

AVOIDING PITFALLS ON MULTICULTURAL MISSION TEAMS

By David Greenlee, Yong Joon Cho and Abraham Thulare

A significant and well-known development in recent years has been the increasing role of the global church, and not just churches from certain regions, in sending mission workers. One result of this is that multicultural mission teams have become increasingly common. Along with their advantages, potential conflicts exist which may destroy the team's 'sense of community' and, correspondingly, its fruitful ministry. Based on our experience with such teams, we begin this article with a summary of multicultural team strengths. We then discuss selected areas of potential weakness of an imaginary but not unlikely team, comprised of Koreans, Brazilians, black South Africans, Christian background Arabs and Americans serving in the Arab world.

Our focus is on understanding how teams can be impacted by different underlying values - the long-enduring judgements appraising the worth of an idea, object, person, place or practice (Dodd 1991:85) - as well as on understanding the observed behaviour of mission workers from Brazil, Korea, South Africa, the Middle East and the USA. We know that all workers from these countries will not act precisely in the ways we suggest. In fact, descriptions of normal behaviour for a given culture describe a central trend. They apply only in a general way to the group, not specifically and precisely to any individual. Further, an experienced intercultural mission worker is not likely to respond in the same way as a recent arrival from the home country; we can grow in our understanding and change our patterns of behaviour. Yet it is our hope that the cultural tendencies we point out will be coupled with study of relevant biblical texts and stimulate useful dialogue involving these and other nationality mixes on mission teams.

A Sense of Community

Key to the survival of multinational teams in frontier missions is fostering what community psychologists over the last thirty 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" (Sarason 1974:157).

McMillan and Chavis (1986; also see comments under "Internet Resources" at the end of this article) define four elements necessary for a high sense of community within a particular reference group.

1. *The element of membership:* The feeling of belonging or sharing a sense of personal relatedness.
2. *The element of influence:* The sense of having influence over a group and being influenced by that group.
3. *The element of fulfilment of needs:* The belief that one's needs can be and are being met through the collective resources of the group.
4. *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 Mobilisation'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 - are a credit to the gospel and make a great impact on outsiders.

Multicultural teams have an in-built, heightened sensitivity as to what is biblical and what is cultural about themselves. The team helps its 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 offence.

The multicultural team, because of its diverse mix, may be less likely confused with 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, Arab value on relationships, Korean zeal, South African commitment and American organisation 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 mission workers, they will gain a heightened understanding of the Body of Christ and the nature of God's mission.

Problems in Multicultural Teams

Although the mix 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 (1992:156-57) states that one of the ongoing challenges is for the team to distinguish what is clearly condemned and clearly approved by Scripture, from those things which are either neutral or else subject to varying interpretation, such as drinking alcoholic beverages.

The following examples of potential problems that we describe 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.

1. Leadership-Related Problems

Communication style. Starting with communication style, an American team leader may cause offence by using an open, direct style both in giving direction and in correcting problems. The 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. To be in touch with all the team members, however, 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 is aware of her needs. In addition, failure to spend time developing relationships with team members could diminish the team's perception of the American leader's authority, which the American may presume is based primarily on a job description, rather than on strong relationships and age-based respect.

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.

Conflict resolution. Conflict will arise at some time for the team; understanding how others approach, or avoid, conflict resolution can be an important part of the process of reconciliation. At one end of the spectrum an Arab may appear to ignore, or at least try to move away from an issue rather than deal with it directly. If the issue is significant, though, he may express himself with strong emotion, quite different from the restraint of a Korean teammate. An American may easily 'share her heart' (even if some may think superficially), but the rest of the team will find this awkward until high levels of trust have been built. Before a problem arises the team may find it helpful to study biblical passages on forgiveness and establish guidelines on how they will respond to each other when conflict does arise.

Women in leadership. 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 and Arab women, especially those with a good education, have a significant role in society and especially in the household but are not often given leadership roles in church structures, except perhaps for ministry among women. At the same time, a woman who had served as a pastor in her home country was affirmed in that role in Sudan, but in another Middle Eastern country was told by her Christian language teacher "We have no [female] 'pastoras' here." American and European women who are open to assuming leadership positions may thus feel stifled by Koreans and, to a certain extent Brazilians, who may not want

them to move above a middle level leadership position, or that they remain focused on women's ministries and not on groups of both genders.

Counselling. Finally, leaders often become engaged in counselling with team members. The Korean educational system moulds Koreans to assume that the expert does the talking and the learner 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. However, the American or Brazilian leader who does not give clearly defined guidelines in counselling, may be perceived to be a weak leader by Korean team members.

2. 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. For example, even though the team may share a biblical value on the frugal use of money, an American might not think twice about an expensive cup of coffee at Starbucks but be puzzled at the emphasis of an Arab teammate on clothing.

