

American or American'it? A critical analysis of western training to the world

It's one of those e-mails you pray will never be written about you. It came from one of my dear African friends, Zwanda (not his real name). Zwanda and I have reached a point in our friendship where we can be brutally honest with each other. He's quick to tell me when I've just made an ethnocentric, American statement and I feel great liberty to challenge his assumptions when appropriate. We share a dissonance in our longing to see God's glory revealed to the nations, while longing to stop the imperialistic tendencies so innate to many missions endeavors. One day Zwanda sent me this e-mail about an "American expert" who had just done some training with him in southern Africa. Zwanda wrote:

"I am in recovery at the moment. I have just hosted for a week, an American who works for Youth Leadership Dynamics [pseudonym] . . . and it has been a disaster. He presented a . . . workshop. The essence of what he presented . . . was really good—but could have been much better presented by someone more culturally-sensitive. I have never met anyone more insensitive to a local culture—nor a more proud, pushy and condescending person in my whole life. We clashed over cultural issues from the moment he arrived to the last minute he left. I even told him that he is terminally-offensive in our culture. He said he is transcultural and that he is not American but biblical in terms of his values. . . .

He never once asked to see anything that I had done—that just made me feel like nothing we have is worth anything."

I wonder what kind of "prayer update" this American leader sent to his supporters upon his return. Can't you just picture it? "I failed miserably. I couldn't overcome my American assumptions and it would have been better if I had never trained in the first place." Somehow, I expect it was more like, "God really used me in amazing ways. People soaked in the material that here, we just take for granted. Because of you supporting me on this trip, the African Church will never be the same. Thank you."

I don't really know what kind of correspondence this brother used to follow up his trip. But I don't have to imagine it too much. I've spent a great deal of time studying training initiatives done by Western church leaders in Nonwestern contexts. There's little question that there's a compelling need to serve the global church with theological and leadership training. The expansive growth of the church around the world is producing a shortage of theologically equipped pastors and church leaders.

- There are approximately 2.2 million evangelical churches in the world
- 85% are led by men and women who have no theological training.
- 7000 new church leaders are needed daily to care for the growing church.
- If every Christian training institute in the world operated at 120% capacity, less than 10 percent of the unequipped leaders would be trained. (WEA Consultation in Iguassu)

Statistics like these make me more than a little passionate about the need to offer theological training and equipping to church leaders around the globe. But I find great dissonance with my

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desire to run hard at meeting this need and my fear of perpetuating the subtle but real imperialistic tendencies we bring these kinds of training endeavors.

The following comes from some of the key findings generated from a study I conducted comparing North American pastors descriptions of their experiences training cross-culturally with the way national pastors and leaders described those same experiences. The cross-cultural training experiences I studied ranged in length from ten days to two weeks.

Consider some of the more blatant contradictions in how these pastors described their experiences. [I've only included statements made with unusual frequency among the subjects from whom data was collected.]

North American Pastors (conducted training)	National Pastors (sat under the training)
They're so hungry for the training we can offer.	You conclude that you're communicating effectively because we're paying attention when we're actually just intrigued by watching your foreign behavior.

This was by far the statement made most frequently by the North American pastors. Look at a sampling of what they said (either in face to face interviews or in journal entries).

I guess I was surprised at the hunger. I was surprised at the thirst.

They were really hungry [for the training].

The training was outstanding. . . . I think they were hungry, very hungry. I would even say more hungry overseas than they are here . . . because they're looking for more effective ways and tools.

They would sit and listen. They wouldn't get up and go to the bathroom every five minutes or say "I need a break" every couple hours. They were enduring heat . . . humidity . . . the small environment. . . . And they didn't get up and leave. I mean they were spellbound . . . in listening to the message, the methodology . . . the format . . . the how to's and the philosophy.

These are the next generation of leaders. They are hungry for truth. They are zealous for God. They [are] anxious to apply their learning.

It was fresh and new [like] they had never heard it before. They really soaked it in.

The were so thirsty. They just hung on every word.

I asked the trainers how they came to these conclusions. Responses ranged from "I just sensed it from the questions they asked and from the way they listened so intently" to "I asked them if they were tracking and they said 'yes'". Others drew upon nonverbal feedback, concluding that nodding heads and note taking implied learning was occurring.

