

The Formation of a Cross-Border Partnership between Two Christian Leaders

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by Shane Sokoll

“*Hola Ednita,*” the voice said on the other end of the line. One Wednesday afternoon in November of 2010, my wife received a call from the pastor of the church she attended while growing up in Mexico. Pastor Alberto called to let us know that he and a team from Mexico were coming to our Texan city to plant a church. The first service would take place in a couple hours later that evening and he wanted to extend an invitation to us to attend.

Decisions, decisions, lots of decisions are needed for an international church plant to be launched. Through a series of events since that initial phone call three months ago in November, I have become the interpreter and liaison between Pastor Alberto and a key American Christian leader in our city that prefers to be called by his first name, Rob. In the last couple of months, I have had the opportunity to observe two leaders from vastly different cultures navigate the formation of a partnership with each other. In the midst of this partnership formation, decisions on multiple levels are being explored and made.

Trying to understand the decision processes taking place by and between these two Christian leaders, I have begun to examine the scenario through four decision making models - *rational*, *emotional*, *coalitional*, and *garbage can*. Over the past 50+ years, these decision models have been designed and examined by renowned organizational psychologists and consultants (Beach & Connolly, 2005). Perhaps the following observations described from my bird’s-eye view of the decisions being made by and between these two Christian leaders will assist emerging global leaders in getting a glimpse of the potential advantages and disadvantages of the behaviors represented in the four decision making models when attempting to form international alliances.

Rationality Drives Decisions

Rationality, one of the first theoretical attempts to understand how leaders make decisions, basically says that decisions are made in a logical deductive sequence as a result of a problem or opportunity. Once an opportunity is identified and understood, potential strategic actions are considered and the ones that seem best are chosen (Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992). As results of the chosen actions begin to occur, the strategies are reviewed and altered accordingly as pursuit of the end goal continues.

Pastor Alberto and Rob both exhibit reliance upon rationality to a certain degree, as they make choices individually and as they explore how to partner together. Rob, an Anglo pastor, recognizes the need and opportunity of reaching the exponentially growing Hispanic population in the city. In an initial meeting with Pastor Alberto, Rob explained how the Anglo and African-American churches have not been successful in crossing the cultural divide of language and culture in their attempts to minister to the Hispanic community. Rob logically deduced that since Pastor Alberto and the Mexican church movement he leads has a long history of planting churches in Mexico and abroad, he might be one of the answers to reaching the Hispanics in the city. Based upon this deduction, Rob decided to loan his church building and facilitate set-up and breakdown of the sanctuary pro bono to Pastor Alberto to assist him in developing the Hispanic congregation.

Pastor Alberto, aware of the growing exodus of thousands of Mexican nationals to our city due to an explosion of violence since 2010, sees the need and opportunity of starting a church for these new U.S. residents. Further, Pastor Alberto has churches in the other major Texan cities and foresees the possibility of utilizing resources and past strategies from these churches to begin a church here. Based upon the increased amount of residents originally from Pastor Alberto's home country, the few Hispanic ministries in our city, the welcoming hand of Pastor Rob, etc., Pastor Alberto sees a logical opportunity for the next church plant and is taking concrete steps in his original goal of launching the church. Although these two leaders are from different cultures, their use of rationality up to this point has been similar.

Emotion Impels Decisions

Emotions commonly play a role in decision making, although it is often subconscious. Both positive and negative feelings influence the making of decisions and the actions surrounding the

implementation of the decisions made (Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992). Pastor Alberto and members of his Mexican team exhibit a high level of passion and happiness in serving others and God, which impels them to make sacrificial decisions as they seek to start a new church in a foreign city. Rob expressed amazement during the first meeting in November as Pastor Alberto explained that he and his team would be driving 10 hours from Mexico to facilitate a church service on Thursdays and drive another 10 hours back to Mexico on Fridays. Week after week, I am continually awed when observing the joy that this Mexican team exhibits that seems to allow them to endure with ease the discomforts and inconveniences of travel and long hours of work.

Rational decision making, although not touched upon in the previous paragraphs, involves balancing the costs with the outcomes to determine if the potential results are worth it or not (Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992). From a purely rational perspective, the costs of the initial personal and natural sacrifices being made by this Mexican team might have deterred them from such a venture. However, the positive emotions associated with the concept of serving a *higher purpose* are clearly influencing the Mexican team's ongoing decision to consistently work towards their goal.

American Christian leaders seeking to form partnerships with Mexican Christian leaders could benefit from understanding the heightened level of passion found in the Mexican faith community, especially as decisions are made regarding the sharing of work and work load. For example, some American believers who might not be accustomed to such levels of sacrifice might initially feel inspired by such behaviors. Later on however, feelings of frustration might be experienced by the Americans when the *balanced life* approach to ministry (common in our culture) seems infringed upon when decisions are made about who does what and how much. From the one small observation described above, it seems the potential areas of differences in the emotional aspects of decision making between American and Mexican leaders entering into cross-border ventures should be carefully explored and talked about.

