Quality control: four ways to check it

Day of Prayer and Vision/Introduction/On the path/blind spots © TEAM, 2004

The first years of my first term were filled with questions about the quality of my ministry and relationships. Our standards often seemed lower than those I had worked with in North America. Our relationships were far more turbulent than what I had lived with before.

Prior to leaving, I had been warned that I would face this, so it was not unexpected. However, the development of patterns foreign to me shocked me, doubly so because they seemed the natural thing to do and not because others influenced me. Adapting to and integrating with my new culture suddenly seemed so distant and unreachable. Within our missionary community I found it hard to live according to basic Christian principles of good relationships.

Certain key question arose: What level of Christian living did I need to reach before I could be sure that my presence was justified? When and how would I know that I was making a contribution to both my church and my community?

Knowing how wide our blind spots can be, I knew that I had to look outside myself to find the answers. But to get them, evaluation had to enter the picture. This judgment had to be based on standards toward which missionaries strive. For example, I had to look at my relationships with the Filipinos, with my fellow missionaries, and with my home base. I had to be tough with how I managed my time and strength.

In the following pages I'll reveal where this took me, and then conclude with some dangers, some tools, and some results.

The local people

First, check how you are getting along with the local people according to the standard of 1 Corinthians 13. God's great command to love particularly hits missionaries entering a new culture. Let me choose just two things: patience and courtesy. Moving into a new culture, we find many good reasons to be impatient. Their values and standards differ. Their words carry different meanings, creating misunderstandings and tensions. We think it's normal and acceptable to explode when our standards are violated. But love means patience.

We're tempted to blame our impatience on our circumstances. We blame it on the horrible traffic, poor workmanship, disregard for time, and so on. In those trying, provoking things we must be patient. In frustrating circumstances we must blame impatience not on the situation but on ourselves. It comes from within. We must take responsibility for it and discipline ourselves to get rid of it.

Love is not rude, it is courteous. Maybe this is something we were taught at home, but learning courtesy in another culture is something else. I had to learn to live according to what the other person considers to be courtesy.

One day I went to lunch at a Filipino's home. Much to my consternation, the rice had been cooling for half a day and the other dishes cooled off for half an hour before we sat down. The courteous thing at home was to serve your guests immediately while the food was piping hot. Could it be that my hostess was less than enthusiastic about my coming? I thought so, but later learned that this was indeed the acceptable local custom.

Nevertheless, I decided to straighten them out and show them how it should be done. I invited my first friend over for dinner and served her spaghetti and sauce right off the stove. She looked at it and said sadly, "Oh, now we'll have to wait until it cools before we can eat."

She had rejected my hospitality, I thought. Later it dawned on me that to be courteous to her I should have served the food at a tepid temperature according to the rules of her culture. I had to accept her values of hospitality and kindness, not impose mine. Love is courteous according to the prevailing values, not your own.

According to the apostle Paul, if these two aspects of love aren't working in our crosscultural relationships, then our gifts and abilities in language learning and ministry, and even our self-sacrifice, amount to nothing. So it's well worth our time to evaluate how well we are doing.

Fellow missionaries

Our standard here is unity (Ephesians. 4). Most of us believe we can contribute something toward people coming to know God through Jesus Christ. That's why we're missionaries. Jesus said that his divine mission would be validated by our unity (John 17:20-23). But we seem to emphasize methods more that relationships. When it comes to evangelism and church growth, I believe methods are subordinate to our love and unity. Therefore, we must judge our relationships with other missionaries by our unity or lack of it.

From Ephesians, we can ask ourselves:

To what degree are we gentle with one another? Bearing with one another (rather than being critical)? Speaking the truth in love (instead of speaking harshly, or not at all)? Not slandering? Forgiving?

Sometimes apologetically we confess that we are independent, strong-willed people, or we wouldn't be where we are. But we fail to see that these traits also cause conflicts among us. Biblical leadership, however, is not independence, but service and peace. We attain this peace among ourselves not by papering over our differences, but by building into our lives the qualities that make for peace.

The home base

The church I joined on the field had an active group of young professionals, so it was natural for me to start building friendships there. Early on they greeted me warmly, talked with me momentarily, and then escaped as quickly as they could to merge with another cluster of people. Immediately they relaxed and began to chatter away at ease. I knew I was the outsider. At home I had been an insider. What sustained me during those long, lonely, early months was knowing how deeply loved and accepted I was at home. There I was socially acceptable and adept. I had friends who stayed and talked. Knowing this gave me both stability and courage to keep on working at Filipino friendships in spite of perceived rejection. We need strong home bases in our ongoing adjustment into another culture.

