The Potential and Pitfalls of Multicultural Mission Teams

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O ur focus in this chapter is on understanding how teams can be impacted by different underlying values— the long-enduring judgments appraising the worth of an idea, object, person, place, or practice (Dodd, 1991, p. 85). We also attempt to understand the observed behavior of missionaries from Brazil, Korea, black South Africa, and the USA. We know that all missionaries from these countries will not act precisely in the ways we suggest. In fact, descriptions of normal behavior for a given culture tend to apply only in a general way to the group, not specifically to any individual. Yet it is our hope that both the cultural tendencies we discuss and the process of discussion itself will stimulate useful dialogue involving these and other nationality mixes on mission teams.

With the globalization of missions, multicultural mission teams have become increasingly common. Along with their advantages, potential conflicts exist which may destroy the team's sense of community and its fruitful ministry. This chapter explores the possible strengths of multicultural teams. We then discuss potential weaknesses of an imaginary team comprised of Koreans, Brazilians, black South Africans, and Americans. We conclude with a few brief case studies.

A Sense of Community

Key to the survival of multinational teams in missions is fostering what community psychologists over the last 25 years have called a "sense of community." This can be defined as "the perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving or doing for others what one expects from them, [and] the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure" (Sarasson, 1974, p. 157).

McMillan and Chavis (1986, cited in Stoner, 1993) define four elements necessary for a high sense of community within a particular reference group:

■ *The element of membership*—the feeling of belonging or sharing a sense of personal relatedness.

■ *The element of influence*—the sense of having influence over a group and being influenced by that group.

- *The element of fulfillment of needs*—the belief that one's needs can be and are being met through the collective resources of the group.
- *The element of shared emotional connection*—the commitment and cohesion that grows out of the experience of shared history.

It can be quite a challenging and time-consuming process for multicultural teams, or any teams, to develop this sense of community. However, when team members commit themselves to grow together through this process, the benefits can be great.

Strengths of Multicultural Teams

Multicultural teams can model the diversity of the body of Christ in microcosm better than monocultural teams. A monocultural team does not readily demonstrate the international nature of Christianity. For example, an African Minister of Education once told the crew of Operation Mobilization's ship *Logos*, "You are like the United Nations, except for one thing—you really are united!"

Multicultural teams can be a demonstration of God's transforming power in intercultural relations. People notice God's healing power for the nations when workers from powerful nations joyfully serve under a leader from a less powerful country. Unity among erstwhile enemies—such as prayer together among Argentine and British missionary co-workers during the 1982 South Atlantic conflict or among Serbian and Western European Christians during the 1999 Balkans crisis—is a credit to the gospel and makes a great impact on outsiders.

Multicultural teams have a built-in, heightened sensitivity as to what is biblical and what is cultural about themselves. They help their members see themselves and the host culture from outside their individual cultures. Diverse cultural backgrounds provide perspective and help the team, as a unit, to respond appropriately, reducing the risk of unnecessarily giving or taking offense.

Multicultural teams, because of their diverse mix, may be less likely confused by others as having "political agents" and so be less likely to be perceived as subversive by the host country. Americans are not the only ones who may face such suspicions!

Although all humans are unique within their own culture, each national group tends to have certain typical characteristics which can enrich the team. Brazilian vibrancy, Korean zeal, South African commitment, and American organization can complement each other to make the combined unit much stronger than the individual parts.

Finally, the home churches benefit, enriched through the multinational team experience of those they send. If these churches stay in close contact with their missionaries, they will gain a heightened understanding of the body of Christ and the nature of God's mission.

Problems in Multicultural Teams

Although the blend of cultures brings great benefits, it is not without potential pitfalls. Proper orientation and an ongoing attitude of learning and servanthood are necessary to resolve these problems. Mackin (1992, pp. 156-157) states that one of the ongoing challenges is for the team to distinguish things that are clearly condemned and clearly approved by Scripture from things that are either neutral or else subject to varying interpretation, such as drinking alcoholic beverages.

The examples of potential problems that we describe below stem principally from the neutral and gray areas. As Mackin reminds her readers, love, unity, and wholesomeness must be emphasized as the team works through the various issues at hand.

Leadership-Related Problems

Starting with communication style, an American team leader may cause offense by using an open, direct style both in giving direction and in correcting problems. A leader who is most comfortable with an "open" style of communication may expect a similar style of openness and frankness from the team members in expressing their needs. Further, the American may presume that authority is based primarily on a job description, rather than on strong relationships and age-based respect.

