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Group processes and the Chilean Mine disaster

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by Donelson Forsyth

On August 5, 2010, a copper mine in Copiapo, Chile collapsed. Authorities and mining experts believed no one could have survived in the dilapidated, badly maintained passages that stretched for miles beneath the desert, but they nonetheless drilled a series of shafts into the last known work zone of the crews. On August 22, a note was passed up from deep underground, attached to one of the searcher's drill heads. The note, translated, read "We are well in the shelter, the 33".

The rescue of the 33 Chilean miners transfixed the world. Thirty three men—not star athletes, Hollywood icons, or world leaders, but solid, experienced, hardworking men—encountered a disaster in the course of just doing their job. How did they survive? They worked together for 69 days, caring for the sick, sharing food, and keeping each others' spirits elevated, until all could be rescued. Who rescued them? Other teams of dedicated engineers, experts, and technicians who worked continuously to find a way to overcome what seemed to be insurmountable obstacles. The miners emerged, one-by-one, through the narrow rescue shaft, but they survived by harnessing the skills, resources, and energy of the collective (Franklin, 2011).

We are used to hearing about groups and problems they can cause, but the rescue of the Chilean miners is a story of everyday individuals who, by banding together, can do great good.



Why such interest, around the world, in the fate of the Chilean miners? For most people, Chile is a distant country and home to people very different from us. Yet, as the story developed, nationality, age, and occupation mattered less and less, as people came to identify with the small group of trapped miners who exemplified values prized the world over: shared sacrifice, heroic optimism, and strength of will to live. As the boundary between our own groups and theirs dissolved, we all became part of their group: we identified so strongly with the Chileans that we were there in the dark, musty tunnels with the 33 men; we were at Camp Hope with the other rescuers figuring out a way to bring the men to the surface safely; we were with the miners' family and friends, looking

forward hopefully to the reunion of husbands, sons, and friends.

The disaster was not over quickly, but stretched out for long enough for it to make its way past the distractions of our usual busy days into the purview of our more thoughtful awareness. As the ordeal continued over days and weeks, we found ourselves talking about it within our own groups—with the family at dinner, at work, over the telephone or the internet—and the closeness of the Chileans became an opportunity for our own groups to become more tightly bound as well. The Chileans' ordeal reminded us of the fragility of human life, but also of the great potential of humans when we work collectively to overcome adversity.

References

Franklin, J. (2011). *33 men*. New York: Putnam.