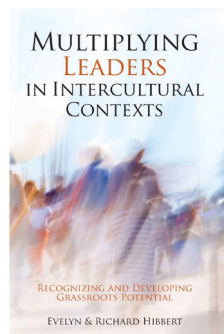


Multiplying Leaders in Intercultural Contexts: Recognizing and Developing Grassroots Potential

By Evelyn & Richard Hibbert. William Carey Publishing. 2023. 169 pages.



Reviewed by David Riddell

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The church is multiplying exponentially around the world. This expansion in our day is occurring primarily in the Majority World where workers and leaders are bi-vocational and have limited access to training and theological education.

Multiplying Leaders focuses on describing the mindset one needs to grow and empower indigenous leaders. The book presents a process by which church planters come alongside existing leaders in a community to journey with them in raising up other leaders. This work of coming alongside is based on the principle of leaders seeing themselves as fellow disciples learning to lead the communities of believers they are called to serve.

The path is not simple: "Each leader, regardless of background, and each community regardless of size, has a compulsion to share new life

with everyone they meet. It is messy, out-of-control, unpredictable, but vibrant and ever-expanding” (xii).

Evelyn and Richard Hibbert write from experience of developing grassroots leaders in contexts where these leaders cannot “leave” their communities to pursue formal theological training or needed training for serving their communities. The Hibberts worked as pioneer church planters among Turkish speakers in Bulgaria for many years before returning to Australia to serve at Sydney Missionary Bible College (SMBC) and the Angelina Noble Centre. Thus, they understand well the importance of training and multiplying leaders.

Summary & Evaluation

Much of the benefit from this book comes from its conversational style. You get the feeling that you are sitting down over a ‘cuppa’ with Evelyn & Richard to discuss together how leaders are developed around the globe. It is well thought-out from a biblical perspective, but not presented in a lecturer-student format, and thus accessible to a broader audience. The authors write from the standpoint of one leader-developer talking to another developer of leaders.

At least three main ideas can be identified in the authors’ line of reasoning and main thesis. First, and probably the most critical, is the approach or mindset any leader has in developing leaders across cultures. Leaders need to first come alongside leaders and grow together with them. They must be “developers” rather than leader trainers or experts (2). Since the manner in which leaders lead is affected by culture, leader-developers should first invest time and effort to learn the fellow leader’s culture in order to better equip and empower them. The authors stress that developing other leaders comes from doing life together with these leaders in their contexts. Leaders should humbly focus on developing people rather than pursuing programs.

Second, the authors underscore the importance of expanding one's view of leaders and leadership. The standard model of a leader is a sole individual with a strong charisma in a recognized leadership position. In contrast, Evelyn & Richard encourage readers to recognize "everyone who is leading rather than merely focusing on people who have official leadership roles" (49). Once again, this requires spending time in the community to watch to see the leaders who are exercising their gifts. A helpful explanation of the five different types of leaders serves to expand the reader's ability to see the different kinds of leaders in a community (50–54): Small Group Leaders (Type 1), Intra-Church Leaders (Type 2), Pastors & Overseers (Types 3 & 4), and Supra-Church Leaders (Type 5). Understanding these different kinds of leaders helps to prioritize where time and energy needs to be given. As the Hibberts point out, it is most often small group leaders (Type 1) who have the most potential influence in furthering the church and a church-planting movement.

Finally, the biblical pattern of leadership development is most often carried out in community. This is seen in the growth and development of the early church in the book of Acts (2:42–47, 6:1–7). The apostle Paul models it through his example (Phil. 1:1–2, 1 Thess. 1:1, 2 Thess. 1:1) as well as exhorting leaders to grow in community (2 Tim. 2:2). This is certainly not a new concept but a reminder that leadership has a cultural soil in which it grows and flourishes. What the developer, coming from his or her own culture, may have in mind for developing leaders may not be appropriate, adaptable, or able to multiply in that culture.

From their study of secular and Christian writers, they identified four critical characteristics of good leadership: community, character, clarity, and care (57). Community is the foundational quality, the framework in which biblical leadership is fostered and grows. The Hibberts underscore this principle by referring to the one-another commands of the New Testament: "Leaders nurture multidirectional care within the community as both leaders and followers learn to love one another" (63). In my own personal case, looking over my ministry leadership timeline, the majority

of my growth as a leader has come in the context of community. As Proverbs says, "Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another" (Prov. 27:17).

If you are looking for a step by step, 'how-to' manual on recognizing and developing grassroots leaders, this book may disappoint. If, however, you are looking for biblical principles to inform and direct your efforts to multiply leaders, this book will give you much food for both thought and practice.

