

Conflict Management in Cross-Cultural Ministry

A Design for Adult Learning

by Jenny Giezendanner, CDEP

WHO: This design was created for an annual staff meeting of an Asian ministry, approx. 90 adults, the majority of whom work in village communities, and a smaller percentage working in the headquarters' office. The participants mostly come from one large region of their own country and share similar cultural backgrounds with one another. However, they work cross-culturally in a wide variety of communities with quite different cultures from their own within the same country. While the session was held in English, this is the second or third language for all participants.

Facilitators: Jenny led the session with assistance from a local teammate, R.B. They alternated leading the learning tasks and scribed for one another.

WHERE: The four-day all-staff meeting was held in a retreat center with simple facilities, including a very large hall for meeting.

Chairs and up to 20 small tables provided, electricity unpredictable, Whiteboard and markers available; We provided paper handouts for each participant that shared all the instructions and examples for the learning tasks.

WHEN: 60 minute session. Rough time allotments are given for each task below. The session was held on the second day of the conference, early afternoon.

WHY? Many staff work cross-culturally in regions where they facilitate projects with local church or community leaders. Expectations on the staff include: developing productive projects, local ownership, transformative impact, while working alongside these local leaders. Staff do much training and mentoring but also facilitate participatory community discussions. Often the "outsider" staff are taken by surprise when these local leaders, even Christian ones, display behaviors which are not what the staff expects from a solid Christian believer. What should they do? And how do they help the local leaders move the project ahead with a good reputation and positive results?

WHAT LEARNING will the participants do during this session?

- **Consider / Explore** the meaning of some examples that are counter-to-expectation about cultural values from Asia and Africa.
- **Rank** the values as they value them from their own worldview.
- **Compare** this ranking with those of other cultures.
- **Define** some specifics of the local value system, by ranking the importance of values they have observed.
- **List** ways for discovering more about the local community's value system.
- **Plan** and **pray** for better relationships with local leaders, leading to better communication and teamwork in the projects.

WHAT TRANSFER:

What Attitudes, Skills and Knowledge will they bring back to the field or to their work?

- Have more **patience** and **compassion** for people who are different from themselves. **Recognize** how local behaviors may be a reflection of their worldview.
- Take time to **observe** and **talk** to people about their values to discover the traits in people that they most trust and respect

- **Help** people struggling with wrong behaviors to find better solutions and grow in their faith and in their abilities to act in the manner of a respected local person, and in light of Scripture.

WHAT IMPACT:

What will be the long-term impact to their programs and village life?

- The “outside” Program Facilitators will be encouraged.
- Field programs become locally sustainable and fit their own local context.
- Local leaders will grow in their leadership capacity and Christian witness.
- Churches will grow and be stronger.
- Constructive decisions will be made by the people closest to the situation, e.g., from within their own culture and community, yet in harmony with Scripture.

HOW: The Learning Tasks

1. Connection

[5 minutes]

Let's **pretend** a foreign aid worker from a very far country comes to Asia. He has many things to learn. Soon he finds out that Hindus revere cows, and so, they do not eat them. He appreciates this.

Then he also finds out that Muslims do not eat pork.

What conclusion might he draw?

Why is this a problem?

Think, then **share** some ideas together at your tables:

2. Content

[18]

Write a short note to yourself: What do you feel is the worst wrong a Christian can commit? [2]

Share this with a partner nearby who is NOT directly involved in your project.

[3]

A. In Borneo, Indonesia, according to the all the people of their neighborhood, some foreign workers had committed the WORST possible sin.

Listen and **think**: How do you feel about what happened?

One member of the foreign couple had become very angry, more than once, in his home. This person had shouted in the house and broken some household items in anger. The local neighbors insisted this person must leave. It would ruin the reputation of Christian work for them to stay.