Language issues. Although some teams function in the language of the country where they serve, in many cases the team will function in English. Those needing to learn both a team language and a public ministry language will be hampered by this. Those who learned English from a British instructor may find it difficult to understand the spoken English of an American teammate, something the American may find hard to comprehend or adapt to.

In the Arab world language issues are complicated by the variations of spoken Arabic from country to country. Arabs from Egypt and the Levant may have a head start on the rest of the team, but they will also need to adapt when serving in North Africa or the Arabian Peninsula.

Koreans may find it difficult to express deep feelings in the team language, the language gap being complicated by a generally reserved nature as compared to their colleagues. Africans on the team may speak excellent English, but while mixing easily with other cultures 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.

Personal frustrations and superficial relationships may result due to these language barriers. A danger exists of forming exclusive national cliques centred on language differences.

Family and the home. As for family life, Americans, in contrast with the 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 and Arabs may have a more holistic view on family issues, making little distinction between private and public time or in allocation of resources for family, work and ministry. But caution is needed, and the multicultural team must respect boundaries! There is always an *ahlan wasahlan* at the door of an Arab home. But if you knock at the

door during afternoon rest time the Arab family would say those words but not really mean them. "Listen, observe, and cut your visit short and next time choose a more suitable time," is the advice of a Western woman married to an Arab ministry leader.

Wives and children. 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 and Arab children, considering 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 more free m.k. playmates. 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 behaviour 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 parents serving abroad. Families from the USA and Great Britain tend to have more options linked to their homelands than their colleagues 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 their children. This contributes to a tendency of Korean families to not return to Korea for furlough since their children do not fit in to the educational structure. For Arabs the problem may be less pronounced if a good Arabic language school is available, although in North Africa this option may include an unwanted religious element. In any case, in their homelands many Arab Christians send their children to a dual medium (language) school so an English or French language education for their children may be perceived as something more positive than by the Brazilian or Korean parents.

Telling the truth. Traditional Korean values perceive the act of lying to be considered a matter of 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' while, according to a counsellor working in the Arab world, Arabs may also consider lying as an appropriate means to set a boundary and still save face. 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 other conflicts, the African combined concern for truth and the feelings of others may be helpful, untoward behaviour being confronted in a non-confrontational manner.

Time or event? The dimensions of ‘time orientation’ versus ‘event orientation’ (Lingenfelter and Mayers, 1986) can be especially troublesome. Time together with teammates is a key issue and vital in building relationships. Africans focus on the present, not sacrificing the relationship or the process for the goal. An Arab couple may arrive late for a team meeting because someone stopped by their apartment just as they were leaving and found it unthinkable to simply greet the unexpected guests and leave. Americans, who might be frustrated that others are not ‘on time’ for team meetings and appointments, need to learn the importance of focusing on the people who are present, not those who are absent. Meanwhile, the rest of the team may benefit from the Americans’ concern for those who are absent and the implication of respect for each other on the team and not just those who happened to show up at the door. Koreans seem to have combined the strengths of being group-oriented while also succeeding in ‘getting things done’. Perhaps all could learn from the comment that “There is no rush in Africa, but when it’s harvest time everybody gets busy except a fool.”

Groups or individuals? Africans and Koreans tend to be more group-oriented than Americans and Brazilians. Americans and Brazilians may feel that their Korean teammates 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 the value of a broader sense of team from the others that is not centred on an ethnic cluster.

Use of space. How people use 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. Arabs have similar practices, except in church where shoes remain on. Mutual respect should be shown in each others’ 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. An Arab man may greet his male friends with a ‘holy kiss’ - men of other nationalities on his team will probably, at first, find this upsetting! Americans, despite their typical openness to others, are more likely than Africans, Brazilians, or Koreans to try to prevent intruding on their ‘personal’ space, possessions and time.

Food. Diet and nutrition on the team may be another area of conflict. It may be as simple, yet important, an issue as a weight-conscious American trying to find the way to politely and effectively tell his Arab teammates that “your cooking is delicious, but I am satisfied and prefer not to eat any more.” Korean food is quite distinct. American and Brazilian singles living with Koreans, or families living next to Koreans, may find the smells offensive while Africans may adapt more readily. Whatever the ethnic origin of the food, Arabs may be less adventurous in trying new tastes as compared to some other members of the team. Common meals based on the host country diet may provide a solution to these problems.

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, if intercultural relationships should be developed. 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 but the number of Arab-Western marriages among Christians in ministry suggests that this is not as significant an issue in the Middle East. That is not to say, though, that such marriages are trouble-free. The challenges of intercultural marriage are high but for Arabs, Africans, Brazilians, and Americans such marriage tends to be more readily accepted at home than in Korea.

