



Causes of friction in mission agencies

TN35 Training Notes series: Structures

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These notes are designed for staff and board members of Christian mission agencies. But they also apply, with some amendment, in other settings too, such as in churches.

My experience of handling problems in organisations is that six causes of difficulty come up again and again. For those who like alliterations, the list of the issues goes as follows: Control, Context, Clarity, Chemistry, Change, Communication.

So, if things are not all that they might be in your organisation, check out these six and take action. They may not be the only causes of problems, but I would be surprised if one or two did not figure somewhere in the list.

1 CONTROL OF THE ORGANISATION ***Who thinks they own this show?***

This is a revealing question when asked of a broad group of stakeholders. It may be better to add, 'Who owns it in theory?', 'Who owns it in practice?' and 'Who should own it?'.

Ownership comes down to being top of the pile, of having the last word, of holding the real power. Some people want ownership and will do what they can to achieve this, such as by offering for key committees or giving a large donation. Others may wield power without holding any obvious office, and some may be blissfully unaware of just how powerful they are. Such people may simply have been around for a long time, or be held in particularly high regard.

Possible (and usually unhealthy!) answers to this clutch of questions include:

- the board (whether trustees, council, or whatever);
- the person who chairs the board;
- some kind of trustee body if separate from board;
- the founders (or their families);
- the CEO (or a former CEO);
- someone who serves on all the key committees;
- a significant donor (or their family);
- those who have served the longest;
- someone external who people go to for advice.

If there are ownership battles going on, in however 'Christian' a way, there will be tension and conflict. And even if people say that "Jesus Christ owns the show", they may not always act as though this was the case. Some thinking around the biblical idea of 'stewardship' may not come amiss.

2 CONTEXT FOR DECISIONS

Do we all understand why we're here and where we're heading?

Keeping detail and perspective in balance is an art. The detail concerns the everyday running of the organisation. When the pressure is on, when you are short of staff, when finances are tight, people's horizons tend to come back to the short-term. It is possible in such situations to let trivia come to the top of the pile. Conflict often centres on trivial matters – but only someone outside the emotion of the situation can see they are trivial.

Trivia can be countered with the big picture: including a reminder of why you exist and where you believe God is calling you to go to. But if purpose and vision are not crystal clear to everyone (it may be that they are clear to staff but not to board, or vice versa), if the direction you believe you are called to head in is confused or non-existent, if you have not defined and agreed the values of the show, then trivia has room to manoeuvre and conflicts can erupt.

The problem I encounter time after time is that issues such as purpose and vision are stated in a simplistic way. A 'mission' or 'vision statement' should be a memorable summary of the main point of that purpose or vision. But it should be the full works version that is applied in depth to every area of the organisation's work.

Organisations in tension frequently have no real and shared understanding of the big picture, or they have taken their eye off this and narrowed the focus to today's problems. There is a useful case study of this filling the book of Exodus.

3 CLARITY OF ROLES

Are board and staff working together in harmony?

Any charity's success depends on how well these two bodies work together (the position may be complicated if in addition to board there are separate trustees, and/or if in addition to staff there are volunteers with a large stake in the organisation).

The key to how well they work together will be largely determined by clarity of purposes and clear water between the two. Tensions usually exist when staff feel that board members are taking decisions that are theirs, or vice versa.

The common misunderstanding is to see board and staff in a vertical plane with board senior to staff. This is neither helpful in any setting nor right in a Christian context. Better to see board and staff in a horizontal plane, with different roles that complement each other. Each depends on the other.

The role of the board is covered in Training Notes TN5 on this website. The headings used there are to:

- 1 maintain a servant attitude;
- 2 promote and protect the organisation's development;
- 3 set a clear direction and keep this under review;
- 4 oversee the right use of resources;
- 5 take individual responsibility.

