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Field Leaders and Team Nurture

Ministry teams have become a trend in missions since the 1980's. A major reason for the popularity of this approach is that teams are the preferred assignment pattern of missionaries and missionary candidates. Today it is hard to find people who will admit being the "lone ranger" of earlier missionary eras. Even those who desire significant autonomy prefer the team approach. For many missionary candidates the perceived security and care inherent in an excellent team is a major factor in their selection of a mission organization.

The results of this trend to use teams have been varied. One reason for the mixed results is that some missions joined the team "band wagon" without adequately examining and adjusting their current selection processes, pre-field training programs, and field care approaches in light of the new team emphasis. Teams require additional types of attention that build upon and go beyond approaches focusing on the individual.

Development of an effective team is a long-term process that begins with the careful selection of members. It involves significant time in group formation to forge a common vision and common expectations concerning work goals, ministry strategy, leader and member roles, personal responsibilities, and type of team. The molding of diverse personalities into a team also requires time for the members to appreciate their differences, build team synergy, and develop mutual trust.

Seldom do ministry teams function in life as designed on paper. Rare is the team where the chemistry seems "made in heaven." Even with successful selection and formation activities, the team will not reach its potential for several years. During those years, mission leadership must spend significant time in team development and team building as their teams deal with the challenges of ministry and the undeniable differences among team members. Even teams at peak performance need periodic and planned care, development, and training.

My purpose in this chapter is to discuss how field leaders can nurture the long-term ministry teams that they oversee. My primary focus on field leaders is intended to complement the important roles of team leaders, field coaches, and the mutual support provided by team members. I present several principles for team development, and discuss a nurturance model that relates team dimensions (relationships, task, strategy, and personal wholeness) to team levels (team leader, team members, the team as a unit). Central to my approach is the need for

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regularly scheduled times of personal and group reflection and an ongoing commitment to team development. Let us turn our attention now to a fictional team situation to highlight a variety of team issues.

Case Study: Kola Team

George, the country field director, has responsibilities for several church planting teams in Matolia. Yesterday, during an unexpected visit, the newest members of the Kola Team, Bob and Sue, shared candidly about the team.

Background

Bob and Sue accepted their first missionary assignment by joining the Kola Church Planting Team. They looked forward to the team approach because they had used the team strategy in two successful church planting assignments in their home country. They viewed this mission assignment as a natural extension of their calling and previous experience. Their two children, ages 13 and 10, accepted the challenge, including the need to live at a distant boarding school.

The Kola Team began eight years ago with two couples, Tom/Jane and Bill/Joyce, as its charter members. Jackie and Ruth, two single women, joined the team three years ago from other ministries in Matolia. Bob and Sue began working with the team ten months ago, after having successfully completed language school.

The team invited Bob and Sue to join the team for two reasons. First, the two couples were seminary classmates and friends of Bob and Sue. They had several opportunities to get to know each other during seminary and each couple enjoyed the others' company. Second, Bob and Sue's church planting success demonstrated their ability to match ministry with people concerns resulting in mature believers and strong churches. Even so the mission had reviewed the team's request with an outside consultant before approving the placement.

Initially, George had taken some deliberate steps in forming the Kola Team. The mission had interviewed and tested each team member to discover the areas of potential tension and synergy. Time was set aside, with a facilitator, for the original two couples to have team building and strategy sessions. Since then, however, George has given minimal time to the Kola Team, expecting the senior members to establish the ethos and team development activities.

To date, the team's ministry with the Kola church and local Christians has been exemplary. Their church planting strategy, mutually developed with the national Christians, has resulted in steady growth in numbers and believer maturity. In light of this George has felt little need to visit the Kola Team during the last three years.

The exceptional and complementary giftedness of each member, when combined with strong interpersonal ability and common training, created high expectations for the Kola Team within the mission and the team itself. Everyone was hoping that they would demonstrate the mission's new team approach. Until yesterday those expectations seemed to be on target.

