

*Kelly O'Donnell*

## **Building Resilient Teams: The CACTUS Kit**

*There are three sure ways to undermine a team--or a family. In a phrase--don't talk, don't share feelings, and don't trust. Teams, like families, need intentional care to be healthy.*

Every struggling team that I have worked with has had the above three "don'ts" in common. In each case there was the clear absence of a regular, acceptable forum for dealing with concerns about team relationships and tasks. This observation fits well with the research on missionary adjustment too--where one of the greatest stressors is confronting one another when necessary (Gish 1983). It just seems so challenging to work through our differences!

### **Dealing With Differences**

Everyone wins when we practice Biblical reconciliation (Matthew 5: 22-26; 18:15-22). For me the essence of sorting out our differences involves "care-fronting": "We care about our relationship and about the issues, so we honestly confront each other to work it out" (Augsburger, 1981; Palmer, 1991). In certain cross-cultural situations, however, more indirect approaches to conflict resolution are appropriate, such as using a mediator to talk on your behalf (Augsburger, 1992; Elmer, 1993).

Working through differences can stir up an uncomfortable feeling of being "all bad", or "all wrong"--sometimes a reminder of similar feelings from our childhood. Differences can also evoke an underlying struggle for control and power within the relationship. When coupled with our basic human insecurity, the result can be a steady regression of distancing ourselves from each other--labeling "differentness" as deviance, relational discord, destructive comments and behaviors, personal and group despair, and eventually team dissolution. Hearts break, groups split, and a multitude of sins covers love (Livingstone, 1993, p.115). No doubt this process has influenced the emergence of the over 20,000 separate Christian denominations/churches over the last two millennia (Barrett, 1982, p. 34)!

What else can undermine a team? Katzenbach and Smith (1993) say: a reluctance to think precisely about the nature of a "true" team. Just like teams in the business world, not every mission "team" is actually a team. For these researchers, true teams involve certain basics: "a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable (p. 45)". The most successful teams are committed to developing these team basics, plus have a high commitment to one another's success and embrace a "demanding performance challenge" that inspires team members. In what way is your team life characterized by the above?

### **Help from the Cactus**

During my youth I used to roam the hills around our home in Southern California with our dog, a black Great Dane. One of my favorite imaginary games was to fight the masses of entrenched cacti, using a stick as my saber. Yet no matter how many jabs I made, or pieces I cut off, I could just not defeat this plant. It was just too well-suited for the dry, desert-like environment: with its protective waxy coating to keep precious fluids within, and its annoying sharp prickles to keep predators with-out. It was, in fact, very resilient.

Missionary teams can learn from the cactus. This is especially true for those that live in harsh environments--e.g., with limited supportive resources, political instability, poverty, social opposition. Like the cactus, they must find ways to become resilient--to maintain the life of the team within (relationships) while maintaining its focus in the midst of challenges from without (tasks). Resiliency though is neither automatic nor quickly obtained. Rather we "grow into" resiliency, through the various stages of team life (Love, 1996).

### **The Core and Care of Cactus**

I routinely advise teams to have a special team building time, in addition to their usual meetings, about once every two months. The focus is on strengthening one or more of four basic team dimensions: relationships (connecting with and seeing each other in new ways), task (discussing and planning work-related strategies), spiritual (worshipping and praying together), and ethos (looking at *how* the team relates and works together--e.g., expectations for intimacy and work styles). Team building works best when four "P's" in place: a point of focus that is clear and consensually derived, participation by all from the heart, a person with good facilitating skills, and a sense of the Lord's presence.

I like to supplement the more familiar "SET" tools (standard Evangelical team tools--like discussions and prayer times), with some more novel ones. Several examples are described in this article, such as creative drawing, trust walks, and role playing (see also Jones and Jones, 1995; O'Donnell, 1992). Self-disclosure, active listening, and cooperation are required. Most team members appreciate the opportunity to learn more from each other and grow together.

Let's look now at eight core characteristics of resilient teams (summarized by the acronym CCACTUSS), along with some tools for team care. These characteristics/tools are derived from research on strong families and healthy teams, along with my consultation experience. Hence the material can apply as much to family life as it does to team life. Shelby Harrison's article, "Healthy Families and Missions" (1990), was especially helpful in my initial development of the "CACTUS Kit".

## **Characteristics of Resilient Teams**

The eight characteristics that I now describe are: Coping Ability, Commitment, Appreciation, Communication, Time Together, Understanding, Structure and Spiritual Wellness.

