being hired as wearing shorts to an interview at IBM.

One thing Great Groups do need is protection. Great Groups do things that haven't been done before. Most corporations and other traditional organizations say they want innovation, but they reflexively shun the untried. Most would rather repeat a past success than gamble on a new idea. Because Great Groups break
new ground, they are more susceptible than others to being misunderstood, resented, even feared. Successful leaders find ways to insulate their people from bureaucratic meddling. They keep the "suits" and other conventional thinkers at a distance, allowing the group to work undistracted. General Groves was a master at this. At Lockheed, Kelly Johnson joined the board of directors to better represent the interests of the Skunk Works. The steward of a Great Group also has to make the case for its product or project within the organization if it is to see the light of day. The leaders at PARC, so able in other ways, failed to convince Xerox to manufacture the group's pioneering personal computer. Steve Jobs didn't have an original paradigm for the Macintosh, but he did get it built and shipped.

One vital function of the leaders of Great Groups is to keep the stress in check. Innovative places are exhilarating, but they are also incubators for massive coronaries. Sundays off helped at Los Alamos and the Skunk Works. Interpersonal stress is trickier. Because Great Groups are obsessed with the project at hand, they are probably less given to rivalry and intrigue than most. Ideally, they are filled with people whose behavior reflects their mutual respect and regard. That's not always the case. In the Clinton War Room, James Carville could be as nasty and peremptory as any drill sergeant. But civility is the preferred social climate for creative collaboration. In an era of downsizing and underemployment, many workplaces have become angry, anguished, poisonous places where managers are abusive and employees subvert each other. Such an environment isn't just morally offensive. It is a bad place to do good work.
Genuine camaraderie, based on shooting the moon together, is the ideal climate of a Great Group. When less attractive emotions come to the fore, they have to be dealt with before they threaten the project. Taylor’s model for resolving conflicts, which encourages colleagues to understand each other’s positions, even if they disagree, is an especially useful one.

Members of Great Groups also need relative autonomy, a sine qua non of creativity. No Great Group was ever micromanaged. In such groups, it is understood that the talent has to be unleashed to find its own unique solutions to problems it alone can see. Disney could imagine a great character and knew one when he saw one, but he could never animate one to his own high standard. His animators held the secrets of making a Disney character come to life. Leaders of Great Groups trade the illusion of control that micromanaging gives for the higher satisfactions of orchestrating extraordinary achievement.

14. Great Groups ship. Successful collaborations are dreams with deadlines. They are places of action, not think tanks or retreat centers devoted solely to the generation of ideas. Great Groups don’t just talk about things (although they often do that at considerable length). They make things—amazing, original things, such as a plane that a bat can’t find. Great Groups are hands-on. Think of Kistiakowsky, the great chemist, sitting with a dentist’s drill correcting defects in castings because that was what the project needed. The thing being made has many uses within the group. It incarnates the dream, but it is something real, distinct from
the people who are creating it, yet shaped by their hands. The thing, the task, is what brings the group together and keeps it grounded and focused. Although the members of the group may love the creative process, they know it has to end. By definition, Great Groups continue to struggle until the project is brought to a successful conclusion. They don’t quit until the new computer is out the door with their names on it, as Tom West liked to say. Great curiosity and problem-solving ability are not enough. There must also be continuous focus on the task until the work is done, the rebel computer created and delivered. As Steve Jobs so often reminded his team, “Real artists ship.”

15. **Great work is its own reward.** Great Groups are engaged in solving hard, meaningful problems. Paradoxically, that process is difficult but exhilarating as well. Some primal human urge to explore and discover, to see new relationships and turn them into wonderful new things drives these groups. The payoff is not money, or even glory. Again and again, members of Great Groups say they would have done the work for nothing. The reward is the creative process itself. Problem solving douses the human brain with chemicals that make us feel good. People look back on PARC or the Clinton War Room, and they recall how wonderful it was to work that hard and that well. There is a lesson here that could transform our anguished workplaces overnight. People ache to do good work. Given a task they believe in and a chance to do it well, they will work tirelessly for no more reward than the one they give themselves.