Avoiding Pitfalls on Multi-Cultural Mission Teams

by Yong Joong Cho and David Greenlee

With the globalization of missions, the use of multi-cultural teams is becoming common. This is certainly true for those teams serving in frontier areas. Along with 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 multi-cultural team strengths. We then discuss selected areas of potential weakness of an imaginary but not unlikely team comprised of Koreans, Brazilians, and Americans.

Our focus 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 1991:85)–as well as on understanding the observed behavior of missionaries from Brazil, Korea, and the USA. We know that all Americans, Brazilians, or Koreans will not act precisely in the ways we suggest. 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 frontier teams.

A Sense of Community

Key to the survival of multi-national teams in frontier missions is fostering what community psychologists over the last 20 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 1974:157).

McMillan and Chavis (1986, cited in Stoner, 1993) 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 fulfillment 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 Multi-cultural teams–or any teams–to develop this sense of community. But when team members commit themselves to grow together through this process, the benefits can be great.

Strengths of Multi-cultural Teams

Multi-cultural teams can model the diversity of the Body of Christ in microcosm better than mono-cultural teams. A mono-cultural 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!"

Multi-cultural 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—are a credit to the Gospel and make a great impact on outsiders.

Multi-cultural 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. Norms of a given host culture, for instance what constitutes a lie, might be misunderstood by some team members and cause offense. Diverse cultural backgrounds provide perspective and help the team as a unit to respond appropriately.

The multi-cultural team, because of its diverse mix, may be less likely confused with political agents and so not perceived as being subversive by the host country. Americans are not the only ones who may face such suspicions.

Although each individual is unique within his/her national local culture, each national group tends to have certain typical characteristics which can enrich the team. Brazilian vibrancy, Korean discipline, 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 multi-national team experience of those they send. These churches which stay in close contact with their missionaries will have

a heightened understanding of the Body of Christ and the nature of God's mission.

Problems In Multi-cultural 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 interpretations (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.

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. 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 presumes is based primarily on a job description.

A Korean leader may find egalitarian-minded Americans too direct in expressing disagreement with his/her 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/her directive style may well offend Americans and to some extent Brazilians.

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. American 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 of managerial position.

Finally, leaders often become engaged in counseling with team members. The Korean educational system molds 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. But the American or Brazilian leader who does not give clearly-defined guidelines in counseling may be perceived to be a weak leader by Korean team members.

Lifestyle Issues.

Some of the most emotionally-charged pitfalls of multi-cultural 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.

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

As for family life, Americans, in contrast with Brazilians and Koreans, tend to delineate sharply between family and ministry, between personal time and ministry or work time. Conflict may arise when the American is considered to be too protective of his/her time or, on the other hand, when the American accuses his colleagues of not caring properly for their families.

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 multi-cultural 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, not a Korean way.

Americans can be offended by child rearing practices, in what they perceive to be spoiled, undisciplined Korean 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. But elementary-age and older Korean children may chafe at the strictures on their time as compared to their freer American and Brazilian playmates. And Koreans or Brazilians 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 American and Brazilian 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 Great Britain tend to have more options linked to their homelands than missionaries from other lands. Koreans 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 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.

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." 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. Brazilian style provides a more middle way that may help both Koreans and Americans feel comfortable.

The dimensions of "time orientation" versus "event orientation" (Lingenfelter and Mayers, 1986) can be especially troublesome. Americans may become frustrated when Brazilians are not "on time" for team meetings and appointments. Americans need to learn from Brazilians and Koreans about the importance of focusing on the people who are present, not those who are absent. Brazilians and Koreans may benefit from the Americans' concern for those who are absent.

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. Amer-

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icans and Brazilians can learn from the Koreans' 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 centered on an ethnic cluster.

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 others' homes on this issue. The comfort zones involving physical distance vary. American men tend to keep their distance from each other while Korean or Brazilian men may walk together arm in arm. Americans, despite their typical openness to others , are more likely than Brazilians or Koreans to try to prevent intruding on their "personal" space, possessions, and time.

Food can be another area of con-

flict. Korean food is quite distinct from American and Brazilian food. American and Brazilian singles living with Koreans, or families living next to Koreans, may find the distinctive smells offensive. Common meals based on the host country diet may provide a solution to this problem.

Finally, multi-cultural 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. Team leaders may need outside counsel to help the couple. Koreans may find intercultural romance a particular difficulty since marrying a non-Korean will likely cause a disruption in the ability to fit into the Korean culture. The challenges of intercultural marriage are high for Brazilians and Americans, but such marriage tends to be more readily accepted in these countries 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 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", 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. But Koreans in their prayer times may display a vocal style that Brazilians and Americans find dominating. 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 American will tend to want to research the area with social science tools and conduct outreach according to a logically derived plan. The Brazilian will more likely emphasize 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.

Conclusion

Multi-cultural teams are an important part of frontier missions strategy. In fact, they may well be the main work horses 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 others 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.

Case Studies for Discussion:

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

a 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. He 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 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. But Jeremias wonders if there are not underlying cultural issues involved that are separating his coworkers. 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, Paulo, a Brazilian colleague, arrived at the door with Kamal, a new believer. Inside Martin groaned. If they had gotten up a half hour sooner, they would have been gone by now. Now the only option was to invite Paulo and Kamal in, prepare some tea, and talk at least for a while hoping that nobody else showed up for a visit. Martin and his family have come to minister to people like Kamal. 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?

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: Elisabet, a single Brazilian woman. But that is just it–she is a woman, and a single woman at that. The issue for many is her gender and marital status and 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. But, even if she did accept, the committee wonders if her multi-cultural 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 Elisabet, how can they help her to succeed?

Case Study Five—It has been a real struggle to accomplish much work during the last three weekly meetings of a multinational team in China. 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, provided 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 a 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 loose a potential wife. Take the part of one of the seven team members, and describe what you might do to help resolve this situation.

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