### **Coping Ability**

Perseverance and inner strength mark the resilient team. Challenges are seen as opportunities to grow. Members believe the best in each other in spite of weaknesses, and recall the many examples of endurance and success in the past. They work through communication impasses and try alternative approaches to work when necessary. They also minimize distractions to stay focused on their work, and regularly use resources outside of the team for ongoing training and coaching (Lewis and Lewis, 1992; Harrison, 1997).

#### *Care Tools*

**\*\*Successes.** Successful team performance breeds team cohesion. Review two work challenges the team faced and overcame over the last few months. Try using the CHOPS inventory--a brief stress assessment tool--to identify struggles, and coping strategies (see O'Donnell and O'Donnell, 1995). In addition, define ongoing/upcoming challenges in manageable ways so as to see your progress (e.g., learning 20 new phrases this week vs becoming fluent).

**\*\*Strengths/Weaknesses.** Draw a picture of your perception of the team's greatest coping strength, and also a picture of its greatest weakness. Write a title and a caption, and then discuss these as a group.

## **Commitment**

Aim at everything and you'll hit nothing. Resilient teams have specific goals, clear ministry strategies, and defined relationships into which they invest themselves. Members are resolutely dedicated to each other's well-being and to accomplishing the team's purpose. Members feel like they belong to and can influence their group. The goals of the team are highly valued and prioritized, yet with due regard for members' responsibilities to family, friends, the local community, and other groups.

### *Care Tools*

**\*\*Good Team Bad Team.** Identify a team you were on that was successful, and one that was not successful. Describe each team in terms of the four team dimensions mentioned above--relationships, task, spiritual, ethos. How does your previous experience influence the type of team that you are part of now?

**\*\*Mutual Accountability.** Do you have a team agreement/guidelines that are in writing? Planned feedback/performance appraisals? Review these as a group and have people give some input about their content. This can help to build mutual accountability, which is so important for encouragement and better performance.

## **Appreciation**

Team members have planned and spontaneous times when they express their appreciation for each other. Thanking one-another and acknowledging each other's contributions add much to group cohesion. Like each of these eight team characteristics, appreciation is both an attitude and a behavior. So cultivate both! Children are part of teams too, so be sure to include them when handing out encouragement.

### *Care Tools*

**\*\*Surprises.** Surprise people by sending a "get-well" card to someone sick, or invite someone over for a beverage or meal. Celebrate the anniversary of someone's arrival to the field, joining the organization, or a recent accomplishment. Appreciation is also expressed by offering comfort and a listening ear during hard times.

**\*\*Service.** Following Richard Foster's suggestion (1978, p. 122) chose a simple way that you can help someone each day, and encourage him/her with your service. Maybe even do it anonymously. This can be more challenging than you think!

## **Communication**

Members of strong teams have good communication skills, including conflict resolution. They listen well and can empathize by reflecting back what they hear and validate others' feelings. They value self-awareness--taking time to step back and reflect in order to step forward and connect with others. Genuine efforts are made to explore and relate together in culturally-sensitive ways. There are also clear written and verbal channels for exchanging information and updates about life and work.

### *Care Tools*

**\*\*Listening Skills.** Divide into pairs, and spend five minutes listening to your partner describe something important to him/her. Briefly summarize what you heard. Then change roles. Conclude by asking each other a few questions about what was shared.

**\*\*Communication Check.** Identify the main sources of communication within your group. Who are the information brokers? Who communicates the most/least? What languages are used? What content areas of communication are needed? Identify a situation when communication did not flow well. How could you improve the communication links? Try drawing a communication flow chart.

## **Time Together**

Teams need quality time together--a great quantity of it. This is especially true during significant transitions: when teams regroup with new members, during crisis situations, or during the early stages of team life. Two complimentary adages are: know God and make Him known, and know and be known by others. Intimacy with a few members but congeniality with all, is a reasonable goal. Resiliency also results from periodically having "fun" times together--simply enjoying one another's company--plus from building mutually supportive friendships with nationals.

### *Care Tools*

**\*\*Building Trust.** Trust is deepened by shared experiences over time. It is earned, not assumed. Identify those whom you spend the most/least time with on your team. Try doing a "trust walk" with someone you do not know too well--one person is blindfolded and is led around for five minutes, roles are reversed, and then the experience is discussed.

**\*\*Team Relationships.** Becky Lewis with Frontiers describes four types of relationships on teams: kindred spirits (like Ruth/Naomi, David/Jonathan), colleagues (friendly/compatible yet not so intimate), enigmas (mysterious people you do not understand), and irritants (people you frankly do not like). Discuss these four categories in light of some stimulating comments on friendship, such as from Ecclesiasticus chapter 6 (apocryphal Jewish wisdom literature: trust is earned; do not trust any one too readily; a true friend is the elixir of life). Try doing something mutually enjoyable with the enigma and irritant. We can change relationship categories--hopefully for the better--easier than we think!