On a team, failure to spend time developing relationships with team members could diminish the team's perception of the American leader's authority. To be in touch with all the team members, the American must develop a network of listeners to help him understand other team members. An example would be finding out the needs of a single Korean woman on a team through a Korean couple who are aware of her particular situation.

A Korean leader may find egalitarian-minded Americans too direct in expressing disagreement with his views. The informal style of language and body posture of Americans and Brazilians may not convey to him the respect he desires. On the other hand, his directive style may well offend Americans and, to some extent, Brazilians.

Listening carefully in a group meeting, an African leader might not overtly express his own opinions until the end, when he summarizes what has been said in his own words. The lack of outward direction could leave some Americans or Koreans wondering if the leader is leading or just following the rest. Meanwhile, Koreans will resonate with African deference to elders, something youth-oriented Americans and Brazilians may struggle with.

Female leaders may be accepted by Americans and perhaps by Brazilians. Korean men, however, would find it hard to submit to a woman unless she has significant experience to set her above the men.

African women, although given certain authority in society, are not often given leadership roles in church structures. American women who are open to assuming leadership positions may feel stifled by Koreans and to a certain extent by Brazilians, who may not want them to move above a middle-level managerial position.

Finally, leaders often become engaged in informal counseling with team members. The Korean educational system molds Koreans to assume that the expert does the talking, and the learner does the listening. Thus, a Korean leader may be more inclined to tell his team members what to do, rather than to listen to their needs. The American or Brazilian who does not give clearly defined guidelines in counseling may be perceived by Korean team members to be a weak leader.

Lifestyle Issues

Some of the most emotionally charged pitfalls of multicultural teams lie in the area of lifestyle. These issues move beyond one's job to questions of one's personal and deeply held values and feelings.

Language and truth

The team leaders will likely need to speak English. Brazilians and Koreans will be hampered by this. In particular, Koreans will find it difficult to express deep feelings, the language gap being complicated by a generally reserved nature as compared to their colleagues. Personal frustrations and superficial relationships may result. A danger exists of forming exclusive national cliques centered on language differences.

Africans on the team may speak excellent English, but although they may mix easily with other cultures, they may struggle with expressing their deep feelings in a way the others understand. Relationships may be valued by Africans not for any benefit they bring but simply for the intrinsic value of relationship itself.

Regarding truth-telling, traditional Korean values perceive lying in terms of causing intentional harm, more than as a

failure to give a literal account of the facts. It is not seen as a black and white issue but a continuum. If a Korean man is unavailable to speak to someone on the telephone, he may in good conscience tell his child to say that he is not at home. An American would consider this to be lying, even if it is a "white lie." Such underlying values related to indirect speech and not desiring to hurt the feelings of others, versus a value of direct honesty, may cause division on the team. In this area, as well as in other conflicts, the African concern both for truth and for the feelings of others may be helpful, with inappropriate behavior being dealt with in a non-confrontational manner.

Families

Americans, in contrast with others, tend to delineate sharply between family and ministry, between personal time and ministry or work time. Conflict may arise when Americans are considered to be too protective of their time or, on the other hand, when Americans think their colleagues are not caring properly for their families. Africans may have the most holistic view on family issues, making little distinction between private and public time or allocation of resources for family, work, and ministry.

The values and feelings of wives on the team, raised in different cultures and thus with differing values and expectations, must be taken into account. The same is true for the values and feelings of the children being raised together in a multicultural setting. Korean parents may find it difficult when their children, who may be studying at an American-controlled school, begin to expect their parents to treat them in an American way and not a Korean way.

Americans may be offended by child-rearing practices in what they perceive to be spoiled, undisciplined Korean children, and they may consider the children's parents to be failing in their role. This applies even to very young children, such as three- and four-year-olds, whom Korean parents do not yet discipline. However, elementary-age and older Korean children may chafe at the strictures on their time, as compared to their MK playmates from other cultures. Koreans, Brazilians, and black South Africans may not understand how an American mother can let a baby cry, for example when the baby wakes at night. Team members, therefore, must respect the culturally conditioned child-raising styles of each set of parents, but parents must also be sensitive to the impact their children's behavior has on the team. Although the other families might benefit by moving toward Korean disciplines, such as in study and music lessons, Korean parents should be prepared for the inevitable influences toward less structured use of children's time.

