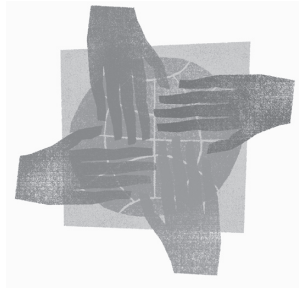


**L E A D I N G
A C R O S S
C U L T U R E S**



**EFFECTIVE MINISTRY AND MISSION
IN THE GLOBAL CHURCH**

JAMES E. PLUEDDEMANN

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LEADERSHIP FOR A NEW DAY IN WORLD MISSIONS

*Christian mission in the twenty-first century has become
the responsibility of a global church.*

SAMUEL ESCOBAR

I WAS A BIT RETICENT ABOUT CONDUCTING official business in my supervisor's living room so late in the evening, long after office hours. As I waited, a rerun of *Hawaii Five-O* blared on the television in the corner, and the room was packed with more than a dozen pastors all waiting their turn to consult with my Nigerian boss.

As the director of theological education for this large West African denomination, I was responsible for the administration of twenty-one Bible colleges and seminaries. I often needed to consult with my boss about major decisions, so I made regular appointments through his secretary. Seldom did we meet during the scheduled time. Most often he would be away on an emergency trip, or an important pastor or village chief would show up at the last minute and usurp my time slot.

On this night I was frantic. I needed a decision from my boss for a crucial board meeting. My flight left very early the next morning. One of the Bible colleges had run out of money halfway through the last semester, and the board was recommending that we close the school and send the students home! I needed to tell my boss this news and get

his advice. After missing another appointment he simply told me to come to his house that evening. Even though I felt it would be rude for me to interrupt his personal and family time with my official business, I went. As I entered his living room, I noticed every chair was filled with pastors coming to him for advice or decisions. I waited my turn, somewhat embarrassed to overhear what seemed to be confidential conversations about various church discipline problems, but no one else seemed uncomfortable. At that moment I sat there feeling frustrated, impatient and confused about Nigerian leadership style.

THE CHALLENGE

The good news is that the body of Christ has been planted and is growing in every country of the world to the extent that churches in the non-Western world are now the majority. The globalization of the church and the general accessibility of cheap air travel have led to unprecedented international interconnectedness.

- Millions of short-termers travel from scores of countries every year to just about every country of the world.
- Tens of thousands of long-term missionaries from Africa, Asia and Latin America now serve in every country of the world.
- Christian colleges and universities are becoming intentionally globalized.
- Urban centers worldwide are forging new multicultural ministries.
- Global business people often see their work as ministry.
- A high percentage of missionaries are working under the leadership of national church leaders.
- Hundreds of churches are forming mission partnerships with other churches around the world.
- Whole denominations in the West are coming under the direction of African leaders.
- Crosscultural leadership development may be the most important task in missions.

This globalization of the church brings fresh challenges. Many individuals and organizations remain unaware of cultural leadership differences, often leading to confusion and bitter misunderstanding.

In spite of profound yet hidden differences, many pastors naively lead short-term teams and attempt to create crosscultural partnerships. I have noticed a growing number of voices suggesting that anyone can do crosscultural missions. Missiologists call this “the amateurization of missions,” while the amateurs call it “the democratization of missions.” Mission pastors rightly react against purists who would like to require that all missionaries have a doctorate in anthropology before serving in another culture. The other extreme is even more dangerous. I’ve heard youth pastors tell their mission team, “Just be yourself, and everyone will love you.” This is a formula for crosscultural disaster. After being burned by bitter cultural misunderstandings, church leaders are recognizing the need for a deeper understanding of cultural differences in leadership.

For God’s people to work together effectively, implicit assumptions about leadership need to be made explicit. They must be evaluated in light of sound social science research and biblical principles. The church in the North and South, the East and West acts out of unconscious and often confusing assumptions about leadership. We must appreciate the differences and challenge some of the misconceptions in order to work together as the worldwide body of Christ.