## **Understanding**

Henri Nouwen observed that one of life's hardest realities is that "love and wounds are never separated". Healthy teams will experience tensions and hurts. There are times when our darker sides will emerge. And there are times when our just being different will create friction. To lessen the impact, team members look at their different "styles" and preferences: personality, leadership, decision making, learning, work, communication, and spirituality. Focus is more on "fitting together" than on identifying someone's weaknesses. Team members thus try to genuinely understand and accept one other's "way of being", while also being free to speak into each other's lives. Rounding things off is the practice of receiving and offering forgiveness--for me the *sine qua non* of team relational health.

### *Care Tools*

**\*\*Relationship Principles.** Look at the book of Proverbs as a group, and identify 10-20 proverbs to guide your team interactions and conflict resolution. Write these down. Are they trans-cultural principles? How might they be applied by team members from different cultures? Also helpful is identifying several of the "one another" verses in the New Testament (such as encouraging one another each day, Hebrews 3:13).

**\*\*Cross-Cultural Preferences.** Discuss Sandra Mackin's article (1992) "Multinational Teams", relating it to the types of leadership, structures, decision making, relationships, etc. that you have/want on the team. Make sure everyone has a chance to talk and explain how one's background influences his/her practices/preferences. Relate these to norms in the host culture.

## **Structure**

Resiliency requires regimen: clear roles for leaders and other members, well-defined decision making methods, agreed-upon accountability and conflict resolution guidelines, and in many cases a written agreement or "memo of understanding". Everyone has designated and chosen responsibilities, so people know how they fit and where they belong. Structure thus brings a sense of security. Structural issues are especially important for multinational teams where different expectations--spoken and unspoken--must be clarified and harmonized over time (see Cho and Greenlee, 1995; Roembke, 2000).

*Care Tools*

**\*\*Team Trees.** Draw a picture of a tree which represents your team. It may be abstract, realistic, or impressionistic. Place the team members in and around the tree. Afterwards, discuss your drawings. What do the drawings say about perceptions of the team structure and function--who are the closest, most influential, what roles are represented, etc? Ask each other a few questions, then hang your trees on the wall for a few days to create a "team orchard". This is also a good way at exploring the team "ethos".

**\*\* Conflict Protocols.** What guidelines are in place for resolving differences and conflict? Review or possibly even role play how the team handled a recent conflict. List a few things you did right and a few things you could have improved. Were the conflict guidelines followed? Do they need to be adjusted?

**Spiritual Wellness**

Human beings are not human beings. God calls us for relationship with Himself (I Corinthians 1:9) as well as creates us for specific tasks (Ephesians 2:10). Spiritual health is the foundation for team resiliency. It develops during the ups and downs of team life, as members "clothe themselves in humility" (I Peter 5:5) and seek God together through "PACTS"--proclamation of His character, adoration, confession of our faults, thanksgiving, and supplication for needs.

*Care Tools*

**\*\*Reading Together.** Read a devotional book together, such as one on developing character through difficult circumstances. A good example is Joyce Huggett's (1997) *Formed by the Desert*.

**\*\*Bearing Burdens.** There is an Uzbek proverb which says "A bitter truth is better than a sweet lie." And Proverbs 14:8 states that "The way of the prudent is to understand one's way, but the folly of fools is deceit." On a scale of 1-10, how open can you be with each other? Talk about how you want to share and pray about your individual and team burdens (Galatians 6:1).

**Final Thoughts**

Developing resilient teams is much like developing resilient families. It takes lots of wisdom, attention, perseverance, and often "seasons of sacrifice" to make them work (Proverbs 24:3,4). Every team gets stuck at times, and requires care to get back on track. This CACTUS kit can help. Review it periodically, using some of the suggested tools, to strengthen your team. Elton Trueblood is right: 'What is most rewarding is doing something that really matters with congenial colleagues who share with us the firm conviction that it needs to be done.'

**Reflection and Discussion**

1. In what ways do mission personnel need to be like cactus?
2. Refer to the summary comments of Katzenbach and Smith's research on high performance teams. How does your team line up with the characteristics of such teams?
3. Which tools described in this chapter would be most useful for improving the resiliency of your team? Which would be most useful for your family?
4. List some of the possible benefits and liabilities of using these tools on a multinational team.
5. Recall a few examples of "seasons of sacrifice" which you experienced in your team or family. How did they strengthen you or weaken you as a group?

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