Cross Cultural Team by Ah Kie Lim, PhD
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Introduction

When Jesus called His disciples, He called them to serve together as a group not as individuals. He gathered a team of 12 men and sent them out two by two. Often they were together as a group ministering alongside Jesus. Though most of them were fishermen, each of them was unique in personality, character, and giftings. They had to learn how to get along and work together as a team of disciples.

What is a team? A team is a small group of people who share a specific common purpose, skills, and method for accomplishing a task. They share mutual accountability to accomplish the goals they set together. A team is committed to each other's success and to each other's personal and spiritual growth. A team that works well together does not just happen. It requires work . . . HARD WORK!

Why Work in Teams?

Working in teams has both challenges and rewards on the mission field. Jones defined a team as a group of people who share common objectives and who need to work together to achieve them. (Jones and Jones 1995:17).[1] We need each other and we are dependent on one another to help us in the areas that we are weak in order to get the job done. One of the joys for me in working with YWAM is being on a team. I have come to realize that in every

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    Jones' definition of the sign of a good team:
1. It has a balanced composition with people of complimentary skills and personality giftings.
2. They have creativity and a clear vision for the team.
3. They have a clear team goal.
4. They are not afraid to tell the truth to each other.
5. There is a sense of belonging in the team.
6. Decision making is shared by the team.
7. Team leaders and members have good relationships. They value and respect each other.
8. Mistakes are faced together and seen as opportunities for growth.
9. They change and grow as they encourage personal growth in each member.
    (Jones 1995: 24-28).

culture we can gain valuable insights and broaden our understanding and appreciation of people and their cultures. One of the foundational values of YWAM is working in teams[2].

What is Cross-cultural Team Work?

It is a sad fact to say that many cross-cultural workers leave their field assignment because they cannot get along with their colleagues. Hence, it is crucial that teams learn to work well together using their giftings and talents, as well as their personalities and cultural differences, for the enhancement of the kingdom of God. Jones and Jones, in their book, *Teamwork*, use the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to help emphasize the need to understand the preferred style of each team member (Jones and Jones 1995). Another practical handbook, *The Missionary Team,* edited by Ian E. Benson, guides cross-cultural workers in understanding team formation, team conflicts, cross-cultural family working, pitfalls for cross-cultural workers, etc. It also helps the team to understand the function and responsibilities of a team leader and team members, which will enable a team to work more effectively on the field (Benson 2002). Ken Williams, from Wycliffe Bible Translators, has developed a 4 1/2-day workshop called *Sharpening Your Interpersonal Skills* for cross-cultural workers to provide training in developing and maintaining healthy relationships. This teaching tool is also being used by many mission organizations to equip their workers to work as a team. This tool is probably one of the most systematic ways that interpersonal issues and skills are being addressed internationally for cross-cultural workers.

"The more cultures represented in a team, the more complex the team dynamics become." (Roembke 1998:93). Roembke emphasized that in a cross-cultural team it is important for the group to establish a team culture and not to have the majority culture in the group dominate the culture of the team. For a multicultural team to work well together it is important that team members respect one another's culture. Mutual respect sets the stage for a reciprocal relationship between equals, which is the foundation for trust. Communication

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[2] FUNCTION IN TEAMS

YWAM is called to function in teams in all aspects of ministry and leadership. We believe that a combination of complementary gifts, callings, perspectives, ministries and generations working together in unity at all levels of our mission provides wisdom and safety. Seeking God's will and making decisions in a team context allows accountability and contributes to greater relationship, motivation, responsibility and ownership of the vision.

between team members is a high value.   There is no one way or method of communicating that is the only right way. The important thing is learning to listen to each other.

Another factor to remember in a multicultural team is not having the assumption that the majority culture, nor the culture of the team leader, will rule the team culturally. When cultural values (not Biblical values) are imposed upon the team or a team member because the others on the team are insensitive or blind to their attempts to elevate their own value as the norm, this creates culture imperialism. Superiority needs to be exposed.

Multicultural teams can be an exciting stage for spiritual and personal growth when they are managed well. If the team leader is able to channel the differences in team members for good use and help the members to mutually respect each other's culture, it communicates acceptance of each person.

Building Healthy, Resilient Teams

Kelly O'Donnell identifies eight characteristics of resilient teams.   First, he said for a team to be resilient they need to have a commitment to one another and to the team's purpose. Second, as they develop commitment they need to learn to appreciate one another and to acknowledge each other's contributions to the group's cohesion. Third, as a team they need to persevere together in believing in each other in spite of their weaknesses, and recall the many examples of God's faithfulness in the past. Fourth, the resilient team needs to work through communication impasses and try alternative approaches to ministry when necessary. Fifth, Kelly emphasizes the need to spend quality time together especially during the early stages of team life and during crisis situations. Sixth, to build a resilient team, the team must also remember to maintain and have good communication skills. Team members must learn to listen and empathize well, and also share their thoughts and feelings with each other in culturally sensitive ways. Seventh, having a good understanding of one another is one of the keys of building a resilient team. Healthy teams will experience tensions and hurts. To lessen the impact, team members can look at their different "styles" and preferences: personality, leadership, decision-making, learning, work, communication and spirituality. Team members genuinely try to understand and accept one another.   Lastly, a resilient team requires regiment. It is important to have clear roles for leaders and members, well-defined decision

making methods, clear accountability and conflict resolution guidelines, and in many cases a written agreement or "memo of understanding" (O'Donnell 2002:393-395).

