

***“Together we ask, listen, discern,
plan, serve, and ask again...”***

"Hey! We hear you've done some research!"

Teamwork has always been a part of our organizational ethos, hasn't it! Our Guiding Principle of Community states that "We pursue genuine relationships and accountability in family, friendship, team, ministry, and local communities of faith." We all know, however, that thriving in a team is not always easy. What is it that causes some team dynamics to be not only ineffective, but toxic?

In this Autumn 2022 edition of OC Research Link, the Global Research Team continues its "Hey we hear you've done some research!" series and asks Emil to describe his study on the role of communication in effective cross-cultural teams. Get set to do some looking inward, as well as outward in your own context.

[GRT] Hi Emil! We hear you did some research. What was the question you were trying to answer?

[E] In my time as a cross-cultural worker, I have seen several partnership and projects fall apart and fail. Some of the projects were large, one even consisting of a multi-million-dollar capital campaign. What caused the failure? What role might communication have played?

My research, which took place in conjunction with a Christian institution in the UK, looked at how a failure to understand cultural differences can lead to ineffective communication and, subsequently, conflict. My initial question was, "What if we are not able to identify a sin issue, or someone may not see something as a sin, when another does?"

[GRT] Why was this important? [E] Jesus prayed that we would be one, as He and the Father are one. I believe that, although it may take longer, Christians working together will, in the long run, have a greater impact for the Kingdom. We need to learn how to work together.



Sarah, Andy and Emil

As Christians, we understand that the root cause of much of our conflict is our sinful nature. We are selfish, prideful, arrogant, prejudiced, insecure, and the list can go on.

My research process started with the statement, “We all have cultural blind spots” (which, to my shock, elicited pushback from both my fellow classmates and one professor born in Imperial British Africa, who denied it). The statement “cultural blind spots” appeared in much of my academic reading, and I asserted that I, as a “white Evangelical American male” most definitely had cultural blind spots. (Note: I was surprised to experience significant anti-American and anti-evangelical sentiment in my academic setting.)

As my thesis idea evolved, I came to settle on the assumption that, when we can’t establish a sin issue, much of our conflict stems from a failure to achieve understanding. The question became, “Can Kingdom values as expressed in the New Testament be used as a starting point for establishing a shared set of values and a shared culture of communication?”

[GRT] What did you do? [E] I started with desk-based research and a literature review, and then conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with front-line workers. Two were Asian men, born in Asia. One was a Brazilian man. One was a Mexican woman. One was an Egyptian Christian man. One was a Moroccan Christian from a Muslim background. Two were Anglo-American men and two were Anglo-American women. In total I interviewed three women and seven men from four distinct cultural back grounds, all of whom had worked over 5 years in multi-cultural teams.

[GRT] What went right? [E] I was able to interview a cross section of cultures represented in cross-cultural teams working in Muslim contexts and I was able to get an answer. I entitled my discoveries “Mindful Mosaics: A Grounded Theory Research into Team Culture and Communication in Culturally Heterogeneous Mission Teams.”

[GRT] What went wrong? [E] I was limited by time and the constraints of the project. I would have loved to have been able to interview more women, but many did not have time. The reality of women in leadership is that they are often juggling many responsibilities along with the responsibilities of being a mom. The pool of women in leadership is, sadly, still disproportionately smaller to that of men. If I had time and space in my project, I would have loved to interview more people, including sub-Saharan workers.

[GRT] What did you learn? [E] The project looked at a number of cultural dimensions:

1. Community Structure
 - a. Individualism vs Collectivism
 - b. Hierarchal vs Egalitarian
 - c. Consensual vs Top-Down
 - d. Relationship Based vs Task Based
 - e. Time: Monochronic vs Polychronic
2. Communication Structure
 - a. High vs Low Context
 - a. Direct vs Indirect Feedback
 - b. Confrontational vs Avoids Confrontation

There was a consensus that some of the dimensions corresponded with biblical values while others not so much. There was a consensus that collectivism, egalitarianism, relationship-based, and confrontation were more in line with Kingdom values. There was agreement that consensual decision-making was preferred, but both consensual and top-down decision-making could be seen in the New Testament. The concept of time was one that needed additional discussion due to the fact that monochronic time is a product of modern society. It was agreed that direct feedback and low context communication would ensure a higher level of understanding. There was agreement to speak the truth in love.

All the leaders agreed that there were New Testament values that should govern how we relate to each other and how we should communicate. In addition, while all the leaders agreed on the above, only the leaders from a Western context initially resisted the idea of there being universal values that should transform all our respective cultures. As the interview continued, these Western leaders eventually acknowledged that there were universal values, but they were either apologetic or afraid to say so. The Brazilian man said that there were universal values, but that most Brazilian believers, while believing that the Bible taught these values, found it hard to live by or just ignored these values.

I think it is true that we all can have the propensity to ignore the Biblical values that we don't want to agree with.

I concluded that:

1. It is unrealistic to expect people to constantly be switching how to communicate due to the person they are communicating with (rebuffing the common belief).
2. If we are not proactive in developing a team culture, one will evolve, and there is a good chance that the team culture that evolves may be toxic. We need to be proactive in developing a team culture based on Kingdom values.

[GRT] Is there anything else you'd like us to know? [E] Much of our current understanding of cultural dynamics is predicated on the idea of cultural relativism. Cultural relativism is a reaction against cultural absolutism. Cultural absolutism is the belief that some cultures are intrinsically superior to others. It was in this mindset that in the past many missionaries, and many businesspeople, traveled the world imposing their cultural values on others. The reaction to this was cultural relativism and the belief that all cultures are essentially equal; no value judgements could or should be made about culture.

I offer that all cultures both represent God's image and at the same time bear the stain of our sinfulness and that we should all be striving to have Christ-likeness in our cultural expressions. While we will in many ways remain distinct, we should be moving toward a common set of Kingdom values.

As missionaries and Christian workers, we need to be careful to not build our understanding of concepts such as leadership and culture on secular and humanistic sources, but to be intentional to build our understanding from the Scriptures

[GRT] Thank you for sharing your work, Emil! May our OC family around the world benefit from your efforts!!

Emil and his wife Sarah live in Southern Spain where Emil is the director of Perspectives on the World Christian Movement in Spain. They work with Latin American cross-cultural workers and North African Believers. Emil has worked in multicultural contexts in the USA, Canada, Latin America and Spain.

Questions or Comments?

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