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The most brutally honest recipient of the training made the statement which appeared above—“You conclude that you’re communicating effectively because we’re paying attention when we’re actually just intrigued by watching your foreign behavior”. But this national leader wasn’t the only one who made a statement that challenged the assumption that people were really hungry for the training. Some of the other statements made by the nationals included:

It was a nice day but I don’t think what they taught would ever work here. But if it makes them feel like they can help us in ways beyond supporting our ministry financially, we’re willing to listen to their ideas. (My paraphrase—“We endured it for the money!”)

I’m glad the trainers felt respected. They should. What they need to realize however is that we would never think about talking or getting up to leave in the middle of their lecture. It would be repulsive to do that to a teacher in our culture.

I wish we could have shared more about the real challenges we’re facing in our ministry. How do I lead a church when most of our godly men have lost their lives in battle? How do I help a parent care for their AIDS baby? Those are my pressing issues, not growing my church bigger or starting a second service. I didn’t get that whole discussion.

Any teacher knows that even in one’s own culture, it’s dangerous to too quickly assess whether learning is occurring, especially if assessment is purely intuitive or based upon a few comments made verbally. “They’re so hungry” versus “We were just intrigued by your foreign behavior” was only the first of several discrepancies between “teachers” and “students” descriptions of the training experiences.

North American Pastors	National Pastors
We’ve got to do something. The window of opportunity is NOW!	You too quickly get into the action without thinking through the implications on our churches long after you go home.

“We’ve got to do something” was a statement made by several of the North American pastors both before, during, and after their cross-cultural training endeavors. The urgency that comes with the desire to seize an opportunity has redemptive value, there’s no question. But might it be that our desire to jump in and do something reflects more of a man-centered theology of missions than a God-centered one?

Indigenous expressions of Christ’s Church exist in every geopolitical nation of the world. The entrepreneurial drive of American culture infiltrates our missions endeavors and therefore spills over into our cross-cultural leadership development initiatives. When we hear about the relentless growth of the global church, we’re inspired to bring our value-added contributions. But while the North American pastors consistently talked about urgency, the nationals consistently talked about the importance of process and of taking time to grow in relationship before developing a strategy for the kinds of collaborative exchanges that are truly needed for mutual benefit.

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North American Pastors	National Pastors
The issues we deal with are pretty much the same.	You act as if the American church is the true trendsetter for how we should all do church.

Almost every North American subject commented on the similarity in the issues being dealt with in the Church cross-culturally. Whether it was youth ministry, elder boards, getting people to buy into vision, putting people under church discipline, or dealing with expectations of people upon the pastor, most of the North Americans concluded church is church, wherever you go.

The tendency to look for similarities in an unfamiliar context is natural. Anderson and Anderson (2002) write,

When we travel to a new country, we feel an almost irresistible impulse to smooth over the strangeness, the distinct particularity of the people we meet. We slip seamlessly into supposing that they are just like ourselves, and we almost forget to marvel at the differences. It's not until we have dwelt in the new country long enough to be shocked, repeatedly, at the wrongness of our assumptions that we begin to notice the crucial things we have missed (p. 41).

One of the North American trainers said, "I wish I had spent less time studying about the culture and the differences because I was really more struck by the similarities than the differences".

While hesitant to be overly critical, more than half of the national pastors expressed frustration that the North American pastors talked about successful churches in the States with little awareness of many churches that are far bigger in other parts of the globe. And defaulting to the practices of suburban North American churches was ubiquitous throughout the training. One national pastor in Brazil talked about it this way.

"During our class, I was describing some of the challenges our church is facing in our bible study groups. I shared how our adolescents rarely feel free to speak up because of some dominant older members. The trainer immediately started to tell me why this proves our need for a specific program for the young people. I told him we were resisting that trend out of a desire to keep the generations together. He laughed and said, 'that's where the American church was 40 years ago but you're going to have to develop a strong youth ministry or you'll lose those kids.'"

May we repent of our imperialistic drive to mold indigenous societies into our wineskins of Church and instead, serve their indigenous discoveries of Christianity.

North American Pastors	National Pastors
Teach biblical principles. Those are always transcultural.	You describe a different Jesus than the one we know.

I usually get lots of empathy from sharing what I've shared thus far. People respond with gasps, dismay, and "That's horrible!". But when I move to this one, many begin to furrow their

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brows. Every North American trainer made some version of the statement, "Teach biblical principles. Those are always transcultural." "How do you argue with the Bible?!" The argument goes, "If the Bible isn't cross-cultural then we have a more basic problem. We've moved out of the realm of orthodoxy".

