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Good Teams, Bad Teams: Under What Conditions Do Missionary Teams Function Effectively?

David R. Dunaetz

Teamwork in missions sounds like a good idea. Both Jesus and Paul worked in teams. Young people considering long-term missions can be more easily encouraged to leave the comforts of North America behind if they believe they'll be part of a team of like-minded missionaries. Missionary teams have the ability to provide community and fellowship in parts of the world where Christians are not likely to be warmly welcomed. Teams sound like a wonderful idea.

In reality, a missionary team can become a nightmare. Rather than being communities with members focused on loving one another and effectively carrying out the Great Commission, teams can lose their original focus and simply maintain the status quo or may even become focused on protecting a missionary's ego, generating only enough missionary activity to produce a stream of fundraising prayer letters.

Team problems aren't limited to mission work. Patrick Lencioni (2002) has described how team dysfunction occurs in every field. He argues that teams will be dysfunctional unless they have five essential elements: trust, task conflict, commitment to group decisions, accountability, and group goals. As a former church-planting missionary in France and as an organizational scientist, my purpose in writing this article is to present a summary of the empirical evidence (i.e., experimentally tested) that either supports

the claim that these elements are necessary or qualifies under what conditions these elements are necessary for teams to be effective. I believe the experimental evidence supports the idea that these elements, under certain conditions, promote team effectiveness. I also believe the results support biblical principles, provide insight into human nature, and are especially relevant to missionary teams.

Trust

Trust occurs when one team member believes that another team member will do something that the first one believes is good and important even when the first one cannot monitor or control the second (Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 1995, 709-734). It is a very domain-specific quality. For example, one missionary may trust another to preach a sermon that is biblical, culturally appropriate, and motivating, but he or she may not trust that same missionary to do the field accounting. The gift-set necessary for good preaching is quite different than the gift-set necessary for good accounting.

Trust develops when there is demonstrated competence in a domain, and it grows when a missionary demonstrates concern for the welfare of other missionaries, when there is a clear commitment to group decisions, when there is increased communication, and when the

missionary demonstrates a willingness to be influenced by other missionaries (Deutsch 1958, 265-279). So if there is enough goodwill expressed and plenty of open communication, a person normally won't be bothered if the team trusts him or her to preach but not to do the accounting for the mission. In general, trust helps groups function more effectively—that is, accomplish what the team is supposed to be accomplishing (Dirks and Ferrin 2001, 450-467).

But why does trust lead to greater effectiveness? One reason is that trust creates a psychologically safe atmosphere in a team (i.e., people don't believe they will be made to feel bad for mistakes or differences in opinion), which leads to opportunities for "learning behaviors" such as seeking feedback, discussing mistakes, and seeking information from others (Edmonson 1999, 350-383). These learning behaviors permit each missionary to learn how to carry out his or her responsibilities more effectively, enabling the team to better accomplish its goals.

But there is one qualification: missionary teams with high levels of trust aren't always more effective (Dirks 1999, 445-455). Trust is only beneficial when it is accompanied with motivation to accomplish the team's goals. For example, a missionary team may have the specific goal of starting new churches or a broader goal of reaching a people group for Christ. However, if all (or perhaps just some) of the team members are perfectly content to run programs in existing churches, high levels of trust among team members will not help the team accomplish its purpose. In such situations, a high level of trust might actually hinder team effectiveness, since team members may mistakenly believe that good relationships among team members indicate that the team is accomplishing its purpose. High levels of trust may exist in bowling leagues or inner-

city gangs, but this trust in no way indicates that they are accomplishing God's will.

Task Conflict

A second element necessary for a good team is *task conflict*, which can be contrasted with *relationship conflict* (de Dreu and Weingart 2003, 741-749). Task conflict occurs when two different ideas are presented as solutions to a problem. If the reasons behind these proposed solutions are presented, each missionary can gain insight into the problem by seeing things from a different perspective. This exchange of information encourages the proposal of new ideas that may be superior to either of the original ideas. For example, if one missionary believes that resources must be used to maintain a ministry and another missionary believes the focus should be on developing new outreach strategies, an exchange of information will enable each team member to better understand the other's concerns and creatively come up with a joint solution that responds to everyone's concerns. Such a solution could be delegating the existing ministry to a non-missionary or training someone to eventually lead it, solutions which would maintain the present ministry while freeing resources to develop additional outreach.

