Building International Student Leadership Teams

by Dr. Lily A. Arasaratnam

I teach intercultural communication as a professor today, but for six of the eleven years I spent in America I was leader in an international student ministry. As I reflect on what I have learned about being an international student leader, I realize that most of my lessons were learned in those six years as a student leader, though the lessons are clearer now, in hindsight.

One of the biggest needs that an international fellowship can meet is the need for a safe place to make friends. I remember my first lonely semester on campus. Friday nights were the worst. I used to walk back from classes, dreading the long hours of boredom and loneliness awaiting me at my empty apartment when I knew everyone else was out celebrating the beginning of the weekend. And then God answered my prayers.

It was my second semester at the University of Kentucky, and I had just started working as a student intern at the international student office on campus. The main part of my job involved planning and implementing new student orientation activities. We usually recruited many veteran international volunteers to help during this busy time. David was one of these volunteers. I remember the first thing I noticed about him was his smile. It seemed to light up his whole face. When we got acquainted with each other while working together, he casually asked me whether I was a Christian. When I said I was, he said something like, "good" and that was the end of the conversation for the time being. Then one day he asked me to join him and a few others for a Bible study. I agreed to go. It turned out to be a really small group, with David, three other guys, and myself. David led the study. This group eventually developed into what became Oasis, which met on Friday nights, and my Friday evenings were never the same again.

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Recruiting Student Leaders

In recruiting international student leaders, one may need to take into consideration some factors that may not be issues when recruiting American student leaders. For example, it is important to bear in mind that doing well in their studies is very important to international students (as they have to maintain certain GPA levels to keep their visa status), and hence they think twice before committing to a responsibility outside of school work. Recruitment methods need to be more relational than formal. Some student organizations recruit leaders by asking potential leaders to fill out an application form. In many cultures it is not customary to use a business model of leadership recruitment in ministry. International student ministry calls for a level of flexibility, and a way of selection needs to be one with which the students are comfortable.

It is also important to understand that many Christian international students who come to America are either new in their faith or Christians who have not had much (spiritual) leadership experience or training in their country. In America, children are often trained to be leaders from a small age – in Sunday school, youth groups, and school activities. In many other countries spiritual leaders are often older people who have walked the Christian walk for many years. So when a student from such a background comes to America, he/she needs time to get used to the concept of peer leadership – especially in a ministry. As such, students are often reluctant to take on positions of leadership as they feel incompetent or unworthy.

What worked in the past at Oasis is that when it was time to recruit leaders for the next semester, we talked to students who had been consistently attending the meetings and who had shown interest in spiritual growth, and casually invited them to come to a leadership meeting to have a look. Once they attended a meeting, they got an idea of what being in leadership would involve, and then we presented them with the possibility of serving in leadership. We gave them time to think and pray about it. The final decision was theirs.

As Oasis grew in numbers, we realized that the core leadership team could not handle the demands of the group on its own. This is when we turned to volunteers and other mature Christians in the group to help behind the scenes. They were not part of the leadership team in the sense that they did not attend the leadership meetings or involve themselves in the administrative details, but they helped in caring for the students outside of Friday nights and prayed for the group. Involving others in leadership in this manner also helped us to encourage people to take ownership of the group and know that they have a vital role to play in the ministry.

Understanding Student Leaders

As in any ministry, it is important for the leaders of a group to set an example for the others. One responsibility of a staff advisor is to know where each one of the leaders is in their relationship with Jesus. This can be a challenging task in an international ministry for several reasons which is best illustrated by a couple of anecdotes.

Laura was very good at art. She helped with making posters and flyers for Oasis publicity events. She was also very pleasant, and loved the Lord. As the time for leadership selection came along, we asked Laura to be on the team to help with publicity, and she agreed. What she may not have realized at that time (as we found out later) was that being in Oasis leadership meant more than merely taking care of logistics. We expected the leaders to share about their spiritual lives, keep each other accountable, and encourage one another in their walk with the Lord. Laura seemed fine at the first few meetings, though she was a little quiet compared to the others. But a few weeks into the semester, Laura got really stressed, and asked to be relieved from leadership. When our staff advisor spoke with her about this, she explained that she was not ready for such a deep level of interaction with others. In Laura's experience, sharing about one's spiritual growth was done only with an older Christian or mentor, and not in the company of peers. We assumed Laura understood what it meant to be part of a Christian leadership team and failed to see that she wasn't ready to take on a role of spiritual leadership.

In America it is often expected of you to be open and vulnerable to others when you are part of a ministry team. You are accountable to each other and you reach a deep level of friendship when you serve God together. This expectation is Biblical. However, this may not always happen in an international student leadership team because of the transient nature of the ministry (with students only being in the country for a short time), the extra time it takes to build trust (due to cultural and personality differences) and the extra effort it takes to understand one another (due to differences in communication styles and language abilities).

It is imperative that staff and student leaders in international student ministry have at least a fundamental understanding of cultural differences in communication styles. In America, a linear and direct style of communication is usually employed. Messages are explicit, with the main content of the message contained in the verbal component. In many Asian and African cultures, implicit and indirect messages are often the norm. The meaning of the message is contained not only in the verbal content, but also in nonverbal and contextual cues. If one is not looking for these cues, one could miss important elements of the message. Implicit messages are used as a way of allowing the other person (or yourself) to save face in a delicate situation. For example, a dialogue in linear, explicit style of communication may unfold like this:

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Staff: "I think you have a true gift of leadership. I would like you to consider being an official part of the leadership team next semester. What do you think?"

