

Indigenous Leader Development

In the last decade or so, there has been an increasing realization in the church around the world – especially in areas of fast church growth – of the need to build leaders. In response, there has been a steady growth of “leader development ministries.” But, what exactly does a “leader development ministry” do?

Essentially, there are three broad approaches that a leader development ministry can take in working with indigenous churches:

1. THE “4P” APPROACH

We will come in and train your leaders for you, using our curriculum, our teachers, our funds and we will give you our degrees upon completion.

This “we must do it for you” method is largely a remnant of old colonialist missions thinking.

It is the “4P” approach. The outsiders supply:

- The Program (the curriculum).
- The People (the teachers).
- The Provision (the funding).
- The Prestige (the degree at the end).

In some situations, this might be the best approach. For example, if there are absolutely no existing leaders, the only option may be for outsiders to build them – at least at first.

However, this approach is not the best long-term activity. Clearly, there is not a high level of contextualization or indigenous ownership in this method. In addition, it is condescending and demeaning toward the capacity of the national leaders and churches to build their own leaders.

Moreover, this approach presupposes that outsiders (with their inevitably limited awareness of the local culture, history and context) *can* effectively build the indigenous leaders – a bold but hazardous assertion!

When this approach is used, there is usually talk of the outside ministry “phasing out” or “passing the baton” of responsibility to the indigenous leaders. This rarely occurs, however, since the indigenous leaders have learned to be the passive recipients of outside charity. If the outsiders stop doing the work, sadly, the whole thing sometimes falls apart.

2. THE “TRAIN THE TRAINER” APPROACH

We will come and show you how to train. We will train you and then you will use the same materials and the same procedures and you will train others, who will then do the same with others, etc.

There may also be a certain amount of customization which is described as “contextualization.”

This “Train the Trainer” approach is currently in vogue.

The basic idea is: “We will show you how to do it, giving you the materials to use, and then you will do it (our way).”

This approach does have a significantly higher level of indigenous ownership than the previous approach since it involves the national leaders themselves doing the ongoing training.

This approach may be appropriate when a high level of specialized training is needed.

However, this method does have significant weaknesses:

1. The training is not deeply contextualized, since the national leader is being asked by the outsider, more or less, to use his materials and to do the training “his way.”
2. Due to the “law of decreasing relearns,” the effectiveness of the training decreases, often quickly and dramatically, with each subsequent “passing on.”
3. The program is never truly owned by the nationals. It will always be seen as an “outside” program (which, of course, it is). Typically, such programs are used for a while, perhaps several years, but then fall into disuse, because they don’t really meet the local need, being replaced by the latest program to come along.
4. The program cannot be easily adapted to meet local needs; neither can it be easily changed in response to changing ministry environments. The leaders have not been taught to *design*; they’ve been taught to *repeat*. Their own capacities to understand and create leader development processes have not been nurtured; they’ve simply been taught how to teach a certain program in a certain way. (Sadly, sometimes the outside ministry even goes so far as to formally forbid the indigenous leaders from ever changing their program, requiring them to teach exactly the same thing exactly the same way – a truly extraordinary insistence on

opposing the indigenization of leader development!)

This approach presupposes that outsiders (with their inevitably limited awareness of the local culture, history and context) *know how* to best build the indigenous leaders – again, a rather daring premise!

Those who use the “Train the Trainer” approach frequently do have a strategy for “phasing out” by “passing the baton” to the indigenous leaders once a sufficient number of them have been indoctrinated in the training materials and their use. In practice, however, the “law of decreasing relearns” and the lack of true ownership are often the fatal flaws of the strategy, and, after several years, the indigenous leaders turn, disillusioned, to the next outsider who comes along promoting his new and improved “train the trainer” method.

3. THE “BUILD THE DESIGNER” APPROACH

We will come and explore with you the basic, biblical principles of how leaders are built, and, on the basis of those principles, we will then work with you as you develop the strategies, methods and tools that you will use as you build your own leaders.

Clearly, this method is considerably more difficult than the first two. However, if successful, it will yield a leader development process that is truly indigenized and contextualized, and is entirely owned, designed, operated and funded by the national leaders – one that is capable of being sustained and multiplied; one that is entirely capable of being changed whenever necessary.

This approach has the following characteristics:

1. It is considerably harder to do.
2. It takes a longer time to do.
3. It requires a deep and genuine commitment from the indigenous leaders, since they are the ones, ultimately, who will design the work, do the work, and provide for its support.
4. It requires a clear and accurate biblical model of how leaders are built, rather than merely a set curriculum along with preformed implementation strategies.
5. It requires a deep and flexible willingness to explore and to learn on the parts of both the leader development ministry and the local leaders.

