

INTERCULTURAL TEAMS

BY DAVID LYNN

In the waning days of May 2001, I was dropped into Kosovo to lead and manage a multi-million dollar educator development project.

The outcome for our project was to leave Kosovo with sustainable pre-service and in-service teacher training systems, administrator development programs, and a ministry capable of meeting its responsibilities using modern management and leadership techniques. My Canadian colleagues were either hired, or being hired, when I left Calgary for Kosovo. We were working in an ethnically and linguistically diverse post-conflict, in-transition society attempting to emerge from the ravages of war, ethnic cleansing, and communism. Kosovo's complex culture was known to me only on paper.

The folk wisdom in the development community was that Kosovars were not good workers; they were unreliable, and unmotivated. Our success depended on teamwork. It could be accomplished no other way. Our team members resided in Kosovo, Calgary, Montreal, and Ottawa. Kosovar staff was as important as Canadian.

There was no time to proceed slowly and carefully. Our tasks in the month of June were to:

- Find and equip an office
- Recruit local staff
- Design, develop (translate into two languages) and deliver in-service programs for 1,000 Kosovar educators
- Overcome the nightmares of dysfunctional communication systems

- Obtain sites around Kosovo for 1,000 workshop participants
- Find acceptable accommodation for 36 Canadian trainers for the summer
- Find two dozen competent translators

Our motive in those initial stages was survival, not team building. We had to pull all of this off; it was the foundation for future success in the program.

We were successful both in the immediate, and long term. A team emerged from our hectic start-up. How?

- Everyone worked tirelessly. Status did not matter. If something needed doing, whoever had a free moment, helped.
- We recruited well. Our local staff believed in the project, were keen to learn, and eager to support Canadians, while teaching us how to work in their culture.
- Canadians accepted interdependence. Daily, our local staff helped Canadians understand the cultural perplexity of the organizations we were to help reform.
- Everyone contributed to all directional decisions.
- Continuous learning was the 'modus operandi' for success in a fluctuating, highly politicized environment.
- Training was provided on site and in Canada. Result: team members better understood the context and expectations placed on others in the team.



- Staff development was on-going, not relegated to training events. It occurred at regular meetings, through personnel evaluations, supervision, and coaching.
- We regularly shared successes, failures, frustrations and identified risks, and strategized mitigating responses. Each individual's voice was important.
- In terms of values, we respected local values except where they contradicted Canadian values of tolerance and respect for ethnicity, gender, age, etc. Canadians practised these values, as did all the staff, bringing local team members increased stature and respect in Kosovo.
- Expectations for individual and team performance were clear, and well known.
- We worked very hard at ensuring effective internal and external communication. Because of language, our 'local' team members were significantly responsible for external communication.
- Canadians worked to do themselves out of a job. I have been replaced by a Kosovar who has been my boss since April 2005.

We learned some critical lessons in team building, and team performance through our experience of 2001:

1. Don't believe cultural stereotypes.
2. Recognize that there will be cultural adjustments based on personal, family and community values.
3. Make the work place safe if you want initiative.
4. People are individuals wherever they live. Learn to understand both the culture and individual staff.
5. Make trust something to be lost rather than earned.
6. Treat each member of the team with respect.
7. As a leader, model what you expect.
8. Be clear about what is to be accomplished. Be organized, even in the midst of a chaos.

David Lynn is a retired CEO of a public school system. This article is based on an international educator development project in Kosovo from 2001 to 2006 of which the David was Project Director. Many of the ideas in the article are contained in a chapter co-authored by David Lynn, Dr. Tom Gougeon, and Dr. Susan Hutton of the University of Calgary in a forthcoming book on international development projects in challenging environments. Mr. Murray Lynn, MBA, is also acknowledged for his critique of drafts of this article.

¹ Post communist societies feature top down leadership in which leaders harshly criticize subordinates who make mistakes. The consequence is that no one moves until they are told explicitly what to do. The challenge is to change this feature of organizational culture.