

## LEADING MULTI-CULTURAL TEAMS

BY ADRIAN BEAVIS

In the first church I was a minister a friend of mine used to say, 'This church is full of PLUSes! **People Like US!**' He was right – almost everyone was born in the UK. Ten years later I was vicar of an urban, multi-cultural church, with congregation from over 35 countries, and a staff team from six countries. It was a church full of people 'not like me'. Often it felt like a glimpse of heaven with many nations worshipping together. But leading a team from different cultural and national backgrounds had plenty of challenges – church life was richer, but team leadership was harder.

From the beginning early church leaders grappled with multi-cultural leadership. Jesus told his disciples to 'make disciples of all nations' (Matthew 28:19) and 'to be witnesses... to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:7) – a clear command to take the gospel not just to 'people like us'. By Romans 16 Paul wrote to leaders who were 'male, female, Roman and Jew'. If we're serious about 'making disciples of all nations' in our increasingly cosmopolitan communities then our teams will increasingly need to be multi-cultural. We will then run head-long into the complex but rewarding challenges of leading multi-cultural teams.

### MULTI-CULTURE CLUB

In The Culture Map, Erin Meyer identifies eight essential aspects of team life:

1. Communication.
2. Persuading.
3. Leading.
4. Decision-making.
5. Trusting.
6. Evaluating.
7. Disagreeing.
8. Scheduling.

In each of these areas there is a spectrum of behaviour – so decision making, for example, is on a spectrum from consensual to top down; evaluating is from direct to indirect. Significantly people from different cultures will approach these issues from very different points on the spectrum. For example: Russians in my congregation were very willing to give very direct, even negative, face-to-face feedback. My Korean team members often did not give any direct feedback because of a strongly hierarchical culture and a fear of dishonouring a leader. When you

realise that ALL cultures are at different places on the spectrum in ALL these eight areas you begin to realise how complex and confusing team life can get.

We can't look at all eight areas, but I want to look at the three most important and challenging areas for leading healthy, multi-cultural teams: communication, leadership, and building trust.

### THE COMMUNICATION CHALLENGE

Good communication is the 'oil' that makes any good team function smoothly, but in multi-cultural teams there are additional challenges making this perhaps the most challenging area.



## 1. Communicating Simply

My first team had no-one who spoke English as a first language. I quickly learnt the importance of simplifying communication to ensure the basic aim of what I was saying was actually understood. This did mean I needed to use simple English, without jargon or word play, and condense ideas to their simplest form. But actually, though frustrating, it was extremely useful as it ensured I had to wrestle with the key ideas and concepts and 'take homes' I wanted people to hear.

## 2. Communicating Slowly

No, not speaking louder and slower!!! Rather giving time to ensuring that what is being said is what is being heard. Even in teams speaking the same language, culture differences can mean the same word means different things. When I spoke about students, I meant university students; my US team member meant secondary school students. This is a simple example, but a far more significant one came when discussing growing disciples. Those from cultures where the

community is a significant place of formation (e.g. many African cultures) placed great emphasis on corporate activities - like prayer meetings, Life Groups, and Sunday worship - for discipleship. Those from cultures where individualism was stronger (e.g. North America) put more stress on personal discipleship - discovering YOUR calling, YOUR gifting, personal mentoring. The way the words were used carried specific emphasise and expectations, even though both carried essential truths.

**To ensure cultural assumptions are out in the open, extra communication time is needed.** We set aside time each month to both discuss big picture issues AND to ask foundational questions like: how would you define discipleship? What does the bible say? What most helped/hindered your growth as a disciple? By giving time for people from different cultures to share their experiences and understanding, we not only ensured we were talking about the same thing. We also celebrated each other's story (a trans-cultural positive way to build trust) and learned from each other to broaden our understanding. Only then did we discuss what we might

do in our own unique context and situation as a response. This slowed down communication but definitely benefitted us long-term.

