

## Cultural Intelligence Building Cross-Cultural Skills in the Local Church *An Interview with Werner Mischke*

Werner Mischke is executive vice president and director of training ministries for Mission ONE which focuses on mobilizing the church for partnership with national missionaries. Many readers will be familiar with Mission ONE's [Operation WorldView](#), an eight-lesson biblical missions overview that has benefitted hundreds of congregations. Recently Postings asked Werner to share some of his ideas on training churches in cultural intelligence, the theme of Mission ONE's new resource, *The Beauty of Partnership*.



**Interchange Postings:** How did you come to be interested in preparing Westerners for partnership?

**Werner:** I'm convinced that ordinary people can learn to be effective in cross-cultural relationships. Many large corporations are helping their employees develop the cultural intelligence necessary to work with people from other cultures. If corporations can do it, why can't the church?

About five years ago, Mission ONE President Bob Schindler and I sensed that God was calling us to share what He has taught us

and what we have learned from many others along the way to improve the cross-cultural partnership skills of ordinary people in the local church. We began embracing the idea of a multiplication ministry based on 2 Timothy 2:2. That's how *The Beauty of Partnership* started.

**IP:** Missionaries spend years learning language and culture. Is it really possible to prepare the average Christian to successfully cross cultures?

**Werner:** Most North American believers won't learn the language of another culture, but they *can* cultivate cultural intelligence.

In terms of **attitude**, the crux is humility. Humility, of course,

does not come naturally, but Christians have a huge potential advantage over unbelievers in this area.

In terms of **behavior**, listening is key. Some call it "empathic listening" or hearing with your heart. Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Mt. 11:5). I think Jesus was saying that most people don't listen well, but all have the *potential* to listen deeply.

In terms of **paradigm**, a Christian can shift from a "powerboat mindset" of driving a partnership and instead adopt a "sailboat mindset" of responding to the wind of the Spirit (see the December 2008 issue of *Postings*, ["To Catch the Wind"](#)). It takes some listening and learning, but this is not just pie-in-the-sky. It really is possible for ordinary believers.

Here's another important point: The average North American *can* develop CQ (cultural intelligence), but Christians have a big advantage because they enjoy a relationship with the most culturally intelligent Person in the universe. I believe

that through training plus God's wisdom, an ordinary Christian can achieve extraordinary levels of cultural intelligence.

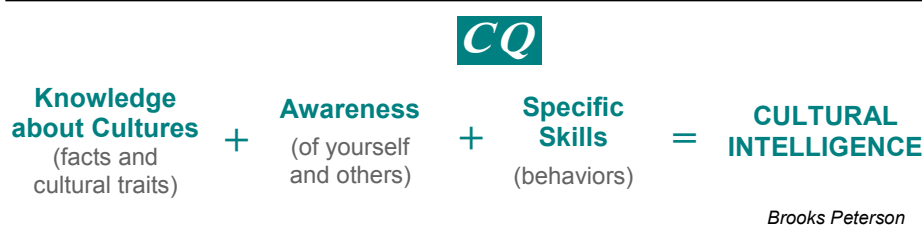
If I am right about this, then could it be that developing cultural intelligence contributes to our relationship with Christ? Could developing CQ be a part of Christian discipleship?

In today's culturally diverse communities and ever-shrinking world, this kind of discipleship seems a pretty important part of having effective local evangelism as well as international outreach.

**IP:** How would you define "cultural intelligence"?

**Werner:** I like Brooks Peterson's definition: **Knowledge**

about cultures, including facts and cultural traits + **Awareness** of yourself and others + **Specific skills** which center around the ability to adjust thinking and behavior based on this knowledge and awareness = **Cultural Intelligence**.<sup>1</sup>





Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman in John 4 is a type of cross-cultural encounter. When you look at this dialog through the lens of Peterson's definition of CQ, our Lord's supreme cultural intelligence shines through.

**IP: Are there measures or commonly accepted standards that indicate short termers have sufficient ability to cross cultures well? How do we know when we have done enough to prepare them?**

**Werner:** I'm not sure how you measure CQ, but I do know you can identify your own cultural style and compare it to another culture using an interview process similar to a spiritual gifts test or a DISC test. Brooks Peterson's [website](#), is a good resource for this.

Also, David Livermore has done some significant research on this and has authored two very accessible books on CQ: *Leading with Cultural Intelligence: The New Secret to Success*, and *Cultural Intelligence: Improving Your CQ to Engage Our Multicultural World*.

There needs to be more work done to define the vital behaviors of someone with cultural intelligence, but there are some indicators. I would try to measure listening by asking questions like:

- "In a cross-cultural conversation, how many questions is the person from America asking?"
- "How much time is he/she talking versus listening in the overall conversation?"

