

Making Process Serve Partnership

by Bob Savage

These candid comments come from senior, majority-world mission leaders describing their experiences with Western organizations who wanted to help them:

- *I don't like to work with most Western agencies. They want to tie my feet; they want me to do their program in order to work together.* Indonesia
- *These North American groups tell us, 'Here is our agenda; here is how it will be done.'* Spain
- *Everyone wants to come here to establish their name, their presence. The church must be led by the church in Iraq.* Kurdish area of N. Iraq
- *Usually Christian missions came and told us what to do; they imposed the way to work. They didn't give us the dignity to say where we need help.* Mali
- *What we want is friendship, understanding, trust.* Egypt

Clearly there is a problem. I'm sure all these groups were well-meaning in their intentions. But how they came across was nearly the opposite of what they hoped to achieve.

Organizational processes themselves are not inherently bad. I suppose if you are in partnership with a personal friend and few others are involved, it can be entirely relational with few real processes. But as others get involved and need to be informed, complexity escalates. Eventually, partnerships require many processes, such as:

- Ways to develop and grow in shared vision and shared ownership
- Ways to prioritize, make decisions, decide who is going to do what based on the unique skills each partner brings to the table
- Information-sharing and reporting processes to keep each other informed and involved
- Financial control processes

- Ways to keep developing a sense of spiritual and relational connectedness

The problems come, I feel, not so much because these processes are needed, but in how we go about achieving them. After all, don't all cultures somehow have ways to accomplish all of the above? But how it is done can differ greatly. And deep down, don't we really prefer our way?

Cultural differences are a huge study, but I think it's safe to say that, in general, Western (or Northern) cultures tend to be more project oriented, more individualistic, more direct in communication style, more "word" oriented (contracts, reports), more focused on measurement (outcomes).

Southern cultures tend to be more relational, more focused on harmony of the group and deferring to one's elders, less direct in communication (saving face or not shaming someone).

On an academic level, this doesn't seem hard to understand. In practice though, lots of troubles come.

A Northerner asks for detailed financial reports, feeling it is good stewardship. A Southerner comes away feeling not trusted.

A Southerner discusses the ministry work in generalities, not wanting to

take credit for himself from the others in the group or even to take the credit that he feels belongs to God. The Northerner comes away feeling the work lacks good management.

A Northerner comes a long way to see the work, wants to make the most of the time, and feels some urgency to evaluate and plan for the future to help justify the trip. A Southerner wants to use a lot of the time to get to know each other and to go together to visit the ministry workers and their families. Both get frustrated.

And so it goes. Is it just too hard then to work together?

Not at all. As a Northerner working in partnership with indigenous missions for 20 years, I've done plenty of asking

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for things I felt I needed or my organization needed to have a successful partnership. I know that what I need is not always how our partners would go about it. But I hope I've also done my share of working in a way that is more appropriate to their circumstances than how I would normally do it.

I'm long past kidding myself to think I can totally contextualize to the way of working of another culture. In fact, my organization couldn't function that way. Nor do I expect our partners to totally adjust to my ways. I need to be a student of their culture and to adjust as best I can. I'm different than I used to be, better at it, I hope. We can learn! And the day comes when we finally realize that we have more to learn from our partners than we have to teach, and that is a big change of perspective.

The key is the underlying relationship. Southerners know

that we Northerners need certain things—forms, reports, and so on. That's just how it is. But if they also know, deep down, that we feel honored to be in partnership with them, we admire their work, and we are unflinching advocates for their reputations and ministries, then it's a whole lot easier to give the benefit of the doubt and put up with the strange requests we make. And if we know the hearts of those with whom we partner, their commitment to the cause and to us, we also can give the benefit of the doubt when we encounter bumps in the road. The Bible says it well: "Love covers a multitude of sins."

Perhaps we feel we have a lot more control over partnership outcomes than we really do, and feel held responsible by others or by God to achieve them. That puts pressure on us and makes us less patient with our partners. When we remember that God alone brings the fruit in His time, we can relax a bit and be more sensitive.

I find we generally feel we are better partners than we really are. Things are still fairly one sided in that we evaluate our Southern partners, their organizations, and their ministry outcomes, more than they evaluate us. Why not just ask your partners how you can do better in partnership? Ask how you are coming across to them in your communications and other processes.

The Christian Reformed World Relief Committee (CRWRC) did just that in an exhaustive study in the 1990s that took several years and involved more than 100 Southern partners (www.gordon.edu/ace/hoksbergen.doc). This led to major changes in their organization. A summary of what they learned is below. Many of the points have to do with funding at first, but soon move on to underlying relational matters.

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They found that their partners feel a greater sense of equality:

- The less direct funding there is from CRWRC
- The less dependency there is on CRWRC funding
- The more donors the partner has
- The more funds the partner raises by itself from local sources
 - The more sensitively CRWRC manages the funding relationship
 - The more partner voices are listened to and heard
 - The more partners are truly involved in decision making
 - The more CRWRC manifestly values their contributions
 - The more trust and mutual respect has grown
 - The more frequent and transparent is the communication
- The less favoritism CRWRC seems to show toward other partners
- The higher is the education level, competency, and self-confidence of the partners
- The more partners lead training sessions for other partners

For those of us who don't have the capacity to launch such a massive study, these points give a whole lot of good advice, things we can be sensitized to and avoid. What would your partners say if given the chance?

Here are some of the major processes that Partners International (PI) uses:

1. An annual "Partnership Development Plan" includes input from all partners and describes what we intend to do together in the coming year. It is put together by the local ministry leaders and our area director (a PI staff member who lives in the region and knows the local context). It covers many things, including

the goals of the partnership and the kinds of help our partner is requesting. The help can include various types of ministry or organizational development training, project funding, short-term teams from the USA, etc.

2. Information about projects that need funding is sent on a special form that answers questions about the purpose of the project and the local resources that will be contributed.
3. Our area director visits each partner as often as possible, generally two to four times per year. This is one of the most important things to do, to develop and maintain a relationship where our partners feel we are an encouragement to them and understand their situations. Other staff also visit, but less often. Sometimes the USA partners (donors, churches) visit also, which we encourage and help arrange.
4. Training seminars are held, usually drawing together a number of partners from the same region. Sometimes we bring in experts from a Western country; sometimes local partners learn from each other. The seminars are usually a result of similar needs that have been expressed by a number of the local partners. We also have a separate effort to provide opportunities and training for women in ministry.
5. Much communication occurs back and forth via email and other means. More formal reports of ministry activities, with photos, are requested twice per year.
6. Audited financial reports following a certain format are requested once per year.



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