

The Biggest Challenge of Multicultural Teams

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A multicultural team with two Americans, two Asians, one European, one Latin, and one African had weekly team meetings at 8:00 am every Monday morning to review the past week and plan the week's activities. When the Latin and African member were consistently late to the meetings the others were irritated. One of the Americans and the European felt that the Latin and African were late because they were basically lazy and didn't want to do as much work.

One of the Americans volunteered to serve as group leader. The European felt that the American leader was not well organized and didn't run the meeting properly. The Africans, Asians, and Latins were displeased that the oldest member was not asked to be the leader since he also had the most field experience.

The Monday morning meeting started with a report of the previous week's activities. The Americans were always the first to speak up. According to the others, the Americans always emphasized their own specific accomplishments rather than the team as a whole. The European gave his report quickly and succinctly but officially while the Latin, and African took time to explain more details, the circumstances, and challenges they faced in getting their work done. The Asians would be cautious about speaking depending how the team and the leader feel about their report. The Americans and the European were frustrated because the meeting always went over the one-hour time limit they had set. They felt that the others did not speak directly to the issue at hand. They also didn't like how emotional the Latin was or how animated the African was in explaining their situation. The Asians felt that the Americans always spoke too much and didn't give others a chance.

The brief description of a multicultural team reveals some of the basic cultural differences that multicultural teams face. The way these differences are understood and addressed will determine how healthy the team will be.

The biggest challenge for multicultural teams is to recognize the degree to which each person believes their own culture to be biblical. When people believe their own culture is biblical, they are unable to accept other ways of doing things. Instead of reflecting the image of God in their everyday interactions, they use their cultural judging system to justify unbiblical behavior in response to cultural differences.

In order to address this challenge team members need to review what it means to be created in the image of God, understand a theory of culture, and compare their own culture with Scripture.

I. Created in the Image of God

The most important concept for multicultural teams to understand is what it truly means to be created in the image of God. If team members do not fully understand what it means to be made in God's image, they will not treat others as made in His image. Their perception of themselves and others are distorted by cultural values. Therefore they justify unloving actions towards others. People who truly understand what it means to be made in the image of God treat others as God treats them.

God created all people in His image (Genesis 1:26-27). This image includes the characteristics of authority, truth, and godly relationships fostered by the three-fold person of

God the father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Humans in turn have utilized their capacity to create culture, although each culture shows signs of being affected by the Fall. At the end of time the scene before the throne (Revelation 7:9) reveals that the image of God will be visible through different ethnicities, languages, and nationalities. Therefore each culture has the potential to reflect the image of God.

The image of God has been viewed as the human capacity to make decisions (substantive), the responsibility to take care of creation (functional), and the ability to love one another in community (relational).¹ These three views can be equated with the characteristics of God.

Due to the Fall, the image of God is no longer perfect. It is now distorted by cultural ways of making decisions based on cultural truth and guided by human centeredness. However, God desires His image to be restored according to the standard of His Son (Romans 8:29).

II. A Theory of Culture

In order to understand how different cultural values distort the image of God, we briefly describe a theory of culture developed by Mary Douglas, a British social anthropologist. She called it the Grid and Group cultural theory². However, we've found that the terms "Structure" and "Community" are more understandable.

Douglas studied a variety of cultures around the world, from very industrialized nations to agricultural based societies. She found that there were two main recurring themes—differences and similarities or Structure and Community (See Figure 2). Structure refers to differences such as age, gender, and class that shape behavior. Community refers to similarities that reinforce group belonging and identity. These two dimensions form four different types or cultural ideals: A= Individuating (Weak Structure, Weak Community), B= Subjugating (Strong Structure, Weak Community), C=Hierarching (Strong Structure, Strong Community), and D=Equalizing (Weak Structure, Strong Community). The preference for a particular cultural type reinforces a cultural bias against the other types which shows itself in one's cultural judging system. That is, what people say and do to justify their beliefs when things don't go their way.

Douglas views the four cultural types as part of a whole; thus, understanding one of the types helps in understanding the other types. A person from a Weak Structure, Weak Community society such as the United States will gain insights into Asian cultures that have Strong Structure, Strong Community ideals by understanding this theory and vice versa.

Understanding one's own cultural type is necessary before one can understand other types. A number of exercises can help individuals understand their cultural type. The next step is to realize how they have mistaken their culture for Biblical truth.

¹ "Theology of Human Nature." In Christian Perspectives on Being Human. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, pgs. 22-23.

² Douglas, Mary T. "Cultural Bias." In *In the Active Voice*. London: Routledge, 1982, 183-254.