You don’t have to travel from Australia to Afghanistan to bump into cultural leadership differences. Remarkable variations exist in the same country, even a few blocks from each other! Cultural assumptions about leadership between young business graduates and very senior executives frustrate both age groups. Those growing up in rural communities experience leadership shock when they share office space with colleagues from London, Manhattan or Lagos. Disagreements between ethnically diverse neighbors are often the result of conflicting cultural values. Several research studies indicate that women and men tend to lead with dissimilar cultural values.¹ Radical differences exist between the leadership culture of a for-profit corporation and that of a volunteer association.² First-generation immigrants are puzzled by the leadership expectations of second- and third-generation children. Anyone who

leads or is led—in other words, everyone—is inescapably impacted by cultural assumptions about leadership.

Our global economy thrusts together people with radically divergent assumptions about leadership. Thomas Friedman writes of the fascinating manufacturing history of his Dell computer. In story after story, he describes computer components made by British-owned companies in India, China and Malaysia; by Japanese and Taiwanese and Irish-owned companies in China; by American-owned companies in Malaysia; as well as by companies in the Philippines, Costa Rica, South Korea, Thailand and Israel.³ The globalization of business has spawned hundreds of studies investigating the effects of culture on leadership. These insightful analyses provide a rich source for forging understanding and cooperation in the global church.

Mission agencies today are increasingly and delightfully multicultural. This is a moment in history when the whole church faces an unprecedented opportunity to reach out to the whole world. I witnessed a mission team in northern India made up of Canadians, Guatemalans, Japanese, Koreans, North Americans, Ethiopians and Indians sharing the gospel with Muslims along the Ganges River. The message of the gospel takes on significant credibility when communicated by such an international team. The skeptic who says that Christianity is a Western religion must give pause when those communicating the good news come from diverse cultures. World missions must be multicultural because the gospel is for everyone and the Great Commission is for all believers. But being an effective multicultural leader is not easy, especially when false expectations and hidden assumptions exist about what it means to be a leader or follower.

Tens of millions of business people, scholars, migrants, immigrants and refugees are flooding countries that traditionally contained one or two dominant cultures. Countries such as Korea, China, Brazil, India and Nigeria are now contributing astounding numbers of missionaries worldwide.⁴ This brings phenomenal opportunities for crosscultural church cooperation—along with serious challenges.

The following scenarios illustrate the interplay of leadership and culture. Some names and places have been changed, but these are ac-

tual stories from my personal experience that reflect the challenges of crosscultural leadership.

Scenario 1: North Americans in Peru. The short-term team from a North American church spent months preparing to partner with a church in Peru. Church leaders in Peru asked the multigenerational church team to conduct a marriage enrichment seminar. The American team recruited people who had the experience and training to teach a marriage-enrichment seminar, and they worked hard to adapt their materials to Peruvian culture. But when the Americans arrived in Peru they were told that the marriage-enrichment seminar had been cancelled. Brian was furious at the apparent dishonesty of bringing a well-trained team all the way to Peru, with all the planning, costs and time involved, just to cancel the program. But Margaret, who didn't speak a word of Spanish, decided that she would simply get to know the Peruvian family in whose home she was staying. Long into the night, she found ways to communicate, as she and her host family shared photographs and stories about their families. Margaret came back a changed person, with many new Peruvian friends. Brian came home frustrated and resentful. What was the difference? Perhaps Margaret understood that some individuals and cultures are *goal-oriented* while others are explicitly *relationship-oriented*.

Scenario 2: Multicultural team building in Liberia. As a silent observer, I sat in a back corner of the living room in northern Liberia and listened as missionaries discussed strategy. Tension grew as Canadians, Koreans, New Zealanders and Nigerians debated what it meant to be a team. The Nigerian missionary suggested that the team do everything together; the Korean missionary urged a daily 5 a.m. prayer meeting; and the New Zealand family suggested that a once-a-month reporting session would be enough. The Canadian was miffed at the Korean for intruding into morning family time, and the Nigerian was peeved at the New Zealander for being uncooperative. The conversation grew more strained. What was going on? Cultural values of *individualism* versus *collectivism* most often lie hidden below the surface, yet have a significant visible impact for crosscultural teams.