Empathic listening is the one behavior that is the most catalytic in developing healthy cross-cultural partnerships. If you can't truly listen, you'll have a hard time demonstrating openness and acceptance—or extending trust and suspending judgment. Duane Elmer's book, *Cross Cultural Servanthood: Serving the World in Christlike Humility*, is so valuable in explaining this.

I've been wondering over the past couple years, "What is the most catalytic behavior for missions in the 21st century?" Some think it's money. Some say training or prayer. Others say it's the short-term mission trip—traveling to needy places.

I am beginning to think that the most catalytic behavior in the Church's increasingly interdependent global mission is listening. Could it be that the skill of listening—listening to God and to people—is *the* most vital behavior for cross-cultural ministry and partnership in today's world?

We have often heard that indigenous Christian leaders in the Majority World feel like they are not listened to by their North American counterparts. But it need not be so.

*Think about it:* Listening is so catalytic because it makes all

the other activities of mission more effective. Listening deepens relationships and builds a reservoir of trust—and with high trust, ultimately everything goes faster and more efficiently. Listening enables us to invest our resources more strategically. Listening makes us pray with greater wisdom and

power. Listening can also help us more effectively raise money for missions. And if we are truly listening along the way, when conflict happens, relationships are more likely to be healed and get stronger rather than decay.

**IP: How much of the success of crossing cultures is "generic" cultural-intelligence skill and how much of it is understanding the particular culture in which a person ministers?**

**Werner:** There is a "generic" CQ that is rooted in good theology. For example, Steve Hawthorne's article, [The Story of His Glory](#), (lesson 2 in the *Perspectives* course) does a great job of articulating a God-centered respect for all cultures. It gives a Scripture-based vision for cultures to be transformed by Jesus Christ while also preserving their uniqueness.

You can also take a major leap forward by understanding the five basic culture scales. Brooks Peterson's book, *Cultural Intelligence: A Guide to Working with People from Other Cultures*, is really helpful in this regard. It can be so healthy to realize that our personal cultural style is just one of many. For example, the typical American "rugged individualism" and the tendency to use a blunt, direct communication style are *definitely not* the norm in the Majority World.

I believe that another basic of CQ is knowing about honor and shame, which is the pivotal cultural value in many cultures. If you can develop a basic understanding of honor and shame, you have acquired a very powerful key to help you understand many, many cultures of the world. I've written a 30-page article on this topic, "[Honor and Shame in Partnerships](#)," available for free from our website.

Grasping broad, cross-cultural principles is helpful, but every effective missionary knows that an in-depth understanding of the particular culture in which you serve is essential to cultivating fruitful relationships and ministry.



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**IP: Does a successful adoption of an unreached people group or the launch of another type of international partnership always require in-depth cultural intelligence on the part of the Western, local-church partner?**

**Werner:** I think with limited cultural intelligence you *can* successfully announce that you have adopted an unreached people group. You can also have a successful mission trip to that people group—if you go in a spirit of servanthood with a clear vision and strong prayer support.

But think about the word “adoption.” It implies a long-term commitment, maybe even a life-long commitment. To clarify, I would note that the word “adoption” also connotes a ‘parent-to-child’ relationship, whereas in cross-cultural collaboration, a brother-to-brother type relationship is healthier.

A vibrant cross-cultural partnership involves the exchange of resources and relational depth. When much is at stake—and there usually is a *lot* at stake in adopting an unreached people or launching a partnership—there is no excuse for *not* developing deep cultural understanding. It will take time, but it can be done, and it is so worth the investment.

**IP: Do different situations and partnership opportunities demand different degrees of cultural intelligence? For example, if a Western church partner wants to partner but has little training in cultural sensitivity or experience in crossing cultures, is there a way to shape a partnership where they can learn as they go without doing major damage? If so, how do churches, agencies, and missionaries identify or develop these entry-level partnerships?**

**Werner:** In his book, *Making Your Partnership Work*, Daniel Rickett includes a “Levels of Trust” graph<sup>2</sup> indicating that as cultural distance or interdependence increases, there is a corresponding need for greater trust. The same can be said for cultural intelligence: As cultural distance or interdependence increases, there is a corresponding need for greater cultural intelligence. So for entry-level partnerships where participants have just a beginning level of cultural intelligence, here are some recommendations:

Begin by focusing on building the relationship. Maybe the first year or 18 months is spent just praying for one another and friendship-building. Instead of focusing on tasks, focus on relationships. This means going slowly. Learn each other’s culture; know that you’re in a story together. Listen deeply to God and to one another. Build a reservoir of trust

over a year or two. Learn the art and science of partnership along the way.