Relationship conflict, on the other hand, is detrimental to teamwork. This occurs when one team member says or does something that makes another team member feel bad. Relationship conflict would occur in the above example if the missionary who wanted to continue a ministry accused (directly or indirectly) the missionary who wanted to start something new of being reckless, ungodly, or mentally ill. Similarly, if the missionary who wanted to start the new ministry accused the resistant team member of being stubborn, the relationship would be damaged as well. So when there is task conflict, a team functions well by

developing superior ideas for accomplishing its goal, but when a team experiences relationship conflict, it becomes dysfunctional as relationships are damaged.

Unfortunately, task and relationship conflict are closely related. It is relatively rare for a team to have task conflict without it becoming emotional and damaging the relationships (Jehn 1995, 256-282). Because of this, groups that want to avoid relationship conflict often succumb to *groupthink*, a pattern of consensus seeking when the desire to remain unified or to obtain approval from the team leader becomes more important than generating new ideas for accomplishing the group's goals (Janis 1982, 2-335). Some missionaries may have a hard time distinguishing between groupthink and biblical unity, which comes from a common purpose and set of values (Phil. 2:2-5), not from a set of assumptions that cannot be questioned.

To reduce the risk of task conflict devolving into relationship conflict or groupthink, a team (and especially its leader) should strive to maintain an atmosphere that encourages both healthy relationships and commitment to accomplishing the group's goals in the most effective ways possible. Such an atmosphere includes openness to diverse viewpoints and a willingness to express them. The team, and especially its leader, must create an atmosphere where it is safe to question the status quo by seeking and expressing new ideas. Some teams in secular organizations appoint a "devil's advocate" who is assigned the responsibility of questioning everything the group does. This person is assured that he or she will face no negative consequences for challenging either the status quo or any proposed ideas.

An atmosphere should also exist in a team which prevents *cognitive overload*, the refusal to deal with all of the available information due to time, cognitive, or

emotional limitations (Carnevale and Probst 1998, 1300-1309). A person may go into cognitive overload when there is a lot of information, limited ability to examine the information, or a tendency to get angry when faced with threatening situations. For this reason, it is essential for teams to have leaders who can interpret and integrate large amounts of information quickly and clearly. People who risk going into cognitive overload may appreciate not having to be involved in making some of the group's complex decisions. Certainly, the other group members would appreciate it.

Commitment to Decisions

A third component of healthy teams is a commitment to the decisions the team makes. When this occurs, they are more likely to implement these decisions in a timely fashion rather than considering them low priority. Commitment to a team decision means that each missionary personally believes that he or she should carry out the responsibilities that are associated with a decision. This benefits a team not only by making implementation of the decision more likely, but also by producing an environment that promotes cooperation rather than competition and by making team members more open to new strategies to accomplish what has been planned (Korsgaard, Schweiger, and Sapienza 1995, 60-84).

There are two primary predictors of commitment to decisions. The first is the quality of decisions. Missionaries will tend to be more committed to a decision if it is wise, if it works, and if it solves more problems than it creates. Perhaps surprisingly, this relationship is only a weak one (Hoffman and Maier 1961, 401-407). High-quality decisions are only slightly more likely to lead to commitment than poor-quality decisions. A far better predictor of commitment to decisions is the degree to

which team members believe they have had a voice in the decision-making process (Lind and Tyler 1988, 1-243).

When missionaries believe they have been able to express their concerns and that these concerns have been taken into consideration, commitment to decisions is much higher. Even if the decision doesn't correspond to what they were hoping for, when missionaries believe they have been listened to and their concerns have been recognized as legitimate, they tend to be more committed than if they believe their concerns have been dismissed or if they have been treated unfairly. This means it is essential that a team leader makes sure all team members have the opportunity to express themselves in a safe environment where their concerns will be acknowledged. If missionaries feel that expressing their concerns would bring condemnation, disdain, or even indifference, it is likely these concerns will be not be expressed and that the missionaries' commitment to any decision will be weakened.

