

MentorNet #12 — Missionary Team Building

Things that a Mentor Should Know

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Missionaries often ask for advice to build teams. Five questions about missionary team building have kept arising over the last thirty years. We try to answer them here. None of these answers is infallible or true everywhere.

Use these observations as a checklist when seeking to build teams or solve team problems, especially with North Americans.

1. Why bother forming missionary teams?

- ❖ Jesus and His apostles always worked as task groups, except when held in detention by authorities. To work alone often leads to discouragement and burnout, to crippling decisions and to moral failures.
- ❖ Younger American adults — like most non-Westerners — seek to work in a closely-knit community. Let them find it on their team.

Caution: Include national workers on your team when on the field. Reorganize and form several teams or task groups at the same time, so that expatriates do not outnumber the nationals. Let nationals lead the teams as soon as possible, while expatriates coach them from behind the scenes.

- ❖ The work requires a variety of coordinated gifts and skill sets. Seek variety and balance. The spiritual DNA that the team carries to reproduce the life of the mother church *body* on the field, in daughter church *bodies*, is best carried by a *body*—the team. Loners usually start weak churches, deficient from birth, which lack certain vital ministries or spiritual virtues. This is because their genetic code is incomplete.
- ❖ The team can model Christian character and unity for new national workers and churches.
- ❖ Sometimes mission agencies throw us together and we must survive together. This requires renewed efforts to follow these guidelines.
- ❖ North American individualism requires special training, especially for doing incarnational evangelism and giving birth to a church.

Caution 1: Do not use the word “personal” to describe faith in the sense of being *private*. That would destroy your ability to work through families and networks of friends. God does not see seekers as isolated individuals. The apostles always went at once to the families of seekers. Christ let Zacheus and Levi gather their friends at once, in order to let the gospel flow.

Caution 2: When starting a new church or cell in the home of a seeker or new believer, do not let Satan make you flee at the first bit of opposition, into a rented building or the home of a missionary. James 4:7 tells us to resist the devil and he will flee from us. Stick with it. Deal with paganism’s counterattacks within the homes and within the culture, or you risk starting a culturally irrelevant work that fails to attract the entire family.

- ❖ Sending churches want to know that their personnel are cared for. Keep them informed of both progress and problems. Name an “advocate” inside sending churches for each team, who will pass on brief reports to pastors to give during worship time and to keep people praying for the new work.

2. What do the more effective expatriate teams do? They...

- ❖ See themselves as a temporary scaffold, not the edifice—the national church—that Christ is building. (He did not say, “Upon this rock I will build my missionary team.”)
- ❖ Are small, having fewer than six workers.
- ❖ Have the skills to do all the things that Jesus sent them to do.
- ❖ Can change their intermediate goals and methods as they adapt to the culture. If they do not make at least one radical change during a year, then they are probably stuck in a harmful rut.
- ❖ Keep on learning the local language and culture.
- ❖ Plant and reproduce cell groups (small churches) before going to another culture.
- ❖ Are of similar ages—less than ten years’ difference.
- ❖ Have a gift balance that allows a wide variety of ministry efforts.

Caution: Some agencies require so much education that only academic types with the gift of teaching end up on the team—a devastating mistake!

- ❖ Serve together before going cross-cultural.
- ❖ Agree together on their vision, goals and general methods.
- ❖ Restructure as short-lived, task groups at least annually.
- ❖ Maintain their Western style team worship separate from the emerging churches’ style.
- ❖ Allow specialization, mistakes and some budgetary freedom.

3. What do effective *mixed* expatriate and national teams do? They...

- ❖ Maintain a balance of one expatriate to five or so nationals.
- ❖ Ensure that expatriates have needed skills to transfer. If they lack them, then they should call in someone temporarily to model the skills.
- ❖ Require that expatriates serve mainly in the background as coaches.
- ❖ Choose expatriates who have experience with living in community.
- ❖ Have a working agreement between the sending agency and the national church or organization that receives them.
- ❖ Have training in cross-cultural understanding. (Contact Galen@Currah.com)
- ❖ Adopt local cultural expressions, especially in new churches.
- ❖ Have found a “common culture” or forum in which to discuss and assess ideas safely without risk to their teamwork or to local cultures.

4. What common pitfalls must we avoid?

- ❖ **Danger:** Spending more time maintaining the “scaffold” (missionary team) than building the edifice (the national church).
- ❖ **Danger:** Creating and maintaining a national scaffold (church planting team) after their own likeness—nationals can repeat the mistakes and culturally irrelevant practices of their missionaries.
- ❖ **Danger:** Making the expatriate team the model for the emerging church.

- ❖ **Danger:** Seeking to increase the numbers of expatriates on the team more than nationals.
- ❖ **Danger:** Expatriates with pastoral gifts ignoring their teammates, wanting to pastor the national church as it emerges.
- ❖ **Danger:** Seeking to recruit more new expatriates without regard for a healthy balance of spiritual gifts.
- ❖ **Danger:** Agencies recruiting and assigning personnel without regard for field realities and needs.
- ❖ **Danger:** Settling in for the long term to accomplish short-term ministries.

5. Why not simply send Western dollars to national workers who will serve for only a few dollars a day and already know the language and culture?

- ❖ This has worked well in some circumstances and failed miserably in others, among the cases that we have seen or investigated.
- ❖ *Partnering* works best. Missionaries from the West often provide training and resources to “jump start” national mission endeavors. Partnering has yielded better results in the cases we have observed, than the results either obtains by working alone—provided that the partnership is genuine, with mutual love, respect and unselfish sharing of authority.
- ❖ To send money without proper accounting and accountability along the whole span of the operation inevitably leads to the following errors:
 - Greed.** The dollars attract money-hungry workers and national organizations whose main motive is wealth—not church reproduction.
 - Fear.** National workers, fearing that the “pie” (the funds from the West) will be cut into smaller portions if they start new churches, fail to sustain their church planting movement.
 - Dependency.** National workers, especially pastors, soon come to rely on Western aid and to neglect Christian stewardship within their churches.
 - Independent spirit.** National agencies with expatriate resources operate without regard for the national churches that trained and supplied their personnel.
 - Disobedience.** Jesus’ Great Commission, to “go” and disciple the neglected people groups, applies to churches of both East and West—not just to those that are geographically near to them.
 - Disorder.** When new, spiritually immature churches send untrained missionaries, they commit the errors mentioned under the questions listed above. New workers from a newly developed field need to partner with experienced workers who mentor them, so they can follow the positive guidelines listed above.
 - Poverty.** Dedicated field workers serve the Lord on a dollar or two a day while their spouse and children go malnourished, because they are not allowed to receive anything but what the national agency deems to be enough.

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