Student: "I'm not sure I'm ready for that. I feel a bit overwhelmed with my studies and I don't know if I can make that commitment. But I'd very much like to continue helping whenever I can."

If the same conversation occurs between a staff person and a student who communicates in an implicit way, the following conversation may ensue:

Staff: "I think you have a true gift of leadership and I would like you to consider being an official part of the leadership team next semester. What do you think?"

Student: [Pause] "Ok. I want to help in anyway I can, of course. I will do my best."

The verbal message says the student is agreeing to the proposal. But the student is probably expecting the staff person to know that he/she has a heavy academic load and the pressure to keep up the grades and know that the student would not refuse a request made by an authority figure. So the fact that the request was even made implies that the staff person thought through all of this and decided that that it is necessary for the student to be in leadership. The student saying, "I will do my best" signifies that he/she will try the best to make all of this work, but the staff person needs to understand that failure is a possibility given the student is being asked to do more on top of what is already a full plate.

We all do hope to exhibit Biblical values such as honesty, accountability, courage, strength, etc. However, the way these values are exhibited may differ from culture to culture. By being non-confrontational a person may be exhibiting strength, as understood by his/her culture. In many Asian cultures a person who talks a lot is considered a foolish person, as exemplified in an Indonesian proverb, "An empty can makes the loudest noise." So, a student who is from such a cultural tradition may not be able to adhere to the expectation that one should freely speak one's mind and be assertive in express-

ing one's opinions. Often students who are reflective communicators expect the moderator of the conversation to give them the space to share their thoughts. Therefore it is possible to solicit opinions from a diverse group of students by allowing free-flowing conversations for those who are comfortable "jumping into" the discussion and also intentionally inviting the opinions of those students who do not speak until it is their turn to do so.

Relational Leadership and Teams

Those of us who are of a collectivistic orientation are motivated by relationships more than those of us who are of an individualistic orientation, who are motivated by goals. In my experiences, the most successful teams and staff-student relationships have been in situations where much time was spent outside of group meetings in people's homes, where students were able to observe how staff persons treated their family and how their fellow teammates behaved outside of the "ministry" context. When relationships were strong, the ministry-related group goals were achieved with ease. This may seem intuitive, but there is often the tendency in individualistic cultural settings to separate task goals from relational goals. I see these to be very much interrelated in international student ministry. The Master of all Leaders, Christ Himself, was a relational leader. He and His ministry team ate together, traveled together, and did life together. For international students who are far from their families, this depth of relationship is imperative. "So continuing daily with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their numbers daily those who were being saved." Acts 2:46-47

It can often be daunting to consider building leadership teams that consist of members who may not only be at different stages in their personal development (undergraduate students in their early 20s with graduate students in their 30s, perhaps) but also come from vastly different cultural perspectives. If the initial barriers can be overcome, however, a diverse team can be a strong dynamic force in propelling a student ministry to extraordinary growth. Some creative ways may need to be employed to create a sense of belonging and oneness in the team. One of the ways to accomplish this is to foster the environment of a family, and encourage the older students to act as mentors for the younger ones. Students from collectivistic cultures are usually comfortable with the idea of yielding to the authority of someone who is older and more experienced. Assign specific tasks to the older students that involve mentoring the younger ones and overseeing the activities of the team from the perspective of the larger vision. Similarly, the younger students can be designated with specific responsibilities that are more hands on. The family metaphor for the team works particularly well with Asian and African students. European students tend to have similar working styles to American students in that they are comfortable operating in low-power distance environment where there aren't obvious hierarchies and everyone has an equal say in team decisions. (These are, of course, generalizations and individual students may vary in their preferences).

One thing that all international students share, however, is the experience of being an outsider in a new country. Research in social cognition reveals that we are predisposed to evaluating our "in-groups" (groups with which we feel a sense of affiliation, such as our family, friends, nation, etc.) more positively than our out-groups. For example, when we encounter socially ambiguous behavior, we interpret it positively if it is performed by someone whom we perceive as a member of our in-group and negatively

if it is performed by an out-group member. In a culturally diverse team, the out-groups are already set up in the form of national/ethnic differences. However, a sense of cohesion can be created by emphasizing a new in-group, which is the leadership team to which all of them belong. If they feel relationally bound to their teammates and emotionally connected with the goals and vision of the team, then the cultural differences, no matter how significant they are, tend to be easier to navigate.

Cultural differences in conflict management styles may also affect international student leadership teams. In many cultures, conflict is avoided as a principle in the face of maintaining group harmony. Confrontation or open discussion of matters of conflict would be very uncomfortable for students from such cultures. In other cultures, conflict is seen as an opportunity to address problematic matters and openly work through issues that can be harmful for a relationship. So, we must be careful if we specify a particular style to use on the team.

I remember watching a video at Urbana 96 that highlighted the fact that one has to only cross one's dormitory hallway to meet someone from the other side of the world. I was an undergraduate student at that time, and the video left a lasting impression on me. I have spoken to countless people from all over the world who said that they met Jesus on campus while they were an international student in America. International student leaders play a powerful role in reaching out not only to other international students but also to those American students who look for opportunities to interact with people from other cultures. God has given us a unique opportunity by bringing nations to our doorstep in the form of international students. I hope the insights I have shared from my experiences are useful in enhancing the ministry of which you are a part. ✦