Scenario 3: Long-term planning in Nigeria. My Nigerian boss approached me with a problem. The mission had given him an ultima-

tum: the national church needed to produce a detailed five-year plan before the church would receive any more financial support for projects. My boss was a well-educated, bicultural person who fully understood what the mission wanted, but he wasn't convinced that a detailed five-year plan was a good idea. "We don't know what will happen to the Nigerian economy or the political situation five years from now. We don't know if there might be a 'people movement' that might call for sending Nigerian missionaries to an unexpected part of the country." He asked me to help him draw up a five-year plan that would satisfy the mission and still allow flexibility for the Nigerian church. Is such a request possible? Cultures with a *low tolerance for ambiguity* clash with those embracing a *high tolerance for ambiguity*, and this can lead to tension among leaders in planning and evaluation.

Scenario 4: Team tensions in Uruguay. Alejandro was a Colombian missionary happily serving in Uruguay on a church-planting team that included a South African, a Singaporean and a German. The team worked beautifully for the first year. When the church began to hold services, Alejandro was appointed to be the interim pastor until a Uruguayan could take the position. But as soon as he became the pastor, his leadership style changed and he no longer consulted with other team members or held team meetings. It seemed as if Alejandro had shifted from being an egalitarian team-player to a paternalistic leader. The high-performance multicultural team fell apart. What happened? Cultural expectations regarding perceptions of *high power distance* versus *low power distance* often lead to challenges for mission leaders in multicultural teams.

Scenario 5: Second-generation Japanese in Chicago. A large and growing Japanese church in Chicago called a new senior pastor from Tokyo, Japan. The church was excited to have a man who was well known as a powerful preacher and a widely respected leader. The new pastor spoke some English, but was more comfortable preaching in Japanese. Older church members had spent most of their adult years in Japan and were quite comfortable with the new pastor. But many of the middle-aged members, though born in Japan, had been in the United States for so long that their Japanese language ability was not fluent.

While they fully understood Japanese leadership values of respect and obedience, they had also become comfortable with a more egalitarian style of leadership. Their children, second-generation young people in the church, didn't speak Japanese and had profoundly absorbed the American youth culture. The senior pastor was perturbed by what he perceived as a lack of respect from the young people, while the youth seemed to be embarrassed by their "uncool" pastor who didn't know English and wanted to tell them how to run a youth group. The clash of leadership values between a *high-power-distance, collectivistic* culture and a *low-power-distance, individualistic* culture is a challenge in many immigrant churches.

JOYS AND CHALLENGES OF MULTICULTURAL LEADERSHIP

We live in an amazing era of missions. Newly planted churches in the so-called mission-receiving countries are growing rapidly, embracing the Great Commission and sending out record numbers of their own missionaries. The slogan "from everywhere to everywhere" has become a reality where missionaries are sent from nearly every country of the world into hundreds of crosscultural settings. Following are some of the more recent developments in world missions.

Development 1: From everywhere to everywhere. Missionary teams venture out from many countries and cultures. While leading a vision seminar in Sudan, we met Samuel and Rebecca. Samuel, from India, is married to Rebecca, from Taiwan. Their financial support comes from churches in India, Singapore, Taiwan and Indonesia. Recently, the churches in Sudan sent out a call for a hundred teachers to come to Southern Sudan to teach the Bible and help develop church leaders who have just emerged from a decades-long civil war. SIM⁵ missionaries arrived from the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States. The missionary arm of the church that relates to SIM in Nigeria dispatched twelve Nigerians, the SIM-related church in Ethiopia added eight Ethiopians, and the church in Kenya sent four Kenyans. What a joy to see missionaries from the East and West streaming forward with boldness and sacrifice to partner with missionaries in Africa to meet a desperate need for leadership development in Sudan! Such global mission teams

face the challenges of different cultural assumptions about leadership. Asian leadership styles differ greatly from those in North America, and Sudanese leadership expectations differ from those of Nigeria.