Bob and Sue's Story

From the outside it seems that all members are doing their part to accomplish the team goals. Yet, Bob and Sue do not see the team functioning as a unit. Rather they are a group of individuals "doing their own thing" within a general plan. Questions and new issues raised by church members or team members are not discussed. The team leader, Tom, has a busy schedule of administration, teaching, and other tasks, which consumes all his energy. New ideas seem to overload Tom. He prefers to talk about the team's general plan formulated six years ago. Tom also seems discouraged, slowly withdrawing.

In many ways Bill is the informal leader. With a quick mind and engaging personality he often dominates the meetings. When challenged about this behavior he becomes defensive. There

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seems to be a subtle competition for ideas and results between Bill and Tom. This has impacted their wives' relationship, according to Sue. Yet during school holidays, the two families collaborate to plan activities for their children (high school and upper elementary age).

Jackie and Ruth have their own successful ministry areas in youth and team administration respectively. Being newer team members without seminary education, they defer to Tom and Bill in most of the matters that come up on the team.

The regular team meetings focus on the administrative problems and routine reports. Creative tackling of new challenges is often replaced with the recalling of past successful events.

Bob and Sue are wondering if they can continue with the Kola Team. Did they mistake the call of friends for the call of God? An added concern is their low level of ministry, much lower than back home, "even after being a year beyond language school." They tried to set up a time to talk with Tom, although he was unavailable due to his preparation for a leadership training course and an upcoming evangelistic outreach.

Reflections on the Case Study

Let's start off with three important questions that relate to the Kola Team and other teams that struggle.

1. What are the basic strengths and problems on this team--that is, what promotes team effectiveness and what hinders it?
2. If you were the field leader, what steps would you take to help this team?
3. What recommendations would you make to the organization concerning its use and care of teams?

Bob and Sue's story points out some common issues for teams: the need for supportive care and a systematic plan for long-term team development. George thought that team formation equals team development. He assumed that if sufficient time and energy were spent in group formation activities, he could shift his focus from the team--except in the "rare" cases of interpersonal conflict, ministry failure or inactivity, or personal problems--and concentrate on other ministry and administrative areas.

In addition, George, partly due to his busy schedule, did not feel a need to look below the "activity layer" of the Kola Team. He assumed that significant activity was a sign of team health. In both assumptions George followed the axiom, "If it isn't broken, don't fix it."

Bob and Sue, on the other hand, may have underestimated the amount of adjustment and learning required to become effective missionaries. In the midst of their adjustment struggles they, like other missionaries, may have longed for the success of the past and doubted their calling and/or capabilities (Smalley, 1966; Harder, 1990). If Tom, as team leader (or another mentor/coach), were more available to them, their adjustment to both the team and the new culture would surely have gone more smoothly.

There are several important long-term concerns in this case. These include the reported lack of Tom's leadership within the team, the unhealthy type of team communication, the seeming competition between Tom and Bill, and the uncoordinated, autonomous work within the team. If these reports are accurate, the team has regressed, needing gentle help to regain shared commitment, harmonize expectations, and establish healthier group norms.

As George explores the functioning of the Kola Team, he will probably hear of other issues which need resolution. A review by George and Tom of the team's covenant/memorandum of understanding (if one was written) and a list of characteristics of an effective team (Parker, 1990, p.33) might be a starting point for their reflection and planning. The type of relationship between

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George and Tom will dictate the first actions in discovering the road blocks and developing a team building strategy.

Clearly a long-term, developmental approach is needed to nurture this intercultural ministry team. This will probably be a difficult process, especially at first, as team members sort out expectations, disclose feelings, and try to work together in new ways. George, as field leader, needs to regularly interact with the Kola Team, overseeing team building exercises, and spend time with individual members. He must especially help Tom, the team leader, become a nurturing leader who equips and cares for other members. Practical ways to provide mutual support--such as through Bible studies, prayer, and fun times together--will also help this team become more cohesive and effective.

Basic Issues in Developing Teams

Before responding to the team and individual issues raised by Bob and Sue, George would profit from a review of six basic issues related to effective missionary teams.