Your reaction? (Wait and think, then **share** a couple ideas from whole group)

[3]

B. Here's another example: A West African high school student was accused by his teacher of cheating on a test because he gave answers to some friends. He was very confused and hurt by the accusation. He was a good student and felt that he had not done anything wrong. What do you think was the reason for this disagreement?

Discuss with your partner:

Share: What do you think was the problem?

Now for a bit **more info:** In the boy's home culture, there is a very high value on helping your clan members. To *not* help them when you would be able to is the worst possible evil.

Think: As the boy's teacher, now what would you do?

Share your thoughts with your partner:

[10]

3. First Challenge

[10]

Now **think** of a time, as recently as possible, when you were frustrated (maybe you are still frustrated!) by a situation with the local people you work with in your region of work. **Write** down a few bullet points about the situation on the paper provided.

[5]

1. What happened or is happening?
2. How do you feel about it?
3. What is it that bothers you the most?
4. What, if anything, doesn't make sense to you?

Share this with a person near you who is NOT involved in your project directly. Both take a turn. [5]

3.b. Second Challenge

[10]

Earlier we listed what we personally feel is the "worst sin." This is probably influenced in some way by our cultural background. It is certainly not the same in every culture. That can be a source of serious conflict.

We also believe the passage in Romans that "every human has done wrong and comes short of God's glory." "Not one person is ever perfect, but transgresses against God's law." Sometimes in a cross-cultural conflict, one person has done something wrong. Often it is even both of us! *Any* wrong needs forgiveness and restoration of the relationship.

But every culture also demonstrates that some **good** values are more important than other **good** values. This goes along with how every culture says that some sins are worse than others. This is normal for

any culture, but different cultures have different “Values Hierarchies.” Each culture ranks the *good* values differently.

It’s even harder sometimes to deal with cultural differences when people are not really doing something wrong, but instead, just acting correctly according to their cultural value system. Let's look at how we ourselves view positive values. Take the list provided and **rank** the seven values mentioned **in order** from most important to least, from top to bottom as you see it from your own perspective:

reputation, honesty, being on time, cleanliness, hospitality, loyalty, prosperity

(This can be done with a set of printed cards for the participants to physically organize.)

Value Ranking for my home culture:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

What do you find? Take a minute to compare your own list to the possible lists for three other cultures:

For Chinese culture: 1. loyalty 2. prosperity 3. reputation 4. cleanliness 5. honesty 6. hospitality 7. being on time	For Swiss culture: 1. honesty 2. cleanliness 3. being on time 4. prosperity 5. reputation 6. hospitality 7. loyalty	For Moroccan culture: 1. hospitality 2. loyalty 3. reputation 4. prosperity 5. cleanliness 6. being on time 7. honesty
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Now, for your *host* culture, the place where you work on the field, how would you rank these same seven values from the point of view of the community? **List** them in the order that you feel the **local people**

would value them.

Value Ranking for my Host Culture:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

Compare this to your own ranking at the top of this section. Where are they the same? What are the biggest differences?

4. Change [10]

Now go back to the difficult field situation that you mentioned earlier. How might this difference in values account for the conflict? What might you do to help resolve the situation, based on your new insights?

Discuss these ideas with your partner. **Take turns.**

As you return to your workplaces, do some informal survey with several people you know from your field culture.

Ask, “How would you describe a really good person, a person of good character?”

Keep track of what people say about this, and also how they act.

What are your questions?

5. Closure [7]

We often talk about whom to trust in the local communities with responsibility for carrying the project forward. Sometimes there aren't any Christians. Sometimes the Christians we know may disappoint us with their attitudes or behavior. The exercise we have done today may help you as you think about this question.

So, look for respected men and women of your language group. See which people the local folks trust and respect. Spend time with them, learn from them, and pray about how you will interact with them. Right now, let's take some time to **pray** about this, and to write any ideas for yourself that you want to follow up as you return.

Pray with your partner for a few minutes. Then I will close the session with a short prayer.

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