This approach presupposes that outsiders (with their inevitably limited awareness of the local culture, history and context) *are simply not the best ones either to do or to design the leader development work* – perhaps a more realistic hypothesis!

Significantly, this approach requires no “phasing out” or “passing of the baton” since the batons of both design and implementation are entirely in the hands of the indigenous leaders from the very beginning.

And because it's theirs, they will use it and make it work.

The author had a significant “Aha!” moment many years ago. For several days, he was with a group of top leaders from a large church network in Asia. On the last day, hundreds of copies of the first book written by one of these leaders arrived, fresh from the printers. The author watched as many of the leaders excitedly tore open the packages and grabbed many copies of the book to take home. With animated joy, they threw the packages back and forth to one another. Clearly, this first book was very important to them. As he watched this, it occurred to the author that there existed probably dozens of books by foreign authors that, technically, were “better quality” than this one. But... this book was theirs! They owned it, they would use it, and it would work.

When the leader development program is designed and implemented by the local leaders, it will work much better than any imported system.

At the same time, this approach affirms that outside leader development ministries do have an important role in serving the indigenous leaders by working with them as they interpret and implement biblical principles. This is a true partnership of equals with neither domination nor dependency.

While any of these three approaches, or combinations thereof, might be appropriate in certain situations, an emphasis on the “Build the Designer” approach may provide our best chance of achieving truly indigenized and contextualized leader development in the long-term. Exactly how this can be done will be addressed in the next section.

BUILDING DESIGNERS OF INDIGENOUS LEADER DEVELOPMENT

The following are the six specific things that the leader development ministries can do as they seek to *build designers* among indigenous leaders:

1. They should prayerfully, relationally and strategically **pursue** engagement with Christian leaders who can potentially catalyze and champion healthy leader development movements. Appropriate leaders to work with will demonstrate the following:
 - Vision for healthy leader development.
 - Strong connections to other leaders, willing and able to work together with them for the sake of the Kingdom.
 - Learning and innovation, flexibility and willingness to change.
 - Readiness to engage.

2. They should **build** them in their own spiritual lives, biblical understanding, marriages, families and ministries. There are two reasons for this. First, one of the greatest current *needs* of many Christian leaders – including those with the most leadership responsibility, and especially in areas of fast church growth – is for their own personal nurture, encouragement and strengthening. It can be challenging for them to receive this help from inside their own groups; so, this can be an appropriate and beneficial role for an outsider to play. Second, as the leader development ministries work personally with them, it provides an *example* for them to follow as they personally build their own leaders. Thus, the leader development ministries must be committed to genuine, caring relationships with the indigenous leaders and help them build their own lives. These personal relationships then become the foundation for healthy leader development partnerships.

Such relationships cannot be forced. Neither can they follow preset patterns, plans or timetables. Trust and respect must be earned and this comes through a sincere commitment to listening and learning. The leader development ministries must first get to know the indigenous leaders, hear what they have to say, and learn their vision, the current situation in their churches, and their genuine needs and struggles. This can be done through time spent together during meals or while visiting for several hours or days. It will take time for relationships to be built and trust to be established. Moreover, the exact manner in which relationships are nurtured may vary considerably culture to culture.

When the leader development ministries are sincerely committed to the indigenous leaders, and not merely trying to use them to fulfill their own agendas and expand their own influence, they will find that one relationship quickly and naturally leads to another, as the indigenous leaders introduce them to other leaders in a pattern of relational-networking that is deep, open, effective and lasting.

3. They should **explore** with them the core biblical principles of leader development. This is quite different from imposing a particular curriculum or preplanned leader development “package” on the indigenous leaders. Instead, this involves working with them *conceptually* to enable them to internalize the fundamental biblical principles of leader development.

Universal biblical principles, rather than established curricula, are the foundation of indigenous leader development. For example, one core biblical principle is, “Leaders build leaders.” Two practical implications of this principle are:

- Leaders must take *personal responsibility* for building new leaders, and not only fulfilling their ministry responsibilities. Jesus personally built His emerging leaders, while He conducted His ministry; He did not

delegate that responsibility to some “expert” institution.

- It takes *personal interaction with mature leaders* to build emerging ones, and not only academic work in classrooms. Jesus took His emerging leaders “with Him.” His disciples’ personal interactions with Him in life and ministry profoundly transformed their lives and made them strong leaders.