But who decides which principles of the Bible are truly transcultural and how do you extrapolate principles devoid of culture? This is a hermeneutical question more than anything else but it bears weight on a discussion of what it looks like to conduct training cross-culturally.

I've spent the last several years working for a ministry that touts, "We teach timeless, transferable principles therefore our biblical strategy applies worldwide, whatever the context." One of the North American pastors in my study who was teaching material from this organization said, "The same plan that Jesus used 2,000 years ago is the same plan we must use today. That's the beauty of our training philosophy. It works everywhere. Don't tell me it doesn't work in your context. You have to make it work."

This trainer, and most of the others in the study, appeared to view the Bible as the "Word of God, pure and simple, rather than the Word of God as mediated through the life experiences and cultural settings of the biblical authors" (Noll, 1994, p. 133). Scripture was most often alluded to as a way to validate leadership principles or other concepts being prescribed.

God's redemptive Story is unquestionably applicable to every tribe, nation, and tongue. But our understanding of that Story is always skewed by our cultural context and at the very least, our cultural biases need to be acknowledged upfront when teaching from the Word at any time, but especially overseas. My perceptions of Jesus are wrought with 21st Western assumptions. I need to grow in gaining a more accurate 1st Century picture of Jesus.

The other interesting assumption connected to this claim, "Teach biblical principles..." was the corresponding thought, "And don't use illustrations". This was rooted in the concern that illustrations aren't cross-cultural, but biblical principles are. "Just teach the principles" the trainers said. The concern for not exporting North American stories and programming is commendable, however, without illustrations, the national pastors complained that they were given purely conceptual information without any help with implementation.

North American Pastors	National Pastors
We have so much. They have so little.	You call us backward for having little regard for your music, no palates for your green salads, no IQ's for your advanced technology, and the list goes on...You underestimate the effectiveness of our local church leaders...You talk about us to your churches back home in such demeaning ways.

If I haven't offended you by now, this one may push you over the edge. As a privileged white male, writing at a cozy Starbucks in the burbs of Chicago, how can I take issue with the statement, "We have so much. They have so little." Let me preface this by saying, I am deeply

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concerned by the disproportionate allocation of resources held in the West and want desperately to be one of many voices in the Church that calls to change that.

But with a fervor for generosity, I must bear in mind, conversations like the one I had with my friend Ashish (pseudonym) at Gino's Pizzeria in Chicago. While there, we ran into a friend of mine and his youth group. The group had just returned from a missions trip to Central America. Ashish asked them, "What did you learn from your trip?" Student after student obsessed about the poverty of "those poor people".

After the youth group left, Ashish said to me, "Why do they assume we want more? What makes them think we're so poor?" To which I jumped in and said, "Ashish. Give me a break." (Okay—this is another brother with whom I can really shoot straight."). I continued, "It's so hard to get these kids minds off of their consumeristic passions. I'm really grateful to hear they experienced the dissonance of their relative wealth while in a developing nation." Ashish rebutted, "Well that's nice and all but I'm so sick of the sympathy of Westerners who think we need more stuff. Why would that have anything to do with our happiness? Please don't help import the idol of consumerism into our land." He went on to tell me about the visiting group of American pastors who were just with him in Punjab. They were really concerned about the bicycle Ashish used to get back and forth to his church. They found out how "inexpensively" they could purchase a car so they came to him telling him they had decided to go in together to purchase him a little car. "The last thing I wanted was a car," Ashish told me. "I had to find a tactful way of telling them that if they really wanted to invest in something, I had several members in my church who could use some help setting up a microenterprise development. But I think I kind of 'rained on their parade' as you say."

This youth group was a lot younger than the North American pastors I studied, but the cross-cultural experience "take-away" was similar for both groups. When I asked the trainers about the influence of their training trips upon their personal lives, most of the trainers commented most about the disparity of resources. They made statements including, "We are so blessed and they have so little." "I'm so encouraged by how much they do with so little." "I have it so good and I never want to take it for granted after seeing the joy in these people's faces even though they have so little."

I'm well aware that there are many whose weekly wage is equal to the latte I'm sipping. That's problematic. But how might our sympathy for fellow brothers and sisters in Christ in developing nations lead us toward treating them in demeaning ways? Our wealth creates all kinds of power issues and as much as we want to talk about collaborative relationships between churches from one culture to another, a national leader who feels safe to be really honest with you may well confess that they realize the need to keep the "partnering" church in the West happy so that funds keep flowing.

