LEADING MULTICULTURAL TEAMS



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CHAPTER 1

THE CHALLENGE OF LEADING MULTICULTURAL TEAMS

Leading a multicultural team is a great adventure. But it is also a complex task that involves huge challenges. Over the past twenty years, as our roles have shifted from being mission team leaders to consultants and trainers of missionary teams, we have met many leaders of multicultural teams who are struggling with those challenges. One leader told us, "I've been on . . . several multicultural teams and in at least two of them, if the question was asked, 'Are multicultural teams worth the effort?' I'd give an unequivocal no as the answer." Another leader admitted, "At a certain point in our team leadership I began to doubt the real value of multicultural teams. It seemed like so much hard work with little payoff in terms of ministry effectiveness."

These two leaders are not unique in questioning whether the effort involved in multicultural teams is worth it. Despite these questions and doubts, organizations including mission agencies and churches are continuing to recruit and build multicultural teams either intentionally or out of necessity. Are multicultural teams really worth the effort? Yes! We need the creative answers to complex problems that multicultural teams are able to generate. We need the close commitment to each other that effective multicultural teams offer in order to be able to cope with the demands of ministry in our rapidly changing world. And we need practical, biblical models of intercultural harmony in a world ruptured by interethnic tensions.

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Multicultural ministry teams commonly face challenges in the areas of communication, making decisions, and managing conflict. In our interviews with church planting teams in one large international mission agency, team members reported that their leaders were especially weak in clarifying expectations and team members' roles and in confronting problems. They and their team leaders strongly felt the need for more support and training in these areas. Chapter 10 will address the question of how organizations can more proactively support their leaders and teams.

Research into multicultural teams suggests that multicultural teams have the potential to become exceptionally effective but also to experience serious conflict. In our own research into multicultural church planting teams, we discovered some seriously damaged relationships and many team members who felt their leader's style of leading was hindering their team's effectiveness.[1] Lorraine Dierck, a missionary to Thailand who studied multicultural mission teams there, found that two out of twelve teams in her research disintegrated due to intercultural conflict.[2]

The failure of a ministry team can be a devastating experience. Although chronic conflict does not always lead to the team disbanding, it inevitably results in damage to relationships. Christian workers who are unprepared for conflict in team relationships expect unity and harmony to be relatively straightforward. This is rarely the case. Conflict and misunderstanding are normal between people in all contexts, but in intercultural interaction they are greatly amplified. Team leaders need to be skilled at managing intercultural conflict on their teams, and chapter 7 discusses this issue.

A major cause of conflict in multicultural teams is the differences between the cultural values of team members. Paul Hiebert defined culture as "the partially integrated system of ideas, feelings, and values encoded in learned patterns of behavior, signs, products, rituals, beliefs, and worldviews shared by a community of people."[3] Culture affects all dimensions of human

1 Richard Hibbert, "Enhancing WEC Church Planting Teams: A Study of the Factors Influencing Their Effectiveness" (DMin diss., Columbia International University, 2002), 167, 169.

2 Lorraine Dierck, "Teams That Work: Leadership, Power, and Decision-making in Multicultural Teams in Thailand" (DMiss diss., Biola University, 2007), 9.

3 Paul Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 18.

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experience. It is inculcated into us from birth and profoundly affects the way we interact with other people.

One of the most powerful functions of culture is that it defines for the members of each cultural group what is right and acceptable and how things should be done. Because our culture is so fundamental to who we are, it is hard for us to understand and accept that what seems obvious to us is only our own culture's perspective. This attitude is called ethnocentrism. One of the consequences of ethnocentrism is that we judge people who behave or think differently to us as wrong. When things seem "wrong" we feel bad. We want to fix those things up so that we do not feel bad anymore. We feel a need for the world to be "right" and cannot just leave things in what we feel is a "wrong" state.

An example of a cultural value that varies across cultures is orientation to time. When we were working in the Middle East, we had an American coworker who invited us for the evening meal. For most Australians it is usually acceptable and even considerate to be up to half an hour late for such an engagement. When we arrived half an hour late, he was furious at what he considered to be our sinful lack of punctuality. In contrast, it was normal for the host people of the country to arrive one or even two hours late for an appointment, and not to wait patiently for them was considered extremely inconsiderate. If your team consists of people from many different cultures with very different views on the reasonable limits of punctuality, major conflict is highly likely.

