

Success and Failure: Wielding the Wisdom of Research

By Larry and Stephanie Kraft

Larry and Stephanie Kraft are members of the Global Research Team of One Challenge (OC) International and have been active in church and missions research since 1987. Their first assignment was to help create a catalog of mission-sending entities in Brazil. Subsequently they created and tabulated surveys, led focus groups, conducted interviews, loaded databases, ran analyses, wrote reports, mentored younger men and women, and archived hundreds of reports that their various OC teams created over the years. They serve in several leadership functions within the [Community of Mission Information Workers](#) and the [Lausanne Movement's Research and Strategic Information Network](#). They each have a B.A. in the sciences from the Johns Hopkins University and an MA from the School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary. After 38 years of living abroad, the Kraft's returned to reside in the United States in April 2024. Larry and Stephanie have two grown children and three grandchildren.



Research can feel like oddball ministry. Indirect and usually in the background, it involves asking good questions, and then systematically listening and documenting answers. It can be both the preamble and the postlude to the work, or part of the work itself.

When applied to pioneer efforts, research can feel even more troublesome. How can strategy be determined without context? And how can context be understood without presence? And how can presence be established without strategy?

The mission researcher is faced with many questions. When and how is it appropriate to ask the best questions about context and ministry,

and who should do the asking? Who should do the answering? Who will determine whether a ministry effort can be said to succeed, or fail?

Lessons Learned in Mission Research

After many years conducting, supervising, and training in mission research, the following are some thoughts about the relationship of research to the processes of ministry and the determination of success and failure in pioneering work:

- **Research is our friend.** It creates a framework for organizing and analyzing what we hear when we listen. It need not be burdensome. It must not be threatening.
- **Research is biased.** To imagine that any research is fully objective, or neutral, is an illusion. Every worker passionately bears their own culture, and thus has bias. We do well to recognize this and own it. This is true for those who minister as well as for those who evaluate ministry.
- **While flawed and limited,** research can be extraordinarily helpful. Every ministry proposal, explicitly or implicitly, is the outworking of assumptions, definitions, and envisioned change. Good pre-ministry research helps build consensus regarding starting points. Appropriate evaluative research reveals the degree to which that envisioned change became reality.
- **Research without objectives can be worse than useless.** It can represent the proverbial drawing of a circle around a bullet hole and calling that the target. Unless time, prayer, effort, faith, and honesty are invested in clarifying the desired outcomes of a ministry endeavor prior to its start, a perfect storm of hurt, misunderstandings, and diabolical confusion can occur.
- **The beginning starts with the end.** The clearer the understanding of an envisioned new reality, the more pertinent ministry research can be.

Crafting Clear Objectives

Under the direction of the Holy Spirit, articulating objectives that enjoy broad support contributes to unity. It also dispels whatever clouds of ambiguity hostile forces might create to obscure faithful planning. Pre-ministry research, designed to understand culture and context, is the best way to begin a process of prayerful visualizing. Regular monitoring and evaluation can help ministry partners stay on the same page.

Our own team experienced the power of well-written objectives when serving a leadership development ministry in Southeast Asia. A nascent training module had been prepared beforehand by “outsiders,” but the course design included no effective instrument to track either behavioral or attitudinal changes in the Asian participants. When the moment for refinement of the program came, members of our research team helped those redeveloping the course to intentionally create learning objectives which reflected the priorities of the original curriculum creators and, subsequently, the priorities of the “insiders” as well. Thereafter numerical engagement in the courses, and self-reported spiritual growth, snowballed.

We have also witnessed the wounding that can occur when ministry objectives are unclear or absent. A certain agency requested our team’s involvement in its decadal internal evaluation. Later, some of their missionaries discovered there were no specific organizational objectives related to their ministry. This predictably brought about demoralized outrage. They asked, “Did they not matter? Was their predicted contribution so insignificant that it didn’t even merit assessment, let alone commendation?” While objectives may feel restrictive, in reality they hold us close to what we believe and say what is important to us.

Head, Heart, and Hands

Mission research is action research; it offers us understanding of the way God is working and suggests how we can better join him in that work. Our team has found the “Head, Heart, Hands” paradigm to be

particularly useful for pondering and proposing the changes suggested by research and, subsequently, how we can articulate objectives which will contribute to that change (Orr 1990).¹ “Head” growth represent shifts in knowledge and beliefs. What is known, and what convictions exist about what is known? “Heart” changes are those that reflect emotive states and attitudes. What is loved and what is feared? What motivates and excites? “Hand” modifications are reflected in activities. What is now being done differently, and how? Objectives that suggest and recognize developments in all these realms can be powerful. Well-written objectives which describe full-orbed change can make evaluative research straightforward.

