

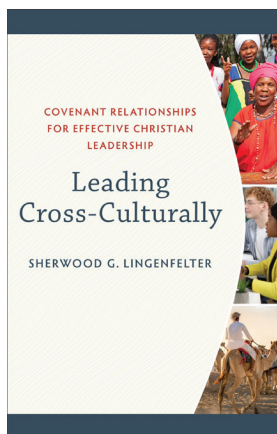
Leading Cross-Culturally: Covenant Relationships for Effective Christian Leadership

by Sherwood G. Lingenfelter

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Reviewed by Alex Peterson

Alex Peterson (pseudonym) has led cross-cultural teams for over a decade in the Middle East in both non-profit and church contexts. The organization he led had members from 20 different nationalities, many of whom serve as cross-cultural ministry workers. He is currently involved in training and equipping of new cross-cultural workers.



Leadership is inherently hard, while leading cross-culturally adds extra burdens of potentially-damaging miscommunication. Learning to lead teams through these minefields is essential for the health and effectiveness of cross-cultural ministries.

Multicultural teams are the default today, with any ministry or tentmaker position often requiring interaction with people from multiple cultures. Many minister alongside national churches or in other cross-cultural contexts, often in positions of formal or informal leadership. International churches—multicultural families themselves—are a growing juggernaut in places where there is no indigenous church. Cross-cultural leadership isn't just required – it's inherent in the work.

Drawing from numerous case studies and his own experience in higher education leadership, Dr. Sherwood Lingenfelter gives wise, if sometimes one-dimensional, advice to those who have leadership responsibilities in cross-cultural ministries. Lingenfelter is the Provost Emeritus and Senior Professor of Anthropology at Fuller Seminary and former provost of Biola University. He has researched leadership in cross-cultural contexts, and he has written *Leading Cross-Culturally* with the cross-cultural worker and the missions world in mind.

Lingenfelter opens each chapter with a leadership case study which he refers to throughout the chapter. The case studies build on one another throughout the book to flesh out the book's foundational thesis that cultivating "covenant relationships" is the best foundation for cross-cultural leadership and building healthy multicultural teams.

Lingenfelter defines leadership primarily as establishing and maintaining healthy relationships between members of the organization and team. The health of these relationships depends on the leader casting a clear vision for the community to participate in and work toward. People from different cultures, however, have different approaches to both vision casting and achieving the team's vision.

To address this, Lingenfelter provides a helpful matrix in chapter four which describes how individuals approach relationships based on their group/individualist orientation and how they understand roles within the organizational structure (whether rigidly or less so). Problems arise when people approach organizational life from different perspectives without even realizing it, causing friction as expectations are not met.

Therefore, a role of the leader is to understand how people from different cultural backgrounds understand team and to unite them behind a shared vision of how the team will work. Within this framework, Lingenfelter distinguishes between "task-focused" teams and "covenant community" teams. He argues that teams with a focus on community

over task create deeper bonds and trust and are better able to weather inevitable storms.

When considering cross-cultural teams, I recommend leaders consider what Kevin DeYoung calls “epistemic humility” (2020), which is a fancy way of saying, “We don’t know what we don’t know, and we should remember that in humility.” When approaching cross-cultural relationships, particularly when we are new to the culture, there is much that we do not know. Getting to know our team and their perspectives on teamwork takes time, conversations, mistakes, forgiveness, repentance, reconciliation, and grace to work out differences. Lingenfelter suggests the leader is the first to demonstrate humility, and more importantly, sacrificial love, even if that means sacrificing honor and reputation (chapter 11). When miscommunication happens, and when the team is fractured, the leader should make the first move to understand people and reconcile broken relationships.

Another helpful framework that Lingenfelter gives is the distinction between “responsible-for” and “responsible-to” (chapter 10). “Responsible-for” leaders, he says, “demonstrate emotional attachment to their role and results, and they exercise power and control to achieve results and assure quality” (133). Leaders acting in this way may care more about their own standing than that of the people around them. “Responsible-to” leaders are quicker to “grant authority, responsibility, and freedom” to the people with whom they work and who work beneath them (133). Often times, acting in a “responsible-to” manner is more effective and gives opportunities to show grace which allows people to grow in their own work. When leaders become consumed by their own success, they are driven to consolidate their power, which is a rich soil for pride and selfishness. It is difficult to act in a “responsible-to” manner, particularly when we feel our own reputations are on the line. However, remembering we are responsible to the people we lead helps us remember that our primary focus is not about accomplishing tasks but about loving people.

Lingenfelter has experience in leadership, both in practice and in research, thus I find myself hesitant to be critical. However, there some questions I might ask, if given the opportunity, from my own leadership experience as the executive director of an organization in the Middle East with staff from twenty nationalities (the majority being Arab and Muslim), in which I was responsible for operations and worked with a multicultural, multi-religious board to drive the vision.

