

I Already Have My Square!

The Relationship between Missionaries and Nationals in Mission Strategy

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Introduction

The Cooperation Squares is a game for five people that is often used as a team-building exercise for groups of people learning to work together.

Each player gets a few puzzle pieces that are cut in the shape of triangles, squares and other simple polygons. The goal is for each player to end up with a perfect square. At the beginning of the game, no player is able to make a square with the pieces he or she has received. Players must exchange pieces in order to get a set they can make into a square.

However, players may only *give* pieces to other players; they may not *take* pieces or in any way *tell* another player that they want a piece. It is common for the group to reach a position in which one or more players have made a square, but the rest of the players are unable to do so.

The following diagram shows that three squares have been made from the 17 pieces, but it is possible to make five squares from them, and that is the group goal. In this case, one or all of the existing squares must be broken up and the pieces redistributed if that goal is going to be reached.



Typically the groups that do best at this game have members who are unattached to their individual squares, being willing to break them up and distribute puzzle pieces to others who might need them. They are focused on the group goal and not simply on the completion of their own square.

An Application to Mission to the World

The typical outcome of this game when used among people from our culture highlights our tendency toward individualism. The game is often used to teach teams the importance of helping other team members succeed in order to reach team goals.

I would like to make a different sort of application—to the situation we face in MTW of one culture working with another. I’m afraid that what we often communicate to the leaders we work with in other cultures is that *we already have our square*. In other words, we convey that “we have our act together, and we’re here to help you,” not realizing that the best way to help them might be to examine “our square” and its relation to the whole more closely.

Let me clarify what I am *not* saying. I do believe that the individuals who work for MTW are generally characterized by humility. Most of them readily admit that as individuals they do *not* have their act together. They are more than willing to learn from their cross-cultural experiences. This is not the issue.

The point I am making is that the way we are set up organizationally communicates that *we already have our square*, and the individuals who minister within MTW are inevitably affected by this institutional structure. I will give an example from MTW's old model, and then from the current model.

MTW's Old Model

A number of years ago this organizational "attitude" was perhaps more obvious. There was a time when we sent in our church planting teams with the intention of starting a presbytery largely on our own, and then handing it over to nationals when we were finished. There was a lot of talk back then of MTW being "on the cutting edge" of missionary strategy. The implication was that "we know what we are doing." "We already have our square." I have called this a "missionary-centric" strategy. Whatever the intentions of the individuals involved, the structure tends to be ethnocentric.

Of course, when you go to start a new church in a place where there are no believers, it is much more difficult to partner with nationals. Unless you recruit nationals from another place to go with you to start the church—which is probably the wiser thing to do if it is possible—your only alternative is to work with the nationals who are converted under your ministry. I think that in some cases this is a viable option, *if* the missionary team is *very* intentional about *investing* in the nationals who are converted, learning from them, always doing ministry *through* them to whatever extent possible, and refraining from trying to get the church up and running more quickly by creating and sustaining the ministries of the church themselves.

MTW's New Facilitation Model

MTW's new model—characterized by the word *facilitation*—appears on the surface to be a more humble organizational stance. It is in many ways an attempt to correct the ethnocentrism of the previous model. While it hasn't always been clear exactly what is implied in facilitating church planting, it seems to involve the following:

1. The previous model didn't work well. Significant problems occurred at the point of hand-off to nationals.
2. Nationals understand their culture better than we do, so they should do the church planting, not us. This will result in a more contextualized and thriving church.
3. Our job is *facilitation*. We use our gifts, abilities and resources to make things easier for them, and to empower them. As I understand it, this often involves the following:
 - a. Instead of supplying answers, asking nationals the right questions so they themselves come up with the answers appropriate for their culture
 - b. Mentoring them
 - c. Training them

- d. Maybe teaching them in certain areas
- e. Putting them in touch with the right people, including the creation of partnerships with US churches
- f. Helping to oversee partnerships with US churches
- g. Providing resources, but in a strategic way—always avoiding practices that would produce dependency.