Quantifying Change

A famous British mathematician once wrote, “When you can measure what you are speaking about, and express it in numbers, you know something about it; when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meager and unsatisfactory kind.”² Our team believes this view to be misguided. We rather focus on both statistics and stories; we give value to both anecdote and analysis. We are convinced that both quantity and narrative inform. Nevertheless, while not everything that counts can be counted, many things can. Change can be one of them.

We have found the Likert Scale, developed by the social psychologist Rensis Likert, to be our most useful tool to convert subjective thoughts and feelings into compare-able quantities. It enables us to contrast one existing state to another, or a current state to a former one. For example, the general question, “How afraid are you when you hear thunder?” might be difficult for a child to answer. “Kinda?” “Sorta?” But the question, “Are you more, or less, afraid during a storm when a parent holds you close?” will likely elicit a quick and confident response.

1 See also Orr 1992. For current applications, see also Burgess 2022 (<https://www.sogolytics.com/blog/customer-success-head-heart-hands-model/>).

2 Lord Kelvin. *Popular Lectures and Addresses* vol. 1 (1889) ‘Electrical Units of Measurement’, delivered 3 May 1883

Questions which measure the strength of agreement (or disagreement) as reflections of beliefs, feelings, and actions can help a researcher frame a current reality. The subsequent application of those same questions can suggest trends. A degree of transformation can be noted, documented, and sometimes quantified.

Definitions Really Matter

Language is living. People often do not share the same usage of words, and those meanings morph with time. We even have to contend with regional differences in understanding the same words. Although very few missionaries enjoy wordsmithing, unless there is a common understanding of what is meant by “obvious” terms such as “leader,” “church,” and “convert,” counting becomes meaningless, and occasionally dangerous. We don’t want wordy definitions with bullet points because we want to keep things simple, but without clear definitions it truly is impossible to be certain we are speaking with others about the same things.

Our team painfully experienced this when, under pressure of budget and calendar, we released a survey designed to better understand the ministry contexts of church leaders in Brazil. We broke our own internal rule of never embarking on data gathering without field-testing our questions. We used a term we thought was universally defined in a certain way. It was not. In our study population there were two distinct ways that same term was understood, and this caused enough contamination in our data that all questions using that word were discarded. In the end, the entire project was scrapped, and all the person-hours invested in it were for naught.

Success or Failure?

Herein lies the challenge of defining success in mission research. Must it represent 100% goal achievement? Fifty percent? Something else? Will the moderating effects of some subjective elements move

the needle from red to green? While, ideally, the degree of openness to changes in evaluative parameters could be decided before any ministry interventions begin, realistically none of us would want to close ourselves off to the surprises which occur when divine intervention happens. Ours is, after all, a supernatural work. We must have our eyes open to see how God may otherwise be at work. There must be room to marvel.

Common Pitfalls

Because research can be such a powerful tool, it should come as no surprise that our enemies (celestial and otherwise) would wish to compromise it. Here are some of the pits into which we have fallen.

Research is expensive, and its costs are not always appreciated.

One of our most serious relational challenges occurred when we worked under a national leader who did not fully grasp the resource needs for an agreed-upon project. He “closed the deal” with an international funding group without consulting our research team as to how much our partnership in a project would actually cost. To honor our national colleague, and to realize a project that we sincerely valued, we worked ourselves silly for months. Long hours, underwriting our own expenses and enlisting volunteer help, enabled us to deliver what we had promised. However, it took months, perhaps even years, for us and our relationships to recover.

Partners are not always able to be faithful. We once found ourselves with the leadership of a very well-respected, well-resourced agency, lamenting together about the uncertainty in a certain ministry field. “Someone should do some research!” We all agreed. We brainstormed together what each of us could bring into the project. We created timelines. We developed a survey instrument and parameters for its application. We trained interviewers. And then we waited. The promised interviews never occurred. As it turned out, for many good reasons our partner was unable to uphold their end of our agreement. The end of the story is a happy one, as the Lord brought an additional partner into the mix who invested the time and energy needed to bring in some valuable

data. Nevertheless, it is a healthy reminder that there is no guarantee that people will always do what they say they will.

