

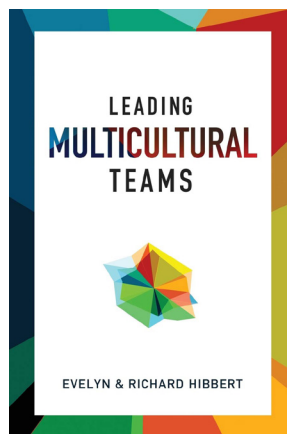
Leading Multicultural Teams

by Evelyn and Richard Hibbert

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Reviewed by Richard Kronk

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In *Leading Multicultural Teams*, Evelyn and Richard Hibbert add to the growing volume of materials intent on addressing the challenges associated with leading teams that are comprised of people from multiple cultures. The authors bring over 25 years of experience with multicultural teams, initially as team members of such teams, and more recently as coaches for multicultural teams that serve globally. The authors argue early in the book that cultural diversity is God's design and therefore something that needs to be embraced. Nevertheless, the authors note that the challenges in recruiting and leading members of a multicultural team are fraught with potential difficulties. These difficulties are related to the core essentials of what it means to be and work as a team as well as how leadership is defined and functions.

Summary of Content

Leading Multicultural Teams provides an honest assessment of the potential benefits and challenges associated with serving on and leading multicultural teams. Through a collection of personal anecdotes, cultural theory, and team-specific research, the authors weave real-life experience with theoretical and biblical principles to establish a framework for successful multicultural teams.

The book begins with an overview of multicultural teams and the cultural challenges of forming and realizing multicultural team success. The overview is followed by two chapters which address developing a vision for a multicultural community, the mechanics of building a healthy multi-cultural team community, and the necessity of clarifying the team's purpose and approach. The book continues by addressing the difficulties of managing team conflict, the essential character qualities which foster team harmony and productivity, and several skills to acquire which contribute to a healthy multicultural team. The authors close the book with a chapter on how organizations can support team leaders in multicultural team contexts.

In addition to the main content, the authors have included some helpful tools associated with the formation and leadership of multicultural teams. These tools include leadership discussion questions, a process for individual team members to identify assumptions and expectations associated with working on a team, and a multicultural team leader inventory designed to highlight the expectations team members have of prospective team leaders.

Evaluation

The authors bring a wealth of experience with multicultural teams, which allows them to dispense firsthand and anecdotal insight which informs their assessment of the challenges and suggested means of forming and leading successful multicultural teams. As they do this, the authors introduce relevant Scripture passages relating to the evaluation

of multicultural team dynamics, leadership, conflict resolution, and defining team purpose and function.

Fundamentally, the authors express a conviction that despite their inherent challenges, multicultural teams are the “normal” and expected outcome of living in a multicultural world. Without entering the debate over the necessity of multicultural teams as opposed to monocultural teams, the authors appeal to the argument that cultural differences are part of God’s design; hence, multicultural teams provide an opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate those differences.

Of note in particular is their assessment that every team member inevitably brings to the team not only their experience and ideas, but a host of cultural values which shape how they perceive the definition of a team, the function of a team, the role of individual members of a team, who is suited to lead, and what is expected of the leader. The authors note, “One of the most powerful functions of culture is that it defines for the members of each cultural group what is right and acceptable and how things should be done” (3). So, cultural differences do not simply define how something is done, but the “right way” to do it.

Refreshingly, the authors acknowledge that much of the literature on issues of leadership and teamwork are not only written in English, but “reflect English/Dutch/German-speaking background (EDG) cultural values. These values include individualism, efficiency, task orientation, an emphasis on written team agreements, and relatively little emphasis on relationships except as an instrumental factor in achieving tasks” (21). Inherent in their admission is the reality that the very concern expressed even by a book of this nature is an expression of EDG values of the authors’ themselves!

The most helpful content in the book addresses strategies for forming multicultural teams that have the potential for relational harmony and the capacity to accomplish the task(s) for which the team was formed. To this end, the authors begin by describing three ways of approaching the multicultural community (assimilation, cultural pluralism and multicultural-

alism).¹ The authors argue that multiculturalism, as a means of viewing a team, “describes a society where everyone feels valued, whatever their culture” (63).

Having proposed a philosophy of multiculturalism, the authors describe how to build a multicultural team community which offers a “safe climate” for all (73), establishes the guidelines by which the team members will function (76), and develops an effective team communication process which works for all (77). To this end, the authors argue that the glue which holds the team together in the midst of its cultural differences is interpersonal trust (81-84), which has both a biblical foundation related to honesty, clarity, grace, and forgiveness; it also has a practical application related to culturally appropriate expression. It is this accumulated pool of trust which will allow the team as a whole and individual members to be able to resolve conflict and endure misunderstandings when they occur (139).