Development 2: Short-term missions. International short-term mission teams are growing at such a rate that no one seems to be able to keep up with the numbers. Youth pastors are expected to be able to lead crosscultural mission trips if they hope to get hired or keep their jobs. Short-term missions has become a global phenomenon. Not only do several million short-term North American missionaries make yearly mission trips, but groups also go from Korea to Afghanistan, from Chile to Niger, from Guatemala to India, and so on. Again, tremendous challenges arise in the leadership functions of planning and organizing interactions between cultures. Often the short-term teams have little crosscultural experience. They are caught off guard by leadership differences in planning and implementation. At the same time, leaders receiving the short-term teams are often unprepared for clashes in cultural values. An Asian, African or Latin host might be taken back by the directness, boldness and informality of a visiting American or Australian team.

Development 3: Church-to-church partnerships. Church-to-church partnerships demonstrate another increasing trend. Leadership challenges emerge when churches in Taiwan, England, Colombia or the United States seek a partnership relationship with churches in cultures with radically different understandings of leadership. The very concept of “partnership” is loaded with cultural expectations that can puzzle both sides of the agreement. The idea of “equal partners” is foreign to most of the world. Partnership in much of the world assumes a junior and senior member. Usually churches from wealthy countries are expected to be the senior partner or the patron, even if they don’t want to be. When a local church becomes involved in a crosscultural partnership, leaders must understand cultural differences. What are the implicit assumptions about what it means to be a leader, follower or partner?

Development 4: Leadership development strategies. Missiologists once defined missions solely as world evangelization, or reaching the least-reached people groups. The nurture of newly planted churches

and leadership development were thought to be of secondary importance or even a distraction from “real” missions. Today, however, missiologists realize that a crucial task of world missions is the nurture and development of leaders. Whole mission agencies have sprung up with the primary objective of doing leadership training. Megachurches often conduct leadership seminars around the world. Such seminars may make the naive assumption that leadership is culture-free and that anyone from any culture can teach it. They often claim they are teaching the “biblical model” of leadership, not realizing that the way they read the Bible is already influenced by their cultural theories about leadership.

Development 5: Working under leadership of another culture. In the colonial era it was assumed that the missionary would be the leader. But in today’s world the expatriate missionary more often works under national church leaders, or under missionaries from countries with radically different assumptions about how to lead. For all the thirteen years my wife and I served in Nigeria with SIM, I gladly served under the leadership of Nigerian directors. But I was often caught off guard by unexpected assumptions about leadership values. I struggled to unlearn many of my hidden assumptions about leadership and to embrace new ways of leading and being led.

When I finally got my turn with my boss in his living room that evening and explained to him the urgent matter of the Bible school’s imminent closing, he thought for a second and then said, “Come with me.” I followed him to his office about a block away. He opened the safe and gave me a briefcase full of Nigerian currency equivalent to over 20,000 U.S. dollars. “This should be enough to keep the school open for the rest of the year,” he said. I was astounded. I asked him where he got the money, and he told me that people in the United States had given it to him to build a much-needed addition to his small house, but the Bible college needed it more than his family. I asked him if he wanted a receipt, but he just waved and said, “No, I trust you.” The students, teachers and board members of the Bible college were jubilant when I climbed out of the small mission airplane the following day, carrying a suitcase bulging with cash.