Personal Adjustment

The added stress of living and ministering in a new culture can inevitably stir up frustrations, misunderstandings, and personal weaknesses that can affect other team members (Gradin, 1980; Grove & Torbiorn, 1985; Harder, 1990). Bob and Sue, in addition to entering the Kola culture, are also entering the Kola Team with its established group culture. Both of these "cultures" will require them to make personal adjustments. Like many mission teams, the Kola Team needs to pay attention to group formation each time new members enter because the entrance of even one new member changes team dynamics. Without such intentional activity a team can lose momentum, regress into earlier stages, and experience conflict. These fruits of benign neglect may not be visible immediately.

Team Stages

Teams progress through different stages of development. Each stage has different concerns which need to be worked through and resolved (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977; Schein, 1985; Harder, 1990). Unresolved issues at any stage will impede the team's effectiveness at later stages. By understanding the present stage of Kola Team functioning, George can sort through ministry and relationship issues as they relate to the stage of team development, as well as anticipate upcoming issues.

Francis and Young (1979) identify four team stages that relate to most work teams: testing, infighting, getting organized, and mature closeness. *Testing* refers to the early process in which team members examine their team involvement in relation to vision, leadership, and interpersonal fit. The next stage, *infighting*, requires members to sort out issues of influence, power, control, decision-making, and tolerance. *Getting organized* involves a stage whereby members become committed to work effectively around a common vision with a growing sense of mutual respect. Finally, the *mature closeness* stage is experienced when members know their own role and contribution, and are willing to extend themselves for colleagues. There are, of course, many models of team stages, most of which have similar and overlapping features. An additional model of relevance to missionary teams is Reddy and Jamison's (1988) seven-stage "Team Performance" model.

Team Models

Many conflicts arise within teams because of the different team models held by the members. Using sports teams as examples, Torres and Spiegel (1990) explore how various models result in different expectations, diverse work strategies, and degree of interpersonal activity. While the

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team's ultimate goal for baseball, football, basketball, volleyball, and tennis is winning, the way of functioning within each type of team is obviously different. Sport coaches employ extensive practice sessions to insure that each player understands the game and his/her role, not confusing the techniques of one sport with those of another.

Members of mission teams bring different "team models" to their mission team. This is true of the Kola Team as well. Bill's preferences for team life and ministry will likely be different from those of Jackie, Bob and Sue, and so on.

The team models for each member come from that member's personal history of home/family life, school activities, sports experience, and church life. Teams with an international composition include expectations based on each member's cultural experience. If not expressed, these expectations cause serious conflict and tension. Discussed, these expectations can be harnessed to fashion a mutual, common set of norms which produces group solidarity and stability.

Team Building Versus Team Development

Understanding the difference between team building and team development will help field leaders and team leaders maximize the growth and ministry of their teams. "Team building focuses on deficits in team performance and its primary goal is remedial--to fix something. Team development does not assume that something is wrong and should be fixed but proceeds on the expectation that there are always positive opportunities for improvement" (Kinlaw, 1991, 24). Further, team building usually involves shorter-term, brief experiences whereas team development embraces a longer-term perspective in which a variety of growth experiences become a regular, ongoing part of team life.

Because of Bob and Sue's concerns, George will need to initially focus on team building activities. He might even need to bring in an outside facilitator or counselor to help the Kola Team address the group dynamics and personal issues. After the team is stabilized through such group and individual interventions, he will need to switch to long-term team development. While team development will not avert team building issues, it will provide a proactive foundation to acquire new skills and perspectives to help prevent and work through future problems on the team.

Approaches to Team Nurture

The maturation of teams requires more than intermittent training or care. It necessitates an ongoing, nurturing approach which consists of three prongs. The Kola Team must integrate all three prongs into its team life in order to become and remain healthy.

One prong focuses on *personal and team development*. It is not training for training's sake or pursuing the latest intercultural trends. Rather it is proactively equipping the team in skills, understanding, perspectives, and behaviors for dealing with significant issues facing the team as a corporate unit and as individual members.

Problem solving is the second prong. Here the field leader and the team seek to resolve relationship or ministry problems which are hindering the service and functioning of the team. Kinlaw refers to this as team building.