Outward behaviors are linked to deeply held cultural values. In the example above, our American coworker believed that time is valuable and should not be wasted, whereas the members of the host culture held that people are of primary importance and that time is limitless, relatively unimportant, and not controllable. In both cases, cultural values strongly affected behavior and emotions.

When people from other cultures act in ways that we see as inappropriate, we tend to make negative judgments about them. It is not uncommon for Christians from one culture working with Christians from another culture to judge them as not even Christians because they see them as behaving in ways that are unacceptable in their own culture. In a multicultural ministry team, this can have devastating effects.

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Differences in cultural values also mean that good leadership is perceived differently by people from different cultures. Leaders will naturally use the model of leadership that is familiar to them, even though this may be inappropriate or even offensive to members of the team from other cultures, who expect their leaders to lead in ways that are familiar to them. Two dimensions of culture described by Geert Hofstede that particularly affect people's views of leadership are power distance and collectivism.[4]

High power distance inclines people to be more accepting of a leader's decisions, whereas people from low-power-distance cultures tend to expect more direct involvement in decision making. If differences in power distance are not understood and managed well, they can have negative consequences for multicultural teams. Western cultures are generally low-power-distance cultures, and this is reflected in their strong emphasis on democratic leadership. The majority of the world's cultures are more comfortable with high power distance. In high-power-distance cultures, followers accept and expect that their leaders will have more power than they do. Leaders are given higher status but are also expected to be aware of individuals' needs. High-power-distance cultures ascribe status according to age and social seniority and expect their leaders to direct rather than discuss.

Differences in power distance can cause tensions in multicultural teams. Australians, for example, are relatively low in power distance, whereas Chinese and people from most of Asia are much higher in this cultural dimension. Peter,[5] an Australian in his early forties, became the senior pastor of a multicultural church with a large Chinese membership. During his first weeks in the church, he worked hard to have democratic meetings with the ministry team, where he said little and tried to get all the staff to contribute to discussions in order to reach a consensus on the church's direction. The Chinese co-pastor seemed to withdraw more and more, and soon there were significant tensions within the leadership team. The Chinese co-pastor expected his leader to be much more directive in his leadership. In a ministry team in Eastern Europe, another Australian was appointed as the leader of

4 Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010).

5 Although all the examples given in this book are from real life, names and some other details have been changed to preserve anonymity.

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a team that included local believers and Asian missionaries, who were all older than him and from high-power-distance cultures. Within days it was clear that there were major tensions in the team. Discussions were ineffective and tension increased. In each of these cases, the leader was considered to be too young by his high-power-distance team members, and his nondirective approach reinforced his lack of credibility. In both cases, the teams failed. The effect of these and other cultural dimensions on multicultural team leadership is discussed in more detail in chapter 2.

Many Christians misunderstand the concept of Christian unity to mean never having any disagreements and everyone having the same values. They can therefore find it difficult to discuss their reservations about multicultural teams and think that Christian unity means that it is unacceptable to not always be in total agreement with their teammates.

We will not always be able to work harmoniously with other Christians who have different cultural values. Some people may not be able to make the compromises necessary to becoming part of an effective multicultural team. An Australian missionary couple was recently assigned to work in a team with Koreans for their prefield orientation. They found that they were unable to cope with the differences in communication style and cultural values between them and their Korean teammates. As a result, they decided not to join the mission agency and said that the effort of working in multicultural teams was one of the main reasons for their decision. This was not a failure but an insightful recognition of their personal limitations. Multicultural teams require compromises on the part of everyone in them. If it is not possible for team members to make those compromises, it is totally acceptable for them to work in another context.

THE VISION: A HEALTHY MULTICULTURAL TEAM

Healthy multicultural teams are beacons of hope in a world that is struggling with intercultural conflicts, racial prejudice, and socioeconomic inequity. With increasing migration and highly diverse international cities, multicultural teams are becoming more and more common. But many workplaces and teams are still dominated by one culture, and people from minority cultures are often forced to compromise at least some of their values and

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