My gifted Nigerian supervisor taught me valuable lessons about leadership. I thought he was rude to disregard appointments; he taught me that *time* is not to be dichotomized into artificial blocks. I was embarrassed to go to his private home on official business; he taught me that location was not to be separated into official and private *space*. I assumed that money was divided into personal and business *categories*; he taught me extraordinary generosity.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The glorious existence of the interconnected worldwide church compels critical reflection on leadership and culture. For the worldwide body of Christ to work in unity, we must look afresh at hidden assumptions about cultural values regarding leadership while we pursue biblical principles that affirm and challenge these values. I believe we can be both biblical and flexible in our philosophy and practice of leadership. My prayer is that leaders around the globe will humbly learn to work together as we look toward the day when people from every language, people and nation will sing hallelujahs at the wedding feast of the Lamb!

Some of my friends and mentors have agreed to contribute vignettes about what they are learning about crosscultural leadership. These reflections can be found between chapters.

In the next chapter I will discuss some of the things I am still learning about leadership. One of my friends suggested that I title the chapter “My 1001 Greatest Leadership Mistakes.” I thank the Lord for those who patiently mentored me in my leadership development. Much of my philosophy of leadership has grown out of these experiences.

REFLECTIONS ON MULTICULTURAL LEADERSHIP

Dr. Joshua Bogunjoko, Deputy International Director for SIM (Serving In Mission) with responsibility for Europe and West Africa

Crosscultural leadership has taken us beyond our own cultural preconception of leadership to appreciate the view of leadership from very diverse cultures. My wife, Joanna, and I are from Nigeria, and we began our missionary career as physicians in Niger. After further study in Canada, we were asked to serve in a leadership role with the international team of SIM. It has been a delight to be able to come alongside people from so many different backgrounds and cultures, working and walking together to encourage and support effective ministry.

The difficulties of working in crosscultural ministry are more or less a flip side of its delight. The different cultural understandings that bring such richness to crosscultural leadership also bring the greatest challenge. This includes balancing different ideas and expectations of leadership roles among different cultural groups and even among people of similar cultural groups who do Christian leadership differently.

There is also the challenge of the language of leadership. The way people understand and interpret concepts such as servant leadership and consultative or participatory leadership all differ from culture to culture and from experience to experience. These differences are not only between people of different cultures, but also between individuals from similar cultures. Diversity of thoughts and ideas brings richness and beauty. The delight of working cross-culturally is that we get to see and know other peoples' differing ideas. Sometimes, we may actually be saying the same thing in different ways.

Choosing to be learners is what helps us most to understand different perspectives on leadership. Crosscultural leadership is a school from which you never graduate. I don't think anyone comes to crosscultural leadership with a superior or inferior view of leader-

ship; we just all come with different views. It is my responsibility as a leader to learn from others what their views are and why, and to help them understand where I am coming from. This can only happen by being honest about my own need to know and understand others, to be vulnerable and open, seeking to understand before trying to be understood, being an empathetic listener and showing true respect for cultural differences in leadership practices, models and styles. I need to ask clarifying questions to be sure that I am being understood, as well as to ensure that I have understood.

I have also learned that leadership in general and crosscultural leadership in particular is not about my success, but about walking with and helping others succeed, whatever their cultural peculiarities may be and whatever their callings are. It is about helping others be all that God has called them to be as much as I can help in that process. Since no condition is permanent, a follower can become a leader someday, and one needs to be prepared to accept with humility the leadership of someone who had previously worked under his or her leadership.

I have learned that there are no superior or inferior cultures or cultural approaches to leadership; there are only different approaches. No particular culture's approach is inherently bad or unbiblical, and no particular culture is completely biblical. I have learned to ask questions, to ask not only what and how, but why. The "what" helps me understand what is expected. The "how" helps me understand the culturally appropriate approach, but it is the "why" that helps me understand the culture itself. It is the "why" question that unmask the deep cultural value behind the "what" and "how."

I confess that I owe a significant part of my growth as a Christian to opportunities to serve in leadership roles, especially cross-cultural leadership. I have had opportunity to evaluate my own cultural leadership norms and my own cultural heritage. This in turn allows other cultural views to help me draw new conclusions and adopt new attitudes as I continue to learn and lead.