Accountability

Accountability may be defined as the "expectation that one may be called on to justify one's beliefs, feelings, and actions to others" (Lerner and Tetlock 1999, 255). Research has found that this expectation very often makes teams more effective. If we know that we will have to explain to our team why we are planning something, or why we did something, we'll put more effort into forming our plans or carrying them out than if we weren't accountable to the group. Accountability has been found to lead to more thinking through the issues in decision-making situations, to being more consistent in one's judgments, and to a greater willingness to understand other's concerns. These, in turn, lead to better group decisions and group performance (Tetlock and Boettger 1989, 388-398).

However, there are several limitations to accountability. First, if people are held accountable for understanding large amounts of information, it may send them into cognitive overload and actually decrease the quality of their decisions. Team members who are not able to deal with large quantities of information, who are not motivated to do so, or who are easily angered are most likely to go into cognitive overload.

A second limitation to accountability is that it can sometimes lead to groupthink, especially if team members believe it is important to please the team leader. If a person who has authority to hold others accountable expresses his or her opinions before the other team members have thought through the issues, accountability reduces open-mindedness and critical thinking. For example, if a missionary leader says he or she believes that the next ministry location should be in such-and-such a location, and then asks what the others think of other places where the next ministry could be, it is quite likely that there will be little consideration of other possibilities. If the missionaries are eager to please their leader, they will be motivated to find reasons to support the leader's position, especially if they risk receiving signs of displeasure for not agreeing with him or her.

However, if the team leader asks each team member to present a specific idea for starting a new ministry, along with five reasons for and five reasons against starting such a ministry, deep thinking and examination of the issues is more likely to occur. This process is called *preemptive self-criticism*, seeking to objectively evaluate one's own ideas in order to refine them and avoid publically defending an inferior solution to a problem. When missionaries preemptively self-criticize, they become more open-minded as they process information more deeply and weigh the pros

and cons of their ideas. This, in turn, leads to more effective missionary teams.

Group Goals

The fifth and final element of effective teams is group goals. The utility of group goals is perhaps the most widely supported finding concerning group effectiveness in the organizational sciences (Latham 2000, 107-119). Four empirical findings are especially applicable to mission work. The first concerns *specific vs. general goals*. Missionaries in teams which set specific goals (e.g., each team member will telephone ten people this week and explain parts of the gospel to at least two of them) perform better than missionaries in teams which set vague, general goals (e.g., share the gospel).

The second finding concerns the *difficulty of goals*. Among missionaries with the same ability, those in teams that set difficult goals will accomplish more than those in teams which set easy-to-achieve goals. If missionaries are in a team that sets a goal of meeting five new people each week, the missionaries will probably meet more people than if their team had set a goal of meeting two new people each week.

The third finding concerns *praise and encouragement to accomplish one's goals*. If team members know that they will be encouraged and thanked for accomplishing their goals, they are more likely to achieve them. If team members believe that achieving or missing the team goals will have few or no consequences (as is often the case in missions), they will work less hard to reach them. Some may argue that missionaries should be working for God's approval (not the approval of other missionaries), but perhaps God wants to use the feedback of the Christian community as a means of bestowing his approval and blessing.

The fourth finding relating team goals to team performance concerns *cognitive effort*. When a team fixes goals and discusses them, missionaries think more about how to accomplish the goals and come up with better ideas than if the team hadn't set goals. The increased thinking about goals leads to additional motivation to stick with them, even when there are setbacks.

But not all goals are good goals. If the goals are too easy, missionary teams might only exert as much effort as necessary to meet the goals. Goals must also not be too difficult. If a team of missionaries believes they do not have the time, money, or skills to accomplish their goals, discouragement may set in and team performance may go down.

Conclusion

Throughout the history of the Church, God has used teams of missionaries to spread the gospel. Some teams work well, others don't. Modern organizational research has confirmed that some elements usually contribute to the success of teams. These elements don't always contribute to the success of missionary teams, but under the right conditions they can make most teams more effective. Making sure these elements are present in our teams, accompanied with love and godliness, will make it all the more likely that we will accomplish the task given to missionary teams: to testify to the gospel of God's grace (Acts 20:24).

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