

IMPACT Field Leader's Survey; Fascinating findings from a pilot research project on the needs and realities of field leaders

By Dr. Ken Harder and Scott E. Shaum

In all of missions, one of the most important and complex responsibilities is that of the field leader. Field leaders have the first-line role to lead field staff in personal well-being and work effectiveness. In working with field leaders in numerous countries across Asia, I (Scott Shaum) have encountered numerous themes that are present regardless of location or local circumstances. But I was left wondering if my observations were based on personal paradigms and perspectives or if they represented some legitimate factors to contend with.

My colleague at Barnabas International, Jim Feiker, has also come across similar concerns in his work with leaders in Asia and Europe. We wondered if there was a study of field leaders that would inform our thinking. We found little concrete data on the needs and realities of field leaders. The one research effort we were aware of that gave us some hints into the important role of field leaders is the 2006 Engage research project.

This cooperative project between Global Mapping International (GMI) and Best Christian Workplaces, surveyed 1065 missionaries from 10 missions. Using mission retention data provided by 7 of the missions, Engage found a correlation between the mission practice of an agency and its retention rate using factor analysis. Of the six statistically significant factors, four related directly to field leader practice: servant leadership, personnel practice, feedback and supervision, and involvement in decisions. All four of these factors were rated low and fell into a designated area of needing improvement. Three of the six factors relating to an organization being a “great place to work” were also connected to field leader practice: servant leadership, personnel practices, and field functioning. The behavior and practice of field leaders make a difference.¹

However, we felt the topic had enough importance to pursue specific data on field-leader dynamics. Thus, Jim formed a partnership with Dr. Ken Harder of GMI to develop a survey. Jim, Ken, and I added the following to a coordinating team: Dr. Tom Horn (Navigators), Dr. Jim Van Meter (Paraclete Ministries) and Jim McGee (GMI).

Impact! Field Leader Survey: An Overview

Our focus was to survey North American leaders based outside of the US with field leadership responsibility. The first survey served as a pilot to assess our initial areas of research. Three well-known North American sending agencies contracted to take part in this pilot study. We devised a survey instrument exploring the personal and professional sides of field leaders, asking questions on everything from goals and strategies to their spiritual and family-life well-being. The feedback would be based on the field leaders' self-assessment. A short organizational questionnaire was also developed to be completed by one leadership member in the international headquarters in order to gain the office's perspective on issues related to the management and development of field leaders. In the end, 85 field leaders participated. This represented 84% of the existing field leaders of these organizations, giving us confidence

¹ For more information on the Engage 2006 research findings contact Jim McGee at jim@gmi.org.

that their responses were representative. Themes from these responses emerged, many confirming the observations we have been gleaning from our interaction with field leaders around the globe.

Note: “One size does not fit all”

In reporting the following data, we will generally report the aggregate response from the 85 respondents. Yet, it needs to be noted that while this gives us trends it does not provide specific direction for an organization on many issues. Each of the three organizations had their own results profile, identifying specific issues and suggesting unique courses of action. For example, one organization’s responses indicated a healthy spiritual tone, while in another the field leaders indicated a need for more attention in this crucial area. Consequently, though the data provides general insight, it is important for each organization to systematically listen to their own field leaders.

We now turn to key findings. Later in this article, we will discuss intentional actions that organizations can take to empower their field leaders.

Field Leaders are New in their Roles

Few, if any, field leaders that I (Scott) have personally spoken to came into their respective organization with the intent of eventually leading at the team, country, or area level. They largely joined to do grass-roots ministry, and their formal preparation was usually geared to that focus. Subsequently they found themselves in field leadership. A crucial question is, “Does the organization help new leaders make this key transition into leadership?”

Of the field leaders surveyed 47% have been in the position for 3 years or less (11% less than one year). With this dynamic you would hope that field leader orientation and intentional, ongoing coaching/mentoring/training would be taking place, but it isn’t. Only 54% had any kind of orientation to their field leadership role. Sixty-four percent said the orientation help they received as field leaders did **not** provide significant help. The majority of new field leaders were on their own to figure out the job.

Despite the lack of intentional preparation, leaders are indeed learning on their own. The field leaders themselves understand that their behavior is important. Ninety percent said that during their tenure as leaders they have become more aware of how their own strengths, weaknesses, and personal experience impacted their leadership practice. Yet two out of three leaders indicated that they wanted personal coaching and/or mentoring. In our field work, ***we find that personal life and ministry coaching is the single most crucial missing link in leader growth and effectiveness.*** At the present, this open posture to learning by field leaders is not being seized by the three mission organizations.