3. Patterns of Ministry

Spirituality. 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 own 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', practising rigorous spiritual disciplines and so on - may cause division and lack of mutual respect.

Worship. Styles of worship are likely to vary. A Brazilian Baptist may be more effusive than an American Pentecostal but Koreans, in their prayer times, may display a vocal style that Brazilians and Americans find dominating. Africans, meanwhile, are likely to be accommodating to a wide variety of styles. Christian background Arabs tend to be conservative in their worship styles with many of their songs translations from English or other languages. Increasingly, though, worship songs are being written in Arabic and reflect a more lively style typical of other Arabic music. Middle Eastern, Christian-background Arabs should remember, though, that the styles and songs that they value 'back home' may not be those valued by new believers in North Africa or the Gulf. 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.

Outreach. Finally, there is potential conflict over the way to go about evangelism and church planting. Arabs will tend to be very relational in their approach to outreach. In their own country they may be more sensitive to the dangers involved but elsewhere they may be bolder than the rest of the team. 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 emphasise the importance of building relationships in the community. To the Korean, 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 the Korean's 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 frontier missions strategy. In fact, they may well be the main workhorses that God will use to help plough, 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 others' cultural values, along with practising 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 states that “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” (1997, 237). 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 for Discussion

Note: These case studies are fictional. Although they are based on our experience the names and situations have been changed sufficiently that any resemblance to specific individuals is coincidental and unintended.

Case Study One: David Wilson, the American field director for Central Asia, is visiting one of his multi-national teams. He knows that some of the Koreans on the team do not yet speak English very well, although they make an heroic effort to learn. During his personal interviews with all the team members, he asks if there are any personal problems of which he should be aware. His is particularly impressed with how cheerful and pleasant Soo Jung is, a newcomer, and 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 he 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 Two: Jeremias Silva has worked for nearly ten years among Muslim peoples in Africa, far from his native Sao 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 Three: On the flight back to his Middle Eastern home, returning from a mission executive meeting, Martin, an American, told himself that the main thing he wanted was time with his family. The day he returned, he promised his wife and two young teens that next Saturday was to be their special day. On Saturday morning, as the family was getting things together for a special outing, Hany, an Egyptian colleague, arrived at the door with Hamid, a new believer. Inside, Martin groaned. If they had only gotten up half an hour sooner, they would have left by now. The only option open to him now was to invite Hany and Hamid in, prepare some tea and talk for a while, hoping that nobody else showed up for a visit. Martin and his family have come to minister to people like Hamid but they also need time as a family. How do you think that Martin and his

wife should handle the immediate and future situations involving family time? What does Hany need to understand about the family and how can he help them?

Case Study Four: A mission agency's executive committee faces a perplexing situation. One of their team leaders living in a male-dominated Muslim 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 issue for many is 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 Five: It has been a real struggle to accomplish much during the last three weekly meetings of a multi-national team in the Arabian Peninsula. One of the single South African 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. Three other three members of the team, an American couple and a Syrian single man, see no serious problem with it, providing they go slowly and remain accountable. The leader tries to instruct the South African 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, the South African is afraid that he will lose a potential wife, and the Syrian feels that no one wants to listen to his ideas. Take the part of one of the seven team members and describe what you might do to help resolve this situation.

Case Study Six: There are five couples, along with several singles, working together in an Arab capital 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 seems to be content to quietly cook, clean and serve her husband – or is it that it just seems that way? They both feel rejected by Silvina, whose Brazilian 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. And, some of the women wonder (although they would not dare to say it out loud) do they have to do things the way Suhair suggests, the 'Arab way' – meaning, how it was done in her church back in Amman? How would you help these women understand and support each other?

References and Suggested Reading

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Internet resources:

Links to a large number of intercultural communications resources can be found online at <http://www.mislinks.org/topics/icc.htm>. This includes links to articles and simulation games by many noted experts in the field such as Geert Hofstede, Charles Hamden-Turner, Fons Trompenaars, and the GLOBE Project.

The *Wikipedia* article on 'cross-cultural communication', found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intercultural_communication, also has an extensive list of useful links.

The key article on 'sense of community' by McMillan and Chavis (1986) is discussed in detail at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sense_of_community and <http://www.answers.com/topic/sense-of-community#wp-Membership>. The article itself is available for purchase at <http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/abstract/112407935/ABSTRACT>.

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David Greenlee (USA), Yong Joong Cho (South Korea) and Abraham Thulare (South Africa) each have many years of experience with multicultural mission teams in diverse settings around the world. This article has been updated by David Greenlee from earlier versions, including *Doing Member Care Well*, ed. by Kelly O'Donnell (William Carey Library, 2002).