Education of children is a major concern for missionary parents. Families from the USA and the UK tend to have more options linked to their homelands than missionaries from other lands. Koreans, South Africans, and Brazilians will likely not find schooling compatible with the system in their home countries. Attendance at an American or British school will contribute to a loss of national identity on the part of the children. This leads to a tendency of Korean families not to return to Korea for furlough, since their children do not fit into the educational structure.

Time

The dimensions of "time orientation" versus "event orientation" (Lingenfelter & Mayers, 1986) can be especially troublesome. Africans focus on the present, not sacrificing the relationship or the process for the goal. Americans, frustrated when others are not "on time" for team meetings and appointments, need to learn the importance of focusing on the people who are present, not on those who are absent. Meanwhile, the others may benefit from the Americans' concern for those who are absent. Koreans seem to have combined the strengths of being group-oriented while also succeeding in "getting things done." Perhaps all could learn from the

adage, "There is no rush in Africa, but when it's harvest time, everybody gets busy except a fool."

Unity

Africans and Koreans tend to be more group-oriented than Americans and Brazilians. Americans and Brazilians may feel that their Korean team mates over-protect one another from criticism. The Koreans, however, will likely feel that their actions display love and unity. Americans and Brazilians can learn from the Koreans' and Africans' emphasis on unity, so that it positively affects the entire team. Koreans can learn from the others the value of a broader sense of team that is not centered on an ethnic cluster.

Space

Use of space must also be considered: personal, intimate, and social space, as well as clean and holy areas. The removal of shoes in homes or on entering a church pulpit is characteristic of Koreans. Mutual respect should be shown in each other's homes on this issue. The comfort zones involving physical distance vary. American men tend to keep their distance from each other, while Korean men may walk together arm in arm. Americans, despite their typical openness to others, are more likely than Africans, Brazilians, or Koreans to try to prevent intrusions on their "personal" space, possessions, and time.

Food

Food may be another area of conflict, as well as a source of good-natured humor. Korean food is quite distinct from American, African, and Brazilian food. American and Brazilian singles living with Koreans, or families living next to Koreans, may find the distinctive smells offensive, while Africans may adapt more readily. Common meals based on the host country diet may provide a solution to this problem.

Romance

Finally, multicultural teams involving singles increase the likelihood of intercultural romance and marriage. Agreement should be reached in advance on how romance will be handled on the team and, in particular, whether intercultural relationships will be permitted. Normal friendliness in one culture may be perceived as romantic attention in another. Team leaders may need outside counsel to help couples who are developing a relationship. Koreans may find intercultural romance a particular difficulty, since marrying a non-Korean will likely cause a disruption in the ability to fit into Korean culture. The challenges of intercultural marriages are high, but for Africans, Brazilians, and Americans, such marriages tend to be more readily accepted in the home country than in Korea.

Patterns of Ministry

The question of personal spirituality is important in defining the team's ministry. Again, team members from differing cultures must learn from each other. Presumption that one's view of spirituality is normative for all—be it an emphasis on daily devotional times alone or as a group, getting a specific "word of the Lord," practicing rigorous spiritual disciplines, and so on—may cause division and lack of mutual respect.

Styles of worship are likely to vary. A Brazilian Baptist may be more effusive than an American Pentecostal. Koreans may display a vocal style in their prayer times that Brazilians and Americans find dominating. Africans are likely to be accommodating to a wide variety of styles. On joining the team, new members should be oriented to these differences and asked to be more observant than demonstrative in public worship, until they have a sense of the team's corporate style. This style will develop over time, having the potential of becoming a beautiful display of the diverse worship traditions represented.

Finally, there is potential conflict over the way to go about evangelism and church planting. The Americans will tend to want to research the area with social science tools and conduct outreach according to a logically derived plan. Brazilians will more likely emphasize the importance of building relationships in the community. To the Koreans, zeal will be a dominant characteristic, with preaching and other direct evangelism emphasized if language is not a barrier. Prayer will also be a vital element of Korean strategy, along with total personal devotion to church planting activities. A black South African may have the most holistic overall approach that is relational and spontaneous, zealous to preach but also concerned to share resources with the poor, and in it all acutely aware of the need for prayerful dependence on God.