How can we evaluate this relationship? I have no Bible verses. But I suggest that we look at our channels of communication between home and field—between us and our families, friends, and churches. Is the system working well? Do we communicate concern, love, and acceptance? Do we communicate regularly, honestly, with clear, understandable sentences?

We must assiduously cultivate this home base relationship, lest we die on the vine, so to say. Time invested in letters pays off in intelligent intercession and stronger bonds of affection.

Managing our time and strength

Writing prayer letters is one of many things we're asked to do, usually without much structure or supervision. In some cases, missionaries go for weeks or months without being held accountable. Many times our reports cover huge spans of time in vague generalities. Our ministries often are do-it-yourself projects, beyond direct administrative controls.

For example, a church planter is accountable in a general way to his board or to a national church, but his immediate goals, strategies, and the hours he works are all up to him. Some people thrive in that framework, but most of us are more productive when someone holds our feet to the fire.

Moving into a new culture, we can't pick up our old "tools of the trade" and start doing something at once. We can't use our comfortable strategies because we don't even know if our goals fit those of the local believers. We have to gain their confidence before they will give us responsibility.

Too often, at this crucial point, some missionaries are so eager to do something that they will do anything. They fall into bad habits and start to waste their time. We need to judge ourselves very strictly here, to get the most from what time and strength we have.

To help us find workable standards, we need to consult books on the subject. Even though written from a North American perspective, the principles can be transformed and the standards adapted to missionary life and work.

For example, missionaries usually spend more time working their way through various government regulations. Ordinary household and maintenance tasks take more time and energy than in North America.

Much time that would appear wasted from an efficiency expert's viewpoint we spend in bridging new cultures. We're not doing nothing when we're taking the time to sit patiently with people and soak ourselves in their language and customs.

None of this negates the need for hard-nosed evaluation, which must be determined by the context. Missionaries used to being loners and those used to running their own show may find this difficult. We can help each other to structure our time. We can hold each other accountable. Out of interdependence comes strength and unity.

The dangers

Evaluation is beset by pitfalls. Obviously, one could respond legalistically and outwardly conform because of strong expectations. Anyone could be superficial about it just to come up to acceptable standards. Missionaries already face strong pulls to conform and to be spiritual giants. Evaluation could be just one more external pressure.

Or, to meet the standards, one might deny the failures. For example, in trying to make your way in a new culture you might very well get impatient and angry. You dislike the way things are done and the way people behave. Missionaries must accept these feelings for what they are and not cover them up. If they don't they won't be able to resolve them in a healthy, constructive way. As a matter of fact, in the right setting missionaries need to blow off once in a while, without being censured.

Evaluation could lead to discouragement and even despair. Standards must be ideal and we must never give up our ideals and be content with mediocrity. At the same time, perfection awaits us when we see God and are transformed in his likeness. Patience with ourselves and with others is required.

If our expectations are realistic, we gain the satisfaction of making progress. Unrealistic expectations drive us harder and make us impossible to live with. So does sitting in judgment of one another.

How to evaluate

My purpose is not to list actual evaluation instruments, but to mention some possibilities.

Logically and practically, field leaders should exercise the evaluation, not the home office. In many cases, local church leaders could also be asked to do an evaluation of the missionary, according to their cultural expectations.

Self-evaluation is useful because we know more about ourselves that anyone else. However, often we are our worst critics, because we can either be too hard on ourselves, or we can be blind to our weaknesses.

Psychological tests and evaluations are widely used. They help us understand our organizational styles, our basic temperaments, the strength of our coping mechanisms, and our weaknesses. Not uncommonly, people will say, after looking at their evaluation, "So that's why I react the way I do." Such knowledge goes a long way toward dispelling defeat.

Peer evaluation can be very helpful. But for this to work, we must love and trust each other. If we include local believers, we must be sure that both we and they are comfortable with the procedure.

Results

So you've tried it, now what? Whatever method you used, look at it as a tool to direct your growth, not as a cudgel to beat you into submission. If you see genuine need for improvement, ask your board for help. More agencies are sending qualified people overseas to counsel missionaries. Pastoral care may be lacking on the field, but sometimes a visitor or friend from home can be the counselor you need. A trusted partner on the field could help.

A veteran worker once observed, after a particularly acute problem about which he sought help from older workers, that he had for the first time experienced the truth of Galatians 6:1, 3: "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ." Evaluations may show the need for career planning. Some missionaries may discover that although they are not yet up to par, they are doing better than their last evaluation, in which case they need more time. On the other hand, others might find strong signals that cross-cultural ministry is not for them.

We can all identify with Paul when he said, "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect" (Philippians. 3:12). I pray that we will encourage one another, "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead . . . toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians. 3:13, 14).

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