Coalition Influences Decisions

Coalition decision making theory recognizes that there is a variety of individual preferences regarding goals and initiatives represented among the people in an organization. The individual(s) with the most power, often the most influential executive leader(s), ends up getting his or her way in the decision process (Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992; Yang, 2003). Pastor Alberto and Rob are of similar influence in their individual organizations, especially as it relates to their partnership. Although I've

not yet observed the workings of *coalition* between these two leaders, I have observed it between Pastor Alberto and the other leaders in his organization.

A recurring dialogue that took place in three separate conversations between different American leaders and a Mexican team member named Rafael offers insight into how the *coalitional* model might potentially function in Mexican culture. Rafael and his family have come from Mexico six times in the last three months to minister at the new church. This act is one of much sacrifice, especially since he has many responsibilities as a successful business owner and a senior pastor of a congregation of 300. Likewise, the danger of driving the Mexican interstate highways that are often exploited by drug cartels represents even further sacrifice and risk. Rafael was asked independently by three different American leaders if he would eventually move to Austin as part of the long-term ministry team. And three separate times Rafael replied, “Let’s see what Pastor Alberto decides.” Likewise the question was asked to other team members and they all replied in a similar way.

As the linguistic interpreter who is also a doctoral student of organizational leadership, I pondered how different this response would be from that of a typical American team. From the lens of my American culture and experience, I would expect a reply to be something like, “My family and I are thinking and praying about it. Pastor Alberto and I are discussing it and considering the possibilities.” The practice of team decision making, as explained here, seems to look different in the Mexican and American cultures. Seeking to understand the differences and similarities of *coalition* before forming close interdependent work partnerships between Mexican and American organizations would likely help to avert potential conflicts or at least prepare the players to know how to work through the differences.

The Garbage Can Mix Evolves Decisions

The *garbage can* model describes organizational decision making as a sea of circumstances, problems, people, and solutions that toss the organizational ship to and fro as it tries to navigate its way to shore (end goals). The changing winds, tides, weather, health of the crew, food supply, etc., all affect how the captain makes decisions to steer his ship. As such, organization leaders are not in full control of all the variables at play in forming decisions. There is limited knowledge, time, or resources. Changes occur that are unforeseen, both positive and negative. The mixture of people, resources, problems, opportunities, and solutions come together in unique ways that are rarely predictable or replicated, which seems to be the result of chance (Tarter & Hoy, 1998). Leaders,

according to the garbage can model, form decisions based on what is in front of them at the moment without clear goals or a complete understanding of the means to achieve the goals (Beach & Connolly, 2005). The objectives become clear as the scenario unfolds—a type of goal discovery takes place as decisions evolve and are made over time.

From the initial phone call with the familiar words of *Hola Ednita*, until today (nearly three months later), it seems both Pastor Alberto and Rob are familiar and comfortable working within the type of environment described by the *garbage can* analogy. Both leaders are extremely busy and seem to make short-term and long-term decisions on Thursdays regarding the new church initiative. During the rest of the week, they are immersed in the many other non-related responsibilities that correspond with their positions and spend little time considering the new church initiative.

Pastor Alberto seems to be even more comfortable than Rob with *letting the cards play as they may* and moving forward accordingly. In fact, it seems to be his way of relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit to make decisions. He spends much time in prayer and firmly believes that his steps are divinely ordered, as the Scriptures promise to those who wait upon the Lord. Culturally speaking, it generally seems that leaders from the Mexican culture might be more prepared to operate in this type of environment where long-term planning and analysis of decisions are less thorough. From my experience, leaders from American culture often attempt to be in control of new initiatives through extensive analysis, long-term planning, documented strategies, timelines, etc. Dialogue between partnering American and Mexican leaders regarding how to form decisions in the face of goal ambiguity and change would be wise in order to successfully navigate the waters of organizational and partnership development.

To Be or Not To Be Cross-Border Partners

Decisions, decisions, lots of decisions are needed when initiating an international church was a concept presented early in this article. From the four decision models explored when mixed in with the different cultural responses to them, it is evident that how the many decisions are made can vastly vary. Cross-cultural partnerships between the Mexican and American Christian communities not only seem to have great potential, but might, in fact, be necessary in order to properly minister to the exponentially expanding Hispanic population in the U.S. The question is probably not *will Mexican and American Christian leaders form partnerships*, but *how will they form them*. If this is the case, it would seem that those leaders ready to move forward in exploring such partnerships would

significantly benefit by investigating the cultural, organizational, and psychological aspects influencing the many decisions needed to form successful long-term partnerships. Selah.

About the Author

Shane Sokoll is a College of Business faculty member at Concordia University Texas in the city of Austin where he teaches and serves as director of the Bachelor of Arts Degree in Human Resource Management (HRM). Professor Sokoll holds a Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership with a major in Human Resource Development, a Master of Business Administration (MBA) with a major in HRM, and is a certified Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR). He has developed and taught courses such as Fundamentals of HRM, Principles of Management, Management Control Systems, Training and Development, International HRM, Organizational Staffing, Strategic Management in Human Resources, all of which incorporate a strong emphasis on leader/employee development and organizational effectiveness. Dr. Sokoll's quantitative and qualitative research is presently focused on employee commitment, employee and organizational performance, global leadership, servant leadership, team collaboration, intercultural competence, and organizational culture. Note: The above article was written by Professor Sokoll while in the midst of his doctoral studies.

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