Conclusion

Multicultural teams are an important part of missions strategy. In fact, they may well be the main workhorses that God will use to help plow, cultivate, and harvest frontier fields. We have outlined some concrete areas that these teams need to consider as they seek to establish a sense of community among themselves, as well as ministry viability. Strong multinational teams take time to develop. This strength comes from understanding each other's cultural values, along with practicing the biblical values of serving one another, giving preference to each other, and being willing to change for the sake of mutual edification.

Intercultural relations expert Geert Hofstede (1997, p. 237) states, "The principle of surviving in a multicultural world is that one does not need to think, feel, and act in the same way in order to agree on practical issues and to cooperate." If this is viable in the business world, how much more should we, united in Christ and operating in the Spirit's grace and power, be able to join together in fruitful service of our Lord!

Case Studies

Case Study 1

David Wilson, the American field director for Central Asia, is visiting one of his multinational teams. He knows that some of the Koreans on the team do not yet speak English very well, although they are making a heroic effort to learn. During his individual interviews with all the team members, he asks if there are any personal problems of which he should be aware. He is particularly impressed with how cheerful and pleasant Soo Jung, a newcomer, is, and he comments on this to the team leader. Later, the team leader writes to David. As it turns out, Soo had smiled but actually had hardly understood a word that David had said. In reality, she was facing a personal crisis related to the illness of her non-Christian father back home in Korea. "But how was I to know?" protests David to himself. "I asked her, and she did not tell me anything!" What could David do differently in the future? Any advice for Soo Jung or the team leader?

Case Study 2

Jeremias Silva has worked for nearly 10 years in Africa, far from his native São Paulo home. Sometimes, he wonders if he would prefer to go back to earlier years, when he and his wife worked alone rather than on a team. The Smiths (Americans) and the Kims (Koreans), each with school-age children, joined the Silvas two years ago. Both couples were highly committed when they came, but now disunity has settled into the team. Dave Smith believes strongly that community development work—drilling water wells and conducting primary health care classes—should play an equal role with direct witness in the team's ministry. Won Ho Kim, though, considers such development activities to be second best. Both men use arguments from Scripture to support their position. Jeremias wonders if there are not underlying cultural issues involved that are separating his co-workers. What might some

of these issues be? How could Jeremias help resolve any issues?

Case Study 3

A mission agency's executive committee faces a perplexing situation. One of their team leaders living in a male-dominated land has had to step down. A replacement must be named soon. There is one clear choice to succeed him in terms of gifts, skills, and experience: Elisabete, a single Brazilian woman. The problem is that she is a woman and single. The issues for many are her gender and marital status, not her abilities. If nominated, doubtless she would humbly decline, but the committee believes she would accept if they encouraged her to take on the responsibility. However, even if she did accept, the committee wonders if her multicultural team would accept her as leader. How would she relate to the handful of leaders, all men, from the fledgling national church? How do you think the executive committee should proceed? Assuming they appoint Elisabete, how can they help her to succeed?

Case Study 4

It has been a real struggle to accomplish much during the last three weekly meetings of a multinational team in Asia. One of the single Brazilian men has fallen in love with a Korean team member, and this has led to some division. The Korean team leader and his wife believe it is better not to encourage this relationship. The other three members of the team, an American couple and their 20-year-old son, see no serious problem with it, providing they go slowly and remain accountable. The leader tries to instruct the Brazilian man privately, but they end up arguing. The oldest American tries to act as mediator between both parties, as this issue is brought up during the team meetings. The Korean woman is confused, the team leader feels his authority is being overlooked, the Americans want to move on and focus on ministry issues, and the

Brazilian is afraid that he will lose a potential wife. Take the part of one of the seven team members, and describe what you might do to help resolve this situation.

Case Study 5

There are four couples, along with several singles, working together in a North African city. Tension between the wives seems to be ready to break out into open criticism. Jane, from America, is disappointed that her efforts to organize a support group for team wives have failed. Hae Sook, from Korea, seems to be content to quietly cook, clean house, and serve her husband—or is it that it just seems that way? They both feel rejected by Silvina, from Brazil, whose physical features and good language skills help her to fit in with local women. Meanwhile, Esther, from South Africa, is reminded of earlier days in her homeland by some negative, race-related experiences she has had while going about the town. How would you help these women understand and support each other?

Reflection and Discussion

Go through the five case studies above, and respond to the items at the end of each case. Use the material presented in this article, your own experience, and other sources to interact with these cases. Discussing these cases is a great tool for team building!

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