## THE LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE

Cultures vary considerably in the way they expect leaders to behave (directional/collaborative), make decisions (top-down/consensual), and how they can be challenged (directly, indirectly or, for some, not at all). Consequently, it is important to ensure team members from different cultures understand how to exercise healthy leadership of their own teams, and how to work well under another leadership.

### 1. Always honour each other (Philippians 2:3) and be honest with each other whether leading or being led

For those from honour cultures, honouring the leader came as second nature, but they found it harder to intentionally honour those whom they were leading. We had to make it clear that all leaders needed to encourage their team, intentionally serve and support them and ask for their input. Those from more egalitarian cultures found it easier to honour their teams but

AS DISCIPLES OF  
CHRIST WE SHARE A  
COMMON LANGUAGE:  
PRAYER.



were often too quick to disagree or challenge their leaders. For those team members we encouraged them to intentionally show respect and honour to their leaders by speaking respectfully and showing support before launching into honest feedback (which was also strongly encouraged – a challenge for those from honour cultures).

## 2. Make it clear who is the leader of any activity

Because so many cultural leadership issues centre on how you should behave around the leader, simply knowing who the designated leader is in any activity with a multi-cultural team is important. My biggest mistake in leading my multi-cultural team came because for one activity I was not clear who the leader was. This meant that there was confusion over how decisions would be made, who should defer to whom, and who would take the lead (e.g. scheduling a meeting, setting the agenda). The result was confusion, disagreement and disunity. Not great in any team, but for a multi-cultural team it brought up issues of shame, honour and self-worth. We quickly needed to return to the communication phase (above) to define Christ-like servant leadership (oh... and forgiveness).

## BUILDING TRUST

Communication, leadership and team membership are so much easier when trust is high, and relationships strong. I've found these three things to build strong relationships across all teams, whatever culture team members are from.

### 1. Eat

Everyone loves to eat. In hospitality cultures eating together is a sign of welcome. In other cultures, it is an expression of family. Either way, eating together and tasting food from around the world was the best way for our multi-cultural team to create stronger more trusting relationships. As a task-focussed person, I needed to be intentional about making extra time for these social occasions and not just assume good relationships would form in ministry together.

### 2. Pray

As disciples of Christ we share a common language: prayer. Our team needed to make extra time to praise God for each other and publicly celebrate where God had been at work in and through our ministry (celebration and public praise is not always common for certain cultures or personalities). I grouped people to pray in cross-cultural prayer groups so that the

groups reflected our cultural mix. However hard team life was, there is nothing that builds love and appreciation than hearing someone using their own culturally unique language of prayer to lift you up to God.

### 3. Love

Jesus said the clearest way people would know we are his disciples is how we love one another (John 13:35). This sacrificial, servant-hearted, agape love can be shown in teams by intentionally encouraging each other, supporting each other in challenging times, and asking for help. None of those things are second nature for every culture but defining agape love in such a way for everyone (whichever culture we were from) meant that we were expected to encourage, support, and care in practical ways. When this happened love, respect and trust was significantly deepened.

By doing these things – making time to eat together, pray together, and love one another – it began to matter less whether team members were 'People Like Us' and more that we were 'People Like Jesus'.

## SOME USEFUL RESOURCES

- The Culture Map, Erin Meyer (Public Affairs).
- Emotionally Healthy Church, Peter Scazzero (Zondervan) – a book on healthy church culture from a very multi-cultural church in New York, many examples relate to cultural issues.
- From Foreign to Familiar, Sarah Lanier (McDougal Publishing Company).

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION



1. Whether your team is multi-cultural or not, when looking at the eight areas of team life, mentioned by Erin Meyer (communication, persuading, leading, decision-making, trusting, evaluating, disagreeing, scheduling) what would your team culture approach be in each of these areas?
2. If your team is multi-cultural, how can you create time to look at the three areas of communication, decision-making and trust to ask (a) how well are we doing in this area? (b) are there any changes we need to make to strengthen this area of our team life?
3. If your team is not multi-cultural, how might you go about hearing from people from different cultures in your church or community, to hear how the church might better represent the cultural mix of the community in its leadership and communicate better to the different cultures in the area?