While *biblical principles* will work in any culture or context, the *specific application* of the principles (the appropriate curriculum, etc.) will vary considerably. Consequently, the leader development ministries should not impose the form of application but, instead, explore with the leaders what those forms might be. The leaders themselves must design their own leader development forms. In short, the leader development ministries should “bring seeds, not potted plants.”

During this building process, the leader development ministries must nurture the indigenous leaders’ abilities to think and design. This could be done through specific training that is designed for this purpose, as well as through the personal examples of the teachers and mentors who model the thinking-designing process. The leader development ministries can also give the leaders challenging assignments to stretch them and cultivate their abilities to think about how leaders are formed and to design their own leader development processes. This should be all done in a face-to-face context of much encouragement and prayer.

In working with the leaders on biblical and theological issues, the goal of the leader development ministry must not only be that the indigenous leaders think biblically and accurately about doctrine, but also that they express right doctrine in a manner appropriate to their own culture and context, creating their own underlying assumptions about the most suitable forms of theological teaching and not merely building upon the outsiders’ assumptions.

This exploration must, of necessity, be highly flexible, so it can accommodate not only cultural differences, but also maturity levels and even philosophical differences found among the indigenous church leaders.

It is also beneficial to create “design teams” – both within and across church networks – consisting of indigenous leaders and teachers who work together to design their own leader development.

4. They should **coach** them on an ongoing basis as they form and implement their own designs in their own environments. This will happen in individual meetings with the leaders, in which the leader development ministries will discuss what the indigenous leaders are doing in their leader development, their specific designs, the problems they face, and possible solutions and strategies.

This includes encouraging them, giving them “permission” to take risks and try new things, connecting them with others from whom they can learn, and debriefing with them their failures as well as their successes.

5. They should **resource** them with leader development tools, printed materials, examples and case studies of effective leader development in a variety of contexts, and other pertinent resources.

This is a different kind of resourcing than simply supplying the curriculum to use. The indigenous leaders are the ones who always must be in control of their own leader development. If they own it, they will implement it, use it and support it – they will take responsibility for it. Many leader development ministries have been genuinely puzzled when indigenous leaders initially embrace their materials and approaches with apparent excitement but never follow through with a systematic and enduring implementation. It was because they never truly owned it.

The leader development ministries cannot simply supply the indigenous leaders with the package that will do the job for them; instead, they must build their internal capacity to design.

6. They can help them **network** with leaders from other groups and church planting movements, with whom they interact regarding leader development.

This can be done within their own nation or culture, or it could involve leaders from other nations or cultures. A vigorous sharing of models, ideas, applications, successes and failures is greatly beneficial to all participants in such networking. In addition, new “design teams” spanning multiple movements and even nations can be established.

This kind of networking is not intimidating to the indigenous leaders since no one is trying to get them to “join” something or to embrace a specific doctrine or specific form of leader development – all the leaders are responsible for their own leader development work. Thus, deep friendships and even working relationships can be forged across the Body of Christ.

Through the above six-part process, they can encourage them to **define** their own foundational models of Christian leadership and leader development, appropriate to their own culture and context.

In some cases, the indigenous leaders have been so convinced by the outside “experts” that they will never be capable of such a thing; so, this may require a lot of encouragement.

This is the ultimate expression of indigenization and contextualization – when the indigenous leaders *define their own foundational models* of leader development.

“Designing” and “doing” are not enough, if outsiders are the ones who defined what leader development means in the first place. Fully indigenized leader development means that the indigenous leaders are the ones responsible to *define, design* and *do* their own leader development. These are the three key elements.

Throughout all this work, the leader development ministries must:

- Aspire to an attitude of true servanthood, refusing to ever use the indigenous leaders in any way.
- Strive to come as learners, not as experts.
- Dialogue with the leaders, asking questions, learning from them, studying their culture, history, struggles.
- Bring resources rather than agendas, principles rather than forms.
- Embrace flexibility, since healthy leader development will look very different place to place. Moreover, it will change over time.
- Honor the local leaders, never doing anything that would undermine them or their authority.
- Affirm the local leaders’ right to all decision-making regarding their own leader development work.
- Help the leaders, from the beginning, to be self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating and self-designing in their leader development work.

Clearly, to do all the above will take considerably more time and involve more complex challenges than an outside leader development ministry showing the indigenous leaders “how to do it,” or simply doing it for them. This, however, is a true partnership of equals with neither domination nor dependency, and it is an appropriate answer to the current need of the church in much of the world.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For our complete models, please see: *Healthy Leaders: SpiritBuilt Leadership #2* and *Building Leaders: SpiritBuilt Leadership #4* by Malcolm Webber.



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