Structure and Community Theory

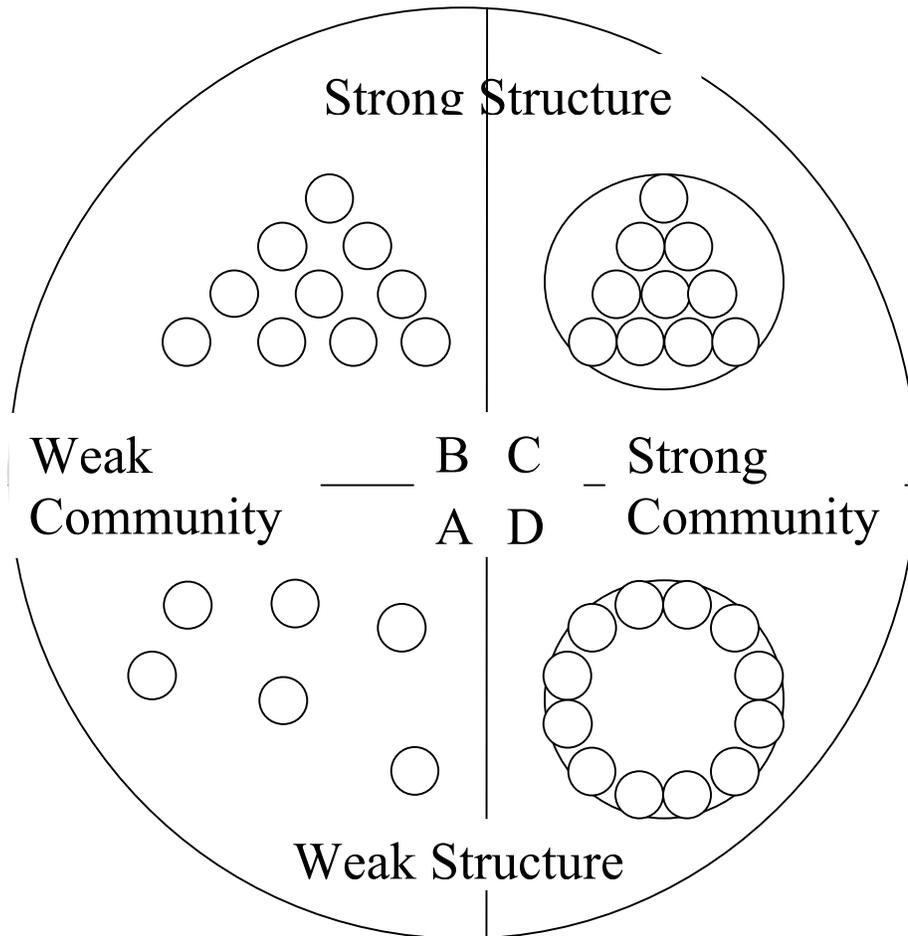


Figure 2: Structure and Community

III. Comparing One's Culture with Scripture

The best way to discover whether you believe your way of doing things is cultural or biblical is to examine your emotional responses and behavior when things don't go as you planned. Do you demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) in your responses to cultural differences? That is, would your multicultural team meetings be characterized by love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, meekness, and self-control? Or are they characterized by "hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy" (Galatians 5:20-21).

Do you seek to justify your negative actions? If so, that is your cultural judging system at work. People make decisions based on what they believe is right and justify their negative responses because they hold strongly to their beliefs. However, if their response to cultural differences do not demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit or the body of Christ, they are holding strongly to their own cultural beliefs rather than to biblical truth.

In order to have healthy multicultural teamwork, each team member needs to understand what it means to be created in the image of God, understand their own cultural background,

and be able to compare it with Scripture to discern whether or not their beliefs are biblical. The multicultural team members will recognize how Weak Community cultures (American and European) seem cold and unfeeling to Strong Community cultures (Latin and Africans) while Strong community cultures (Latin and African) will understand why Weak Community cultures (Type A & B) focus on themselves (Americans) or need to follow the rules (Europeans). Weak Community cultures (Type A & B) focus on linear and written communication while Strong Community cultures (Type C & D) focus on non-linear and oral communication. Weak Structured cultures (Type A & D) will understand why status and order are important to Strong Structure cultures (Type B & C) and Strong Structured cultures will understand why status and order are not important to Weak Structured cultures (Type A & D). Each type has different underlying assumptions and misunderstanding and conflict naturally result.

However, when team members recognize how their cultural judging system of their cultural type distorts the image of God, they humbly ask God to help replace their cultural judging system with God's Truth and justice. The process of cultural self-discovery is a not a quick process, but takes much time to reflect and seek God's help.