Beware of the absence of actionable conclusions. Early on we erroneously took on the assumption that accurate, dynamic, attractive reports would do their own work in eliciting change. We imagined this should especially be the case if we included quotations from well-respected national voices and crafted some impressive graphics. Being presented with the facts in a lively, colorful, organized way should certainly mobilize decision-makers to make the wisest choices, we thought. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

In what was probably an excess of caution, we discovered that we left our report consumers impressed, but at the same time clueless as to how to apply what they had just read and/or seen. Those of us who were immersed in the data felt like it was shouting suggestions. For those, however, who were beholding it for the first time, the information in our reports just felt overwhelming. We now offer possible interpretations and suggested applications every time we present some data. Perhaps even more importantly, every report our team creates now contains a section of “Prayer Recommendations.” At least, those who read our reports will have a few points for prayer. We have discovered that this section is often the most enjoyable and exciting to write.

Expectations and motivations are not always shared. Sometimes leaders do not reveal their fundamental reasons for commissioning research, or the understanding of why a particular project has been undertaken can be unclear. This can lead to criticism—by the researcher about the leader who appears to be bending the data to an unusual purpose, but also by the leader about the researcher, who may be accused of giving greater weight to one finding over another. On one occasion, we were taken aback when leaders saw a particular “logical choice” that did not make sense to us. Only after prolonged conversation and emotional debate did we come to appreciate the fact that those who commissioned the research really just wanted to simply confirm a choice they had already made.

We can stop too soon. It is easy to feel finished when a pre-ministry ethnography or a post-ministry evaluation is finished. Done and dusted, we think. However, we can sell the process short if we do not look for every avenue to make our findings as widely disseminated as possible. In the mid-2000's, we undertook a number of studies on the discipleship issues faced by new followers of Jesus from a Muslim background. Because of the danger the findings could possibly cause our study participants, we held the reins on the resulting reports very tightly. We carefully controlled the distribution of all of our results. We slowly released data exclusively to vetted recipients. In so doing, our data got old. Some of it became obsolete.

We later lamented that so much more mileage could have been obtained from our efforts had we been more pro-active in finding appropriate avenues for sharing, or ways of obscuring the dangerous aspects of details. Gratefully, a member of our team garnered an invitation from a new ministry partner to create a meta-report of our previous work. With sensitivity to security concerns, he resurrected some of our findings and suggested new applications. Don't quit before the work is done.

Do Not Forget the Intangibles

If your God-inspired objectives have not been realized, look deeper. There may be positive outcomes you have missed that are as good, or even superior, to your initial goals. Have you experienced the blessings of unity within a diverse team? Have you witnessed a miraculous deliverance or a surprising divine intervention that convinced you of God's presence? Has something of God's kingdom come in a place you least expected? If so, recognize these as manifestations of God's ownership of your work and rest in the greatness of His power.

Conclusion

It is difficult to distill into one article all the lessons learned through years of conducting, supervising, and training mission research. So, to

recap it now is impossible. It is best to leave you with some important bullet points:

- Even the best research is flawed and limited, but it can still be extraordinarily helpful.
- Research without objectives can be worse than useless.
- It always starts with well-written objectives.
- Good mission research engages the head, touches the heart, and moves the hands.
- While not everything that counts can be counted, many things can and should be.
- Be clear with definitions, and make sure everyone shares them.
- Leave room to marvel at the work of God.
- Good research is expensive in time and resources, so plan carefully.
- Partners are not always able to live up to their end.
- Aim for actionable conclusions.
- Clarify, and clarify some more with research partners.
- And do not stop too soon; sense where the Holy Spirit is leading.

May we wisely not draw too many circles around our outcomes and call them our successes. Let's wisely wield research as a useful tool and rejoice that we can employ it in the Master's service.

Questions for Conversation

1. To what extent does research data inform or not inform your team's strategic ministry decisions? What value do you believe frontier practitioners should place on ministry research?
2. Which insights from the article are most relevant to your team's ministry practice? What would it look like for you to implement these principles into your context?
3. Discuss the author's claim: "While not everything that counts can be counted, many things can and should be." What significant ministry realities cannot be counted? What, if anything, do you think "can and should be" counted?

Bibliography

- Orr, David W. 1990. "What is Education For? Six myths about the foundations of modern education and six new principles to replace them." *Annals of Earth* vol. 8, no.2. Reprinted in *In Context* (Winter 1991): 52-52. <https://www.context.org/iclib/ic27/orr/>.
- Orr, David W. 1992. *Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World*. SUNY.
- Burgess, Jake. 2022. "Using the 'Head, Heart, Hands' Model to Embrace Customer Success." TSogolytics Blog, January 19, 2022. <https://www.sogolytics.com/blog/customer-success-head-heart-hands-model/>.
- L. Kelvin. 1889. "Electrical Units of Measurement." *Popular Lectures and Addresses*. Vol. 1. Macmillan and Co.