Team Concepts and Functions

Methods of solving team problems in a multicultural team are often influenced by culture. Asian team members who are led by Westerners may feel distressed that their leaders are not clear in stating and motivating towards goals. They would not approach the leader due to strong respect for leaders in their culture. In the West, leadership style is more collaborative, non-directive versus directive.

Westerners are more confrontational in their approach, which often can be viewed as not submissive or rebellion by the Asian leaders. Asians are taught to be polite to their elders. Understanding one another's culture is a long and enriching process. Appreciation is a first step forward in positive team working environment.

Dimensions of national culture

According to Geert Hofstede, culture refers to the collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another. Hofstede identifies four dimensions of national culture:

1. Power distance (tolerance for unequal power distribution in a society). For example, both power distance and individualism affect the type of leadership most likely to be effective in a country. Hofstede has shown that in countries with lower power distance scores, there is considerable acceptance of leadership styles and management models that are even more participative than those that presently exist. According to Hofstede, the ideal leader in a culture in which Power Distance is small would be a resourceful democrat. On the other hand, the ideal leader in a culture in which Power Distance is large would be a benevolent autocrat.

High power Distance:
- Who you are related to matters
- Who you are matters
- Honoring people you are dealing with is a high regard
- Give attention to appropriate greetings especially during public functions

Lower Power Distance:

- What you do is more important than who you are
- Are not offended in casual atmosphere
- Lack of protocol does not mean rejecting, nor is dishonoring
- Addressing people by their given names unless others use titles.

2. Uncertainty avoidance (the extent to which people feel threatened by ambiguous or unstructured situation)

Direct Communication:
- Short, direct questions show respect for the person's time
- A "yes" is a "yes" and a "no" is a "no".
- An honest, direct answer is information. It does not reflect on how the person feels about you.
- You can say what you think, but it will usually not be taken personally.

Indirect Communication:
- It's all about being friendly
- Every question must be phrased in such a way as to not offend by its directness
- Using of third party
- A "yes" may not be an answer to your question. It could be a polite no.
- Avoid embarrassing people.

3. Individualism/collectivism (members of a society are expected to look out for themselves and their immediate family). In collectivist cultures, leadership should respect and encourage employees' group loyalty; incentives should be given collectively, and their distribution should be left up to the group. In individualist cultures, individuals tend to be more mobile, and incentives should be given to individuals.

Individual cultures:
- I am my own identity
- Every individual should have an opinion and can speak for themselves
- Taking initiative is good and expected
- My behavior reflects on me, not on the group

Collective culture:

- I belong to a community
- My identity is tied to the group – community, family, village
- The group protects and provides for me
- Taking initiative within a group can be greatly determined by my role
- Team members expect direction from leaders

4. Masculinity/femininity (clearly defined gender roles with a focus on assertiveness and material success).

Hofstede suggested that although some cultural gaps were not very disruptive or were even complementary, differences between two cultures in uncertainty avoidance were potentially very problematic for international cooperation because of differences in tolerance towards risk, formalization, and the like (Hofstede 1984). In her book, "*From Foreign to Familiar*", Lanier provides valuable insights and tools for cross-cultural workers who are preparing to work in a foreign land. She helped her reader to captured and understand keys concepts of one's own cultures and the culture of the people they are working in. Her insights on hot and cold climate cultures, compliments Hofstede's theory of dimensions of national culture (Lanier 2000).

Team Conflict

Often conflicts in a multicultural team arise due to different cultural ways of doing things and ways of communication. Conflicts could arise when westerners are considered to be too protective of their time and space. Different styles of parenting within a team can also be a stress point. Food may be another area of conflict as well as a source of good-natured humor (Greenlee, Cho, and Thulare 2002:402-403). In conflict resolution it is crucial to understand that different cultures deal with conflicts differently.

> Western styles of conflict resolution value one-to-one direct address confrontation, self-disclosure, negotiation, and resolution, whereas in the two-thirds of the world, conflicts are immediately referred to a third party—an older, wiser, neutral, skilled family members or a trusted person from the community.

Triangulation serves to save face for both parties and to reduce shaming in the system (Elmer 1993:67).

Both ways of handling conflict in a team are good depending on the people who are involved. Cultural sensitivity needs to be applied by the mediator who is involved in helping the team resolve their conflict. What you heard may not necessarily be what it means. Watch out for non-verbal cues. Teams need to discuss when differences of communication arise. Members of strong teams have good communication skills, including conflict resolution. They listen well and can empathize by reflecting back what they hear and validate others' feelings. There is no right communication method in a cross-cultural team. Teams need to work out a pattern of communication among themselves.

Points to remember in a multi-cultural conflict situation:

Majority world cultures:

- Are relationship based
- Communication must create a "feel-good" atmosphere
- Society is feeling oriented
- Efficiency and time do not take priority over the person
- It is inappropriate to "talk business" upon first arriving at a business meeting or making a business phone call

Western World cultures:

- Are task oriented
- Communication must provide accurate information
- Society is logic oriented
- Efficiency and time are highly priorities, and taking them seriously is a statement of respect for the other person

Conclusion

For a team to work well together, they need to work at destroying stereotypes that may have unconsciously crept into their thinking. Accepting each person as he or she is will be key to maintaining trust and unity in a team. The greatest gift team members can give to one another is to accept each other unconditionally, irrespective of each country's past or even

their own personal past and cultures where they are from. The best people strategy is therefore to treat everyone with respect and trust, and to provide them with a work environment which offers them the opportunity to develop skills and competencies relevant not just to their current job, but to jobs which will need to be done in the future.

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