The Major Flaw in both Models

The old model is more obviously flawed in that it tends to impose our cultural ways on our colleagues in other cultures. While the facilitation model is well-intentioned and does address some of the problems of the previous model, it is still, in my opinion, inadequate—at least in the ways it seems to be working itself out in practice.

In both models, we are the experts and have virtually nothing to learn about ourselves, either as an organization or as a culture. In the second model, we've limited our area of expertise so as to exclude knowledge of their culture. Our role in this model is more modest, but we are still experts at what we do: facilitation. We already have our square.

In other words, the major flaw in both of these models is that neither one requires us to examine our “square.” In both cases the assumption is that “we already have our square.” When viewed in this light, the differences between the two models are minor. In the first model we go over to their side of the table and try to put their square together for them. In the second model we ask them questions like, “how do you think you should build your square?” Or we give them training on the different ways people have come up with to build squares. Or we put them in touch with other people who might be able to help them assemble their square. But in neither case do we consider that we might need to disassemble our square, or that they might have a piece we need in order to create a square that also allows them to create a square.

The second model could be seen as an advance over the first in that we are at least asking them their opinion. However, they know very well that examining and dismantling our square is not even an option that would come to our mind. That, along with the fact that Latin Americans tend to be very polite and desirous of maintaining harmony, pretty much insures that our square will remain unquestioned and intact.

Underlying Assumptions

The assumptions underlying MTW's old model come from what has been called a developmentalist worldview. According to this view, if cultures are different it's because they are at different levels of development or maturity. If all cultures were equally mature, they would all look the same. This is the cultural mentality that led the church many years ago to think they needed to civilize people in other cultures before they could evangelize them. Of course, MTW has always consciously rejected the ethnocentrism and paternalism inherent in this view. Yet the assumptions somehow crept in unawares and affected MTW's missionary strategy.

The assumptions underlying MTW's facilitation model (at least in terms of how it seems to be working out) are more in line with the postmodern mood. According to this view, if cultures are different it's because different ways of thinking and acting simply work better in different situations. This comes out of a relativism according to which one culture can never judge another. Of course, MTW would never knowingly accept relativism. It goes against everything we believe as a denomination. Yet, I believe the facilitation model as commonly practiced or talked about reflects this relativistic worldview in some ways. The assumption is that we have figured out how to contextualize the gospel in our culture (we have our square together), and now our colleagues in other cultures need to figure out how to contextualize the gospel in their own cultures. We can encourage and empower them, but only they are capable of applying the gospel to their own culture.

The assumptions underlying my critique of these two models are as follows:

1. All cultures reflect God's glory in some way.
2. All cultures are affected by sin—some more than others at any given time in history. This happens primarily in terms of cultural idols.
3. People even read Scripture through the filter of their culture.
4. The people in a given culture tend to be blind to the ways their own culture uniquely reflects God's glory, to how this should be complemented with the glory reflected in other cultures, and to the ways sin affects their culture. Everyone in that culture grew up in the same cultural fishbowl, so who is going to see clearly enough to challenge anyone on these blind spots? It would be a case of the blind leading the blind.
5. The Great Commission is not only for the purpose of proclaiming the good news to those who haven't heard, but also for the purpose of mutual edification and getting out of one's cultural fishbowl. The ones who are sent end up getting a clearer view of the gospel as they begin to look at their cultural and organizational uniqueness and sin from the point of view of another culture. And those to whom they are sent have the opportunity to contextualize the gospel in their own culture with the help of those who are looking at it from a different point of view. At this important level, no one is the expert. We all need each other.¹
6. The communication of meaning—especially across cultures—is less subject to misunderstanding when words are fleshed out in actions in the context of trusting relationships.² Otherwise it's too easy to co-opt the words of others into one's own worldview. When people see your words fleshed out in actions and relationships, they understand your meaning more clearly.

Some Practical Implications

I propose a model of doing mission that is different from both the missionary-centric model and the facilitation model as I have understood them. My proposal in practice is

¹ See, for example, Paul's argument in Ephesians—especially 3:9-18.

² See my articles on "The Meaning of Meaning."

that US missionaries and national leaders should minister together side by side on a regular basis. I'll call it the synergistic model. What I am proposing is different from MTW's first model in that national leaders are involved in the work of church planting from the beginning (if there are any). This is also different from the facilitation model in that US missionaries are also involved in the work of church planting throughout the process.