Personal Reflections & Implications

After language and culture acquisition here in France, our first foray into cross-cultural church planting focused primarily on the work that we would do. We certainly knew the importance of seeing people come to Christ, discipled, and released into ministry. But consciously or unconsciously, we saw ourselves as the trainers and leaders in this process.

As time went by, we came to realize how much the obstacle of our own pride inhibited and stifled the multiplication of disciples and leaders, particularly in cultural contexts different from our own. In the last few years, we have moved towards a more community-based, small-group focused, adult-learning driven process of multiplying leaders especially in multicultural contexts. We stumbled into some of what Evelyn & Richard Hibbert outline in their book, a shift in approach which has been most helpful to us over the past few years. We were also helped by interacting with the Hibberts personally on this topic, whom we met on one of our first visits to Sydney Missionary & Bible College. In our initial conversations with Richard, we sensed the common 'heartbeat' we had for church planting and raising up leaders. We benefited from sharing learned insights with one another through discussions and joint presentations at various times.

Readers may find several weaknesses in the Hibberts' approach. First, while there is great value in the conversational approach of this book, it doesn't always necessarily follow a logical or sequenced approach. This may leave the reader searching for more of a clearly defined process or approach. Second, though the Hibberts do not overwhelm the reader with a host of personal examples, there are a few times when a personal or real-life example would be helpful. For example, the encouragement to create problem-based, complex skill training (149–151) would benefit from an example that would allow the reader to walk through the proposed steps in this process.

At the same time, there is also a benefit in this lack of numerous personal or real-life examples of the various principles they describe. Instead, the Hibberts leave the reader to reflect on how these principles will work out in their adopted context. For that is the message from the very start of their book when they encourage the reader: "To be effective developers of leaders from other cultures, we need to invest time and effort learning the culture" (3).

There are at least three implications for our work of multiplying leaders in intercultural contexts. First, from the outset, we must build into the process of multiplying leaders a reproducible element. Sustainable leader development must not be dependent on "external developers" (138). Otherwise, once the developers from outside the culture leave, the multiplication of local leaders will stagnate and stall. Developers from within the very culture must be raised up, developed, and empowered to do this work. This DNA of multiplication is easy to talk about, but difficult to carry out in practice. From the beginning, the developer team must evaluate the DNA of their approach and its ability to be reproduced among the local leaders.

Second, leader development must connect knowledge with experience. Our tendency is to share or transfer a certain body of knowledge as the basis for leader development. The authors do not look down on theological and missiological education as both are trained developers and lecturers who have served in institutions. They stress that

knowledge disconnected from experience will not serve local leaders well, as it is not reproducible in a community learning environment: "For leaders, knowledge is far less important than character and skills. This does not mean that it is not important. But, rather, that it should be strictly in proportion to its importance rather than swamping everything else" (148). To make this connection requires a good deal of time, energy, and an innovative mindset. Knowledge as the transfer of information is something easy to do. Taking that knowledge, breaking it down into smaller chunks, and developing ways for leaders to interact and apply that knowledge takes a lot more effort. The Hibberts call us to take the time to create "complex skill training," a type of training which provides opportunities for a group to learn and work together to address issues and problems they face (149).

This leads to the third and final implication. Developing and multiplying local leaders happens through collaborative discussion. True learning happens not only through the interaction and discussion of ideas, reading, and other research, but also through the leader's real-life experience. The authors present an extremely helpful image to capture the dynamic relationship between theory and experience: the image of a two-railed fence where the top rail is theory and the bottom rail is experience (148). The benefit of this dynamic is played out in the collaborative discussion between leaders as they seek solutions and strategies, applying what they are learning to real life situations. This frees the developer to grow and multiply leaders by using problem-based learning. Problem-based learning challenges leaders to apply the principles they are grappling with to a real problem or situation. I personally have profited from the image in using it to talk with several leaders in recent days. It pushes us to focus more on the needs of the leaders being developed than on the information that the developer wishes to convey.

In sum, this book is of great value and worth the read and reflection for anyone involved in coming alongside local leaders and movements of multiplying churches. One possible way to do so on a team is to have

team members read the first eleven chapters of the book on their own. Then, as a group, using chapters 12–13 as a base, the team can have a collaborative discussion to outline a first round of complex skill training they would facilitate using a problem-based approach. The collective goal would be to “empower leaders to solve complex problems by using a consistent process” (151). *Multiplying Leaders* provides biblical leadership principles that allow you and your team to define a learning process in your cultural context which will facilitate and empower ongoing leader multiplication.

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