The authors spend a good deal of time discussing issues surrounding managing and resolving conflict on multicultural teams. They acknowledge their own experience with team conflict has partly shaped how they understand and address team conflict now. Of note is the observation that people from different cultures will not only experience conflict differently, but will also have differing expectations as to how conflict is resolved. The authors describe a conflict escalation scale by which one can assess to what level a particular conflict has evolved, as well as a series of suggested approaches to addressing and resolving conflict given its stage of evolution (142-143).

The challenge of authoring a book like this is that, despite the skill inherent in identifying cultural differences and the challenges associated

1 *Assimilation* is described as the process of adopting the cultural values and expressions of the culturally different host or dominant culture at the expense of one's cultural of origin. *Cultural pluralism* is the freedom to express one's culture of origin within the boundaries of the cultural values and norms of a culturally different host or dominant culture. *Multiculturalism* is the cultural dynamic which blends cultural expression from two or more cultural groups who inhabit the same cultural space (61-63).

with forming and leading a successful multicultural team, no one – not even the authors – can live as non-cultural persons. Despite their efforts to embrace a respect for cultural neutrality and step back from imposing an EDG cultural perspective as the preferred one, at times it comes through. When the authors suggest that “the team leader should encourage the team members (who are in conflict with one another) to talk with each other” (162), they are espousing a practice which is arguably oriented towards cultural values which are associated with EDG values (independence, directness, etc.) and not cultures which embrace collectivity and indirectness. Once again, the authors’ bias comes through when they argue that “good team leaders include each team member in the decision-making process, making a decision based on what everyone has said” (177). Such an approach is highly valued in a low, power-distance context which values a democratic approach, but not so much in cultures which value high power-distance and expect the leader to decide for them.

While not shying away from acknowledging challenges to successful multicultural teams, the authors never imply that it is somehow more work than it is worth. However, they do admit more than once that sometimes the cultural divide among team members is such that the successful functioning of the team may not be possible, and it may need to be restructured or dissolved (5, 146).

In summary, the main strengths of this work include a helpful treatment of understanding the roots of common conflict of multicultural teams and approaches to mitigating conflict, an unapologetic acknowledgment that multicultural teams reflect the cultural diversity of the people of God, and hands-on resources (provided in the appendices) to help individuals on multicultural teams identify and assess important aspects of leadership, purpose, and conflict resolution.

Relevance/Importance

Evelyn and Richard Hibbert have made a helpful contribution to the body of literature seeking to address the practical side of forming and leading multicultural teams. Their honest assessment of the challenges, their practical suggestions, and the hope they offer for the possibility of forming and leading successful multicultural teams is both encouraging and realistic.

One helpful but sobering note in the wake of the discussion of how to form and lead successful multicultural teams is the honest assessment that it may not always be possible. “We will not always be able to work harmoniously with other Christians who have different cultural values. Some people may not be able to make the compromises necessary to becoming part of an effective multicultural team” (5). With this honest admission, the authors have anchored their text in the reality of the human condition – even for those who are Christians.

Though the authors do not make this connection, it seems apparent for two reasons that the necessity of multicultural teams is an essential component of the realization of the *Missio Dei*. First, because of global migration and the globalization of the Church, the cultural make-up of the missionary force is increasingly multi-cultural. This fact alone implies the increased opportunity and necessity of multicultural teams. Second, the nature of the remaining unreached requires cultural skills that are underrepresented in historically Western, European cultural contexts. The benefits of non-Western cultural values and norms on team function and leadership are yet to be fully realized and appreciated with regard to the advance of the gospel.

Recommendation

As someone who served many years on a number of formal and informal multicultural teams, I would have benefited greatly from the discussion, tools, and approaches offered by Evelyn and Richard Hibbert had I had the chance to read and interact with their ideas prior to

my experiences in multicultural team contexts. I heartily recommend this text, especially for newly forming or recently formed multicultural teams. I think the maximum benefit from the book could be realized if it was read and discussed by all team members. Because of the cultural differences which the authors reference, the impact of the book may vary depending on the culture of origin of the readers. In particular, those of us from historically dominant cultural contexts with regard to missions will need to take seriously the challenge to assuming that our way is the right way and find ways to not only acknowledge cultural differences but seek to value and honor others in the way that we serve as members of multicultural teams.

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