Meetings Happen, But are the Key Issues Covered?

There seems to be no lack of meetings between field leaders and their supervisors: 10% meet at least every 2 months, 23% three or more times a year, 45% at least twice a year. Only 6%

never had a scheduled meeting. In addition, 84% say they have an annual review of their leadership practice. Other data leads us to wonder of the agenda of such meetings.

A key leadership question is: do the agendas of these meetings consist of responding to current urgencies or is there a long-term focus related to the current job description, ministry goals and strategies; and the on-going spiritual nurture and skill development of each field leader?

The data from the open-ended section of the survey heightens this question. The issues most consistently identified by the field leaders on how their organization can improve were: “intentional communication”, “coaching and mentoring,” and “development of me/training.” So a question is raised about the content and effectiveness of the meetings between the supervisor and field leader. There seems to be a disconnect between current practice and meeting effectiveness.

Many Leaders have too Many Roles

We are consistently running into leaders who are struggling with maintaining multiple roles. IMPACT data confirmed this dilemma, with 72% of the field leaders reporting that they have two or more jobs, spending 29 hours a week or less in their field leader responsibilities.

There may be unavoidable variables that contribute to this reality, such as few people to oversee or lack of available field leaders. However, asking leaders to handle two or more jobs has significant ramifications. Our field experience shows that what is frequently left undone are the people-intensive areas of spiritual nurture, encouraging supervision and the tough, messy matters such as conflict. All these areas require skill development for most leaders. Another potential ramification is increased stress, especially when leaders wrestle with their efforts not meeting their own standards or others' expectations. Bottom line: ***leaders must be empowered and released to focus on leading well. Focus is a crucial element to effective leadership.***

Focused Management Tools Present, but are they Directive?

When the vast majority of field leaders have multiple roles, it is critical for their health and effectiveness that they understand their priorities. One way this is commonly done is through the management tools of job descriptions and annual goals, and the connecting of the two tools with the daily life of field leader. The good news is that 81% had a written job description and that 75% had set goals for their leadership role. Seventy-five percent also had personal development plans. Yet, there is concern when 20-25% of the field leaders do not use these basic people management tools.

The challenge is keeping both tools current and relevant. Apparently goals are current as 84% stated their goals had been updated in the last year, while 71% had updated their development plans. That is not so with job descriptions where only 32% said their job descriptions had been updated within the last year. (Annual updating is a common standard). Thus, for the majority of field leaders, the job description is on paper, but possibly not a reference tool for the leadership goals or personal development plans that they set. One mission leader said he thought that only one generic job description for their world-wide leaders was needed. When

asked if the various countries had the same demands and expectations of their field leader, he quickly replied, “No.”

These previous two sections – multiple roles and management tools - leave us with a curiosity. The vast majority of leaders have job descriptions *and* yet many of them also have multiple roles. Is the multiple role scenario by design? Have the leadership ramifications of this dynamic been thought out? It is our conviction that leadership requires the opportunity to focus on pursuing strategic objectives and staff oversight while responding to unplanned demands and crises. We are left wondering if unresolved interpersonal conflict, ineffectiveness and attrition amongst field staff would all be significantly diminished if leaders were freed up to focus on leading people effectively.

Mission Teams are Increasingly Multi-national

The research confirmed the 21st Century trend toward multi-national teams, even amongst these three organizations headquartered in United States. Only 22% of those surveyed lead teams with one nationality. Forty-four percent have 3 or more nationalities on their teams. Seventy-nine percent of the field leaders said they had become somewhat “stronger” and “much stronger” in their sensitivity to cross-cultural dynamics. Yet only 47% said their mission helped them become a more effective intercultural/ multicultural leader. These numbers highlight another training/coaching area for every leader. Lack of training can lead to team dysfunction and conflict, resulting in less productive ministry and possible staff attrition.

Conflict Resolution Skills a Weakness

We are all aware of the reality of conflict within our teams. The previously mentioned ENGAGE 2006 research showed that only 39% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “my organization is effective at preventing and resolving conflict among field staff.” That means 61% of the missionaries would say that this as an area for improvement. The current IMPACT survey found that 27% perceived themselves as weak in resolving conflict. Interestingly, only 10% perceived resolving conflict as a strength. Regardless of how leaders perceive themselves, the data clearly shows that our organizations must be much more intentional in training all staff, especially leaders, in conflict-management skills.