If these two groups do not have much significant contact with each other, or if the only contact they have is in meetings among themselves, not much deep learning at the cultural level is likely to occur. Highly verbal activities that are somewhat isolated from interaction with the culture and with those to whom we minister—like planning meetings, team prayer meetings, classes and seminars—have their place and are often necessary. But they are not likely to produce learning at the organizational and cultural levels. I call these IFC activities because they are somewhat *Isolated From the Culture*. In IFC situations, it is too easy for the people from one culture to co-opt the words of those from another culture into their own worldview, and thus misunderstand them.

In IFC situations it is very easy for a “meeting culture” to be produced. When you step into a meeting like this you are stepping into a situation in which the rules of interaction are not controlled by the outside culture. This meeting culture is usually reflective of the national and/or organizational culture of the group of people in the meeting that, for whatever reason, has greater influence in that meeting. The reasons for having greater influence might include, for example, being more numerous, being more forceful, having more resources, or having more education than the other group.

On the other hand, doing things together that require a greater degree of interaction with the culture—like making contacts, evangelizing, discipling, leading worship, leading small groups, participation in social events, participation in mercy ministry, and training others outside the classroom—help clarify the meaning of our words to each other. They tend to reveal deeper levels of meaning.

Working with nationals who are not leaders can also be helpful, but they are less likely to verbalize their thoughts and feelings if the missionary is their pastor—out of respect for his authority. But when there are no national leaders with whom to work, this is a good model. Whenever possible, however, it is more helpful for US missionaries and national leaders to work as partners in a regular, significant way. I'm not ready to say exactly what “regular” and “significant” looks like. It may look different in different situations. Maybe working side by side in ministry in non-IFC situations fifteen hours a week would be a good start. One or the other will no doubt have to take the lead. Or they can take turns being the leader. But in practice they should minister as partners.

I have no doubt that working in the way I am proposing will produce greater tension between US missionaries and nationals. But working out the tension will produce deeper understanding and greater effectiveness. It will help each side see more clearly its God-given strengths as well as its cultural blind spots.

Getting the most from this synergistic model will require the cultural humility that encourages both sides to ask a lot of questions, not in a critical way but as true inquirers. Meetings of all kinds are necessary, but they should take place in the context of having ministered together in significant ways. I suggest it would be helpful in many cases to structure these meetings more around asking questions than around giving reports or giving opinions. Reports and opinions should be given primarily in response to questions from others. Here are some of the kinds of questions that should be asked:

1. Why did you do it that way?
2. How does it make a typical national feel when he or she sees us doing X? What is appreciated? What is not appreciated? Why?
3. How does it make a typical missionary feel when he or she sees us doing Y? What is appreciated? What is not appreciated? Why?
4. How can we design ministries in a way that don't impose your culture on ours, but rather feel "national?"
5. How can we design ministries in a way that incorporates what we can learn from your culture, while retaining a national feel?
6. From your missionary perspective, how can we design ministries so as to avoid the consequences of our cultural blind spots?
7. From your national perspective, how can we design ministries so as to avoid the consequences of our cultural blind spots?
8. As you observe our ministry together, what otherwise legitimate and biblical values do you view as having become more important than Christ?
9. How can we please the Lord?

Some cultures tend to be more direct than others. Other cultures are hesitant to disrupt harmony by implying any kind of criticism. I am convinced, however, that if missionaries make it clear that they do not hold their *square* dearly, but are willing and eager to examine it and even break it up if necessary, more effective communication will be possible.

Conclusion

Both the missionary-centric and facilitation models of doing mission communicate to nationals that "we already have our square." The synergistic model, on the other hand, assumes that "we may have to break up our square and receive a piece from you in order for both of us to get our squares." Self-knowledge at the cultural level is critical to the effectiveness of our mission. This self-knowledge is best obtained by working together side by side, and asking sincere questions about how people from another culture see us, not only as individuals, but as a group that tends to design ministry in certain ways and with certain priorities.