So should we abandon all attempts at short-term training? Believe me, midway through my study I was tempted to give a resounding "YES!" to that question. But I have great hope that there are ways to redeem the efforts and well-meaning intentions of churches and leaders in the West who want to be involved with their counterparts beyond simply sending money.

There are several key factors for effective cross-cultural training. I've only briefly described them here.

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1. Core Values of the trainer and content

The values and ethos of the trainer, his or her ministry, and the content being taught permeates the entire cross-cultural learning experience. For example, if the trainer comes from an organization that teaches a prescriptive model for ministry or a Western-driven model of leadership, it's doomed for failure from the start. The obvious offenders of this are those who simply take the material they've developed for a context here, translate it, and expect it to be transformational in another context.

But more subtle are those who biblicize their cultural forms of ministry and contend that they're cross-cultural because they're biblical. If the training is approached as a way to transfer knowledge from the trainer to the student, learning and effective empowerment for ministry are unlikely.

I have great hope for the success of training initiatives lead by organizations, trainers, and materials that hold conclusions loosely, question assumptions, and truly seek to help other leaders construct theological, personal, and ministry convictions appropriate to their unique contexts in empowering ways.

2. Selection of those who Train

This leads to the importance of carefully selecting the right people to train cross-culturally. The sr. pastor or missions pastor involved in an international church partnership may be but aren't necessarily the best people to lead a cross-cultural training module. Some of the key competencies needed are:

Relationally Strong. Relational affinity will communicate and vice versa. Even when cultural offenses occur, and they will, relational "bank" goes a long way. When selecting a "trainer", consider...How do they interact with people stateside? Are they intuitive to the needs of people? Do they ask questions well and remove attention from themselves? Can they laugh at themselves?

Reflective in praxis. Leaders who question their assumptions based upon what they see in a foreign context are much more effective in cross-cultural learning environments. Do they demonstrate a reflective stance when describing other cross-cultural experiences? Is there an unhealthy level of confidence? Is there a willingness to put in question the ways they think and act? Is there a theoretical framework guiding their cross-cultural interactions. Are they lifelong learners?

- **Cautious in using examples.** Illustrations, while rooted in culture, are necessary parts of cross-cultural training. Do potential trainers exhibit an ability to demonstrate theoretical concepts for application without presenting an illustration as the "right" way to apply the concept? Can they move freely between the theoretical and applied realms?

- **Secure in their contexts.** Sometimes Americans think deprecating our own culture and all it represents is the best way to establish credibility cross-culturally. Realizing that American culture has many weaknesses is an asset; however, pretending or devaluing all that makes

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up our society is a liability. How do they perceive and describe Stateside culture? What is their level of awareness of cultural dynamics?

3. Preparation of those who train

While training in and of itself, was not an assured determinant to effective teaching cross-culturally, effective pre-departure training did enhance the effectiveness of those who already demonstrated the competencies listed above. The most effective pre-departure training models assist participants to structure meaning from their experiences rather than simply giving information about a culture.

4. The duration of the training sojourn

While initial immersion in a foreign context leads one to gloss over the differences while seeking similarities with one's own context (Anderson & Anderson, 2000), that begins to change at six weeks, and more significantly at three months, six months, a year, and so on. But even extended immersion in a context is no guarantee one has successfully acculturated.

More extended immersion in a cross-cultural context is likely to play a much stronger role in fostering effective training partnerships than just a two-week training trip. However, abandoning the two-week training model altogether is not the only alternative. The two-week training modules can be used as a piece of a comprehensive plan for partnership.

Training is merely a means to an end, and the long-term value of blowing into a place one time, sharing some information, and moving on to the next stop is questionable at best. However, long-term partnerships built upon relationships and collaborative learning have the potential of truly strengthening Christ's Church on both sides of the globe. And partnership implies learning is truly mutual. The Western Church would be well served to sit under the teaching of many of the church leaders in the 2/3rds world.

As one who does a great deal of leadership training overseas myself, I have far more questions than answers about what it takes to effectively serve the church in this regard. But without doubt, the richest part of my own cross-cultural training experiences has been forging relationships with brothers like Zwanda and Ashish who help me to more clearly see who I really am. That in turn, makes me more effective in learning with God's people scattered around the globe.

My desire to see theological and leadership training offered to national church leaders globally around the world is not waning. But may we hold our passion to serve with training initiatives in tandem with a strong belief in what God is doing among all his people, everywhere, to move us toward the shared destiny of Revelation 7.9, when more people than we can count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language will stand before the throne in front of the Lamb!

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