A third prong is *responsive, supportive care*, to encourage team members as they experience cross-cultural and ministry challenges along with normal life issues. The care is not necessarily directed at fixing a problem or changing a negative event, but at helping a team or team member positively respond to an issue or creatively live with present realities.

Team Levels and Team Dimensions

Missionary teams require nurturing by mission leadership at three levels: the team leader, the individual members, and the team unit as a group. Field leaders usually do not have direct

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responsibility for the nurture of individual team members, although they are responsible to help the team leader provide this. Field leaders have a special responsibility to coach and support team leaders, and to make sure that sufficient resources for team development are available for the teams they oversee.

When working with each team level, four team dimensions need to be addressed: relational, task, strategy, and personal wholeness. For the Kola Team, it would be important to help the members work through their interpersonal relationships, clarify the group and individual tasks they want to pursue, harmonize the overall team strategy, and develop ways for individual members to continue to grow as persons.

The combining of team levels with team dimensions (see Table 1) reveals several facets of team nurture. The resulting matrix can be used as an analytical tool for identifying areas that need attention for either team development or team building.

A Strategy for Team Development

Team development is designed to foster the systematic growth of both the team as an intercultural missionary group and its individual members. As with all growth, team effectiveness usually comes with consistent attention and incremental steps. Like farmers who tend their crops, field leaders such as George (as well as team leaders) must become committed to consistent nurture of the team and not wait for crises to catch their attention.

Table 1. Nurturing Matrix: Relationship Between Team Dimensions and Team Levels.

Consistent nurture requires developing a systematic plan, or *cycle of nurture*. The plan needs to provide regular opportunities for reflection, evaluation, encouragement, and planning for ministry and growth (Vogt & Murrell, 1990).

One way to implement a team development plan is to set aside a day on a periodic basis for each level of the team: team leader,

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individual member, and the team as a unit. Each level meets with the field leader or possibly another field coach, preferably at least every six months. These meetings, referred to as *focus times* (discussed below), are an important part of an overall cycle of nurture. Additional activities in this cycle usually include prayer, Bible study, discussion, teaching, ministry review, and planning.

Focus Time

Focus time is a specific team development event that is planned into the team schedule on a regular basis. The purpose is to provide personal care, ministry direction, and focused growth. It can be used with individual members, couples, and the team itself, and requires up to six hours so as not to rush the process. Focus times are used to reflect on the past events, present realities, and future direction that affect one's personal life and ministry.

The agenda for focus times is straightforward, and is based on the following five stage process.

1. *Sharing.* This is a time to catch up on general information regarding personal, family, community, and church events. This stage encourages the focus time leader and team member to tune into the lives of each other.

2. *Reflection.* In light of the ministry and personal goals, the missionary reflects on the recent past. The goal is to gain perspective on relationships, events, ministry, oneself, the host culture, and God.

3. *Adjustment.* Here the process moves to learning from the past in order to understand the ministry, the people, oneself, and the ways God is working in the context. This encourages the missionary to adjust the way he/she views the situation, plans and implements his/her ministries, lives in a family/household, and relates to the local church and community.

4. *Direction.* Using information and insights obtained in the previous steps, the missionary with the mission leader will try to gain a sense of God's direction in specific enough ways to make contextually appropriate plans for ministry and personal/family life.

5. *Growth.* Finally, each missionary identifies two to five specific areas for growth. These areas can range from cross-cultural ministry issues to personal issues of family or personal life.

The focus time requires a coaching leadership approach if it is to be effective (Megginson & Boydell, 1986). Through a coaching style, the field leader, field coach, or growth facilitator encourages missionaries to reflect on their past experiences and relationships. Using their own reflections the missionaries can develop understanding which can be immediately incorporated into their ministry and personal life plans. When the reflective process is performed with empathy, the missionaries involved experience a sense of care and encouragement.

Focus Time and Team Nurture

How can field leaders find enough time to nurture the team leader, each team member, and the team as a unit? With the Team Nurturing Matrix (Table 1) in mind, let's look at some ways that a team leader can provide the necessary help.