First, Lingenfelter seems to imply that cultural behaviors are largely neutral (chapter 4). And they usually are. But I would ask, "How do we discern when cultural behavior isn't neutral, but rather negative?" Lingenfelter may object that he does not claim culture is neutral. Indeed, he writes, "The second problem with my early definition is the idea that culture is 'neutral.' After years of reflection on texts of Scripture that reference the world, ideas, doctrines, ancestors, myths, and genealogies, I have concluded that Scripture takes a rather negative stance toward the fallen human cultural ways of life" (60). However, Lingenfelter does not develop a framework for evaluating cultural practices. Further in the chapter, he seems to view culture as a neutral vessel that the cross-cultural leader must learn to interpret.

It is largely true that cultural behaviors are usually neutral. However, there are times when leaders need to make judgment calls on whether our actions or that of the people we lead are right or wrong. Sometimes leaders' cultures have blinded them to their own unbiblical behaviors. At other times, leaders may need to address a sinful practice of a team member from a different culture. Making such judgment calls is complicated by biases and sinful hearts, leading easily to mistakes and miscommunication.

This was particularly relevant when leading my middle managers. Their only experience of leadership, or being led, was command and control. This meant my leaders tended to manage harshly. But it was also considered part of the cultural and leadership landscape. How is someone like me, from a different culture, to address this?

In this regard, I appreciated Lingenfelter's council on covenant relationships, humility, and reliance on the Holy Spirit for direction. These elements are critical for navigating the treacherous waters of cross-cultural conflict and evaluation. When we rely on the Holy Spirit and engage with those whom we lead and serve, we grow in humility and gain additional perspective, better able to discern when our own or others' actions need to be corrected. Then when a moral judgment is required, leaders have the right heart attitude and right goal in mind.

Second, what happens when a team member does not perform their tasks adequately and acts selfishly? While I believe Lingenfelter is correct to value the covenant relationship of the community over task completion, the team must still accomplish tasks such as pastoral ministry, mercy ministries, or administration. Lingenfelter gives a wise process of listening, prayer, discernment, and confrontation in love to address issues. The result, he infers, is that the person will improve their performance as they lean in to covenant community or, perhaps, discern that they need to move on to another job.

There is much to be commended in this approach. I remember one instance when my frustration towards a staff member boiled over, and the result was more hurt feelings and less improvement in performance. I was more concerned with saving face and accomplishing the task than with the person in front of me. Even so, there are times when a person does not hear a call to move on, their performance does not improve, and the person becomes belligerent. The cross-cultural leader is the one responsible to manage the team. How does the leader know the time to be quick and decisive verses slow and measured?

Third, how does the leader strike the appropriate balance between the need to take time in addressing poor performance and the multi-dimensional goals that pressure most leaders? The case studies seemed one dimensional in that the only relationship in focus was that of the leader and the team. Often, however, the leader is acting within a larger ecosystem of perspectives, goals, and expectations. There may be local

governments, donors, board members, or beneficiaries of the ministry to consider. Those pressures impact how quickly a leader feels he must deal with those who are not contributing to the covenant community.

However, Lingenfelter's advice is still relevant. Leadership, as he notes in chapter 1, is not about telling people what to do; rather, it is about influencing people to accomplish a certain vision. This can include "managing upward" or influencing those to whom cross-cultural leaders report.

Approaching conflict within the frame of covenant community is helpful both for leaders relating to poor performing team members as well as for leaders relating to larger stakeholders. There have been moments when I have had to work with parents, board members, and other stakeholders to redirect their attention to our mission and vision as focused on people and driven by our love for God. It takes a wise leader to realize team conflicts require multidimensional responses. This relieves the unnecessary performance pressure on the leader and makes space to utilize all available means of grace when dealing a struggling team member.

Lastly, how does Lingenfelter balance the role of leadership in exercising authority and the need to exercise sacrificial love for those being led? Jesus' leadership was sacrificial, and therefore I agree that we are also called to be sacrificial in our leadership. However, Lingenfelter seems to set up a dichotomy between "rule over" language and sacrificial leadership. In some ways, I feel he is correct. "Ruling over" others is often used as a way to describe how leaders utilize their positions of authority to achieve their own selfish ambitions and goals. However, this behavior can be distinguished from proper exercise of authority.

Exercising authority should still be done in the wider context of Christ's sacrificial leadership and our own call to exhibit the same for those we lead. When making hard decisions, we prayerfully and humbly listen, learn, and seek consensus. We seek counsel from mentors and

from the community whom we lead and serve. Yet, the bent of the human heart does not naturally err on the side of exhibiting too much servant leadership. Rather, most leaders – precisely because of our leadership personalities – default to “ruling over” in ways that are “lording over” those whom we lead. The counsel to be sacrificial in our leadership is wise counsel.

I recommend this book for those who are new to cross-cultural leadership or those who need another perspective in diagnosing roadblocks they are experiencing as cross-cultural leaders. While this book does not address all the nuances of cross-cultural leadership, the principles form a solid foundation from which to springboard into the complexities of working with people from different perspectives. It is full of examples and practical suggestions that drive the reader to trust in the Holy Spirit and create covenant communities – a worthy endeavor in any leadership context.

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