Those notes then say, "It is not the responsibility of the board to get involved in the day-to-day management of the organisation, but instead to see that it is managed well through the appointment and monitoring of the (executive) staff, and the setting and monitoring of strategy".

For an equivalent statement on the role of staff, click [here](#) for an additional note.

Putting it from the other perspective, it is the role of the board to decide on and monitor the overall plan under which the organisation operates, but the role of staff to implement that plan on a day-to-day basis and to manage the organisation so that it achieves its aims.

4 CHEMISTRY OF CEO AND CHAIR ***Is there mutual trust and respect?***

But even if roles are clear, there is a human factor that comes into play. In general terms it concerns how the members of the board relate to members of staff. But at heart this comes down to the relationship between the one who chairs the board and the chief executive.

The relationship is often not an easy one. The two people may have very different personalities. The CEO may be a visionary who wants to rush ahead, and the board may need to inject some caution. It may need considerable effort and sacrifice by both parties. But these two people are not called to be best friends. What matters is the level of trust and respect that exists between them.

For such respect to develop there needs to be the clear definition of roles as in point 3, but also regular, on-going communication between the two (see also point 6). Time together is vital, and this is far more than a hasty hour before a board meeting. If location permits it, regular meetings on site and off site will be helpful. If distance makes this difficult, perhaps a regular extended telephone call and occasional full days together will be possible.

5 CHANGE MANAGEMENT SKILLS ***Are current developments being handled well?***

Any Christian mission should find itself in constant change, but there are times when there have to be major developments if the organisation is to maintain its purpose in a constantly changing world environment. Such changes may be championed by the staff who then come up against a board who see things differently. This often happens when the board see their role primarily to police the staff and stop them doing anything that would harm the organisation, a negative approach to governance that is rarely helpful.

If board members have seen the organisation over many years and the CEO is new, this can cause sharp differences and is a frequent case of severe conflict.

But sometimes it is the board who are championing change and the CEO who fears it or who feels uncomfortable with the idea. In other cases it may be that board and staff are committed to change, and it is the membership of the organisation that is reacting in horror. One example of this last point may be a name change for the society.

It is wise to take professional advice and/or buy in some training to plan carefully how to manage a change process. A period of major change may cause some of the sharpest and most dangerous conflicts the organisation will face.

6 COMMUNICATION THAT LISTENS

Are we getting through to each other?

Most of the above depends on people talking and listening to each other. The listening aspect is deliberately stressed in this heading.

- 1 All five points already covered have a communications aspect to be worked at: openness and honesty with each other, explaining roles with care, time to build relationships, keeping people in the know during change.
- 2 Friction often develops if the board is perceived to be remote from staff. Board members need to spend time outside meetings getting to know staff and volunteers, seeking to understand their work and their views. Some system of linking board members to individual staff or departments can be helpful. It can be dangerous for CEOs to be the one link between the two bodies: they may misrepresent one to the other.
- 3 But the problem may lie between other groups: such as when volunteers and paid staff are not listening to each other, or the membership feel remote. Or when roles get confused, as when board members are drawn from the volunteer workforce and the staff then find themselves trapped in the middle.

Does everyone feel they have been heard or is one group disenfranchising another by keeping them in the dark? Good communication is not about throwing out more print to everyone, nor everyone knowing everything. It is everyone feeling that when they speak they are listened to, and that they are told all they need to know.

So there are six issues to check up on when your Christian mission agency (or secular charity for that matter) is suffering from tension or conflict. My guess is that one of these will be pretty close to the real problem; but it may be that several of these play their part. On the basis that correct diagnosis is the first step to cure, check these out for everyone's sake.

These notes are available at www.john-truscott.co.uk/resources/training/tn35.pdf. For indexes of all items available on the site, visit the [resources page](#).

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of his working as a consultant to help put right any friction in your mission agency, or to run a training day on these issues. For a more detailed investigation, ask him to run his Christian Effectiveness Model.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow and cover the six categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN35 under Structures.

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