Team Leader. The most important level of nurturing for field leaders is with the team leaders. By helping team leaders grow, field leaders can multiply their nurturing efforts through the team leader to each member and the team as a unit.

The focus time with team leaders would look at four major areas of life: personal ministry, family life, team leadership role, and church/community relationships. Having heavy responsibilities, the team leader needs help in maintaining marital/family and ministry balance. A strong marriage and family is not a luxury, but a cornerstone for communicating the Gospel as well as nurturing the team.

Another function of the field leader is to help the team leader identify personal gifts and strategically match them with ministry involvement. Again the focus time becomes an event

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which promotes the realistic matching of priorities to the demands of intercultural service and life.

The agenda of a team leader's focus time includes the ministry and growth needs of the team. It is easy for ministry needs to consume all one's time, leaving none for development of the team or individual members. Working together, the field leader and team leader can plan the team's focus time by discussing the present functioning and the stage of the team's development. Together they can identify ways to help the team reach the group goals and maintain healthy team dynamics. The team leader can then raise issues with each team member and as a group plan the upcoming focus times.

Team Members. A focus time for each team member or couple/partner unit is the responsibility of the team leader. It would be helpful to schedule this every six months and to follow the five stage reflective process previously described. Together they explore four areas of the team member's or unit's life: personal ministry, family/couple life, team role/dynamics, and community/church life.

In addition, once a year the field leader needs to have a time when members can share individually, or as a couple/partners, the joys and concerns of their missionary life. Each team member needs to feel he/she has access to the field leader, while not allowing it to short-circuit the authority and nurturing responsibilities of the team leader.

Team as a Unit. The focus time for the team is separate from regular team meetings. Holding them twice a year allows the team to corporately reflect on ministry issues and team dynamics. Although usually led by the team leader, external resource people can be also used for specific team building or development issues. The perspectives of such "outsiders" can help the team look at itself more objectively, especially in problematic areas.

Focus Times and Team Retreats

Each year, a team focus time can be conducted as part of a two to four day retreat. It is usually better to hold such a retreat in a location away from normal, daily interruptions. Be sure to include each team member as the retreat schedule is being planned. Depending on the team's needs, the retreat schedule should allow for times of team ministry review, team planning, recreation/fun, worship, Bible study, and personal rest. The informal times for recreation or rest are important for developing friendships and bonding together as a team. Worship times can be informal, allowing each person to participate. Using outside resource people can be particularly helpful to bring fresh encouragement to the team.

Involve the children too. The older ones also benefit from special group times with one another and with the larger group. In addition, wives need time away from their usual daily responsibilities so they can provide input, renew themselves, and fully participate.

George, the field leader, and Tom, the team leader, could use a retreat setting to tackle the issues facing the Kola Team in a positive manner. Beginning the team retreat with worship and praise would help the team members to focus on God and put their life in better perspective. Allowing members to share significant growth and ministry experiences will help them to tune into each other's world, something often overlooked in the business of daily life. George could administer a short team building instrument--such as one described by Francis and Young (1979), Parker (1990), or in chapter 14 of this book--to identify areas of team stress, conflict, and poor performance. Once identified, the team could begin to discuss and prayerfully work through these problematic areas. It would be important for both George and Tom to acknowledge how they have contributed to the team's struggles and commit to changes in their own behavior before expecting other team members to change.

Conclusion

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The development of an effective missionary team takes significant time and energy, beginning with the team's formation. Ongoing coaching and nurture by a mission's field leadership is a necessity, as is a systematic plan for team development. Regularly scheduled focus times for team and team member growth can strengthen teams for their evangelistic tasks. They also help to build a team ethos that values mutual care and mutual accountability, both of which form the bedrock of any effective team.

Questions for Discussion

1. Which supportive structures and services should be in place before a team is sent to a field?
2. How does your mission agency provide systematic, periodic nurture for your teams, team leaders, and field leaders?
3. How knowledgeable should team leaders and team members be about team formation principles, team stages, team models, and team dynamics?
4. What are some creative ways for mission agencies to provide care to teams that are geographically isolated, or where there is no field leader in place?
5. What are other useful types of team development events besides the focus times described in this article?

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