Then think about what you can accomplish as a team. Seek God’s Kingdom together, and listen to one another. Learn from those who have had successful cross-cultural partnerships. *Learn, pray, do.* Try things. Make mistakes. Maintain an attitude of humility and grace. Then *learn, pray, and do* again.

**IP: What are some of the unique challenges for Americans to become culturally sensitive?**

**Werner:** Americans live in the wealthiest, most powerful country on earth. By virtue of being part of this American, culturally-dominant force, we tend to absorb certain attitudes—such as a can-do spirit, rugged individualism, entrepreneurial drive. It’s a big part of our worldview in America, where most successful people, including those in local churches, have these attitudes.

Interestingly, when we go on short-term trips, we probably consider ourselves *ordinary* people, but we aren’t aware of the *extra-ordinary* wealth and power we represent as Americans in comparison to those in the Majority World.

Of course there are exceptions to these broad generalities. But I think it’s safe to say that it is natural for us as Americans to underestimate the strength of our personality, our wealth and power, our influence—and this can cause real challenges in navigating a cross-cultural partnership. This

is why it’s so vital to be more quiet than loud ...to go slow...to really listen.

**IP: Are people who live in multi-ethnic communities automatically more culturally sensitive? Can we make multi-cultural experiences here in North America better laboratories for the development of cultural awareness?**

**Werner:** We live in more culturally diverse cities and

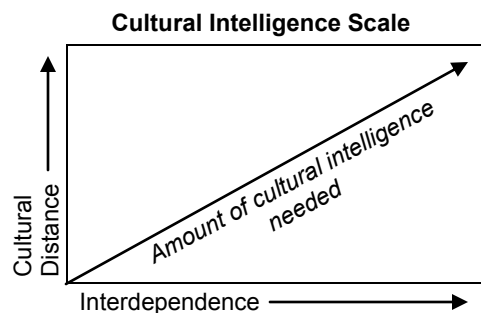
communities than prior generations, and this does help people be more culturally sensitive. But it isn’t necessarily so. For example, the stress of cultural diversity—coupled with today’s economic uncertainty or job vulnerability—can have the opposite effect; it can influence people *away* from cultural sensitivity and toward *more* cultural isolationism.

In times of stress and conflict, it is normal to rely on our “default culture,” to borrow a term from Sherwood Lingenfelter. Our human tendency is also to avoid people different from us. In a crisis, we want to be with the people we know, the people who are like us. This is a tendency for all people, Christians and missionaries included.

**CQ**

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**CQ**



The fact that we have growing cultural diversity in our communities, however, is an amazing opportunity to reach across cultures and develop cultural intelligence. Think of all the churches that have ethnic congregations meeting in their buildings. Or think of how many churches have public schools nearby that are ethnically diverse. The opportunities for developing CQ are sometimes right in front of us!

I know of a Baptist church here in the Phoenix area that is partnering with a nearby public elementary school in which the vast majority of students are Hispanic. A team of Anglos from the church invest a portion of every week serving families and the teachers in the school, developing friendships, building trust. The school principal, teachers, parents, and children—they all know that these church members who show up weekly have no agenda except the love of Christ. They understand the team comes because they care.

To develop greater cultural intelligence, the church invited the school's social worker/parent educator—herself from a Hispanic background—to come to the church and teach those involved in the school partnership about cultural issues. Isn't that a great way to become cross-cultural learners? What a practical means to build trust and demonstrate the servanthood of Christ!

**IP:** Tell us about the new package of resources you have just published.

**Werner:** I became convinced that the task of developing cultural intelligence—along with other skills necessary for cross-cultural partnership—is best accomplished through a small group study, what we like to refer to as a “missional learning journey.” So while *The Beauty of Partnership* does include some new knowledge, it emphasizes the development of skills and attitudes. This can only be done over time in a process of discovery with others, built on mutual encouragement.



*The Beauty of Partnership Study Guide* explores three interrelated disciplines—godly character, cultural intelligence, and organizational competence. Readings from some of the authors mentioned above go with the lessons. We include material on how to apply the five basic culture scales.

There are free, online videos. The book also comes with a Discussion Guide DVD that provides additional resources ideal for a small group. You can order the materials as well as find an extensive introduction on our website: [www.beautyofpartnership.org](http://www.beautyofpartnership.org).

<sup>1</sup> Brooks Petersen: *Cultural Intelligence: A Guide To Working With People From Other Cultures*. Intercultural Press, 2004, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Rickett: *Making Your Partnership Work*. Winepress Publishing, 2002, p. 77.

### Interchange Postings

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