Leaders are given Adequate Empowerment

In the three missions surveyed, 70%-90% of the field leaders say that their mission does great in the following areas:

- My mission gives me appropriate decision-making authority. (92%)
- My mission encourages me to experiment and innovate. (83%)
- Mission allows leaders to make mistakes without fear of punishment or reprisal. (83%)

Despite these major strengths, four areas were identified by the leaders that need attention:

- “organization implements change well”
- “effective communication on organizational issues”
- “sufficient resources to do the job”,
- “having enough resources for their own personal development”. (*The resources needed are the elements mentioned throughout this article, and in particular, coaching. See recommendations at the conclusion of this article.*)

Personal Supervisory Skills and Practices a Weakness

Everyone would agree that a key responsibility of a field leader is oversight of people. Most leaders felt they had good relationships with their supervisor (81%) and that their supervisor had given them “valuable feedback” in the last month (71%).

Interestingly, we found conflicting perceptions about field leaders’ own abilities in this skill set. While the field leaders indicated they were *strong* in “affirming others” (53%) and “listening to others” (45%) (top two ratings), these skills were in contrast to those who felt the following were *weaknesses*: “giving frequent and specific feedback” (49%), “helping ineffective missionaries become effective” (39%), “being decisive and timely” (30%), “resolving conflict” (27%) and “having candor and courage to speak the truth to people” (36%). It appears leaders do well in handling the positive issues, but struggle in following through with the tougher ones.

Equally interesting is that the more experienced leaders (7 or more years in leadership) stated specific weaknesses in key interpersonal areas: 37% said they need training and coaching in resolving conflict and 39% said they are weak in “helping ineffective missionaries become effective.” Years of leadership allow for lessons to be learned. It appears these key interpersonal tendencies are more easily observed over time. But the highest percent of weakness “for giving effective feedback” was identified by those with 0-3 year’s experience (62% as weakness). This self-described set of weaknesses is consistent with missionaries’ perceptions in ENGAGE 2006 where 69% said that “my organization helps ineffective field staff become effective” is weakness needing growth.

When put together, these five self-described weaknesses point out the lack of skills to do basic people management. Combined with a leader who has multiple “jobs”, these areas may tend to be avoided and thereby increase the potential for strain at many organizational levels. We cannot assume that an effective missionary has the skills to effectively lead and manage missionaries at the team, country or area levels. And the need for training is increased by the emerging reality of multi-national personnel and teams.

Personal Spirituality: a mixed bag

While 66% of responding field leaders indicate that personal spiritual vitality is “stronger” or “much stronger” since they took their field leader positions, there was a split among those who identified “maintaining intimacy with Christ” as a strength (26%) and as a weakness (26%). For the statement: “My supervisor regularly asks me about the condition of my soul and relationship with God” – there was also an even 50-50 split. The field leaders with 0-3 years experience struggle the most with spiritual intimacy; 35% say it is a weakness. We would all agree that the on-going spiritual and character development of leaders is crucial.

Our experience is that leaders give a head nod to this area, but when pressed, they seldom have habits such as taking the Sabbath seriously or regularly spending a day in prayer. This area and the next cannot be taken for granted in the leader's life. Specific questions must be raised and personally designed growth plans implemented.

Family Life, another mixed bag

It goes without saying that the field leader role impacts family life. The majority (82%) said their ability to give proper attention to the family was the same or better since they took their role. But that means nearly one in five leaders is struggling here. Further 21% said their ability to have balance in life had gotten weaker. This is too high a percentage to ignore. All of us involved in the design of the survey agreed the data would have benefited from spousal input on this area. I, as a husband, may think I am doing great whereas my wife feels that though I am in the house, I am not present to the family. Further research is needed.

What can be done: Empowering Field Leaders across the Organization

All the above findings are only academic unless we take stewardship of our field leaders seriously and act to correct weaknesses. We realize that the sample is small, but the results give us confidence in suggesting some actions. Our conviction is that growing, directed, empowered, and spiritually vibrant leaders influence field personnel toward the same characteristics and the result is greater effectiveness.

Suggested Actions

1. Be an organization with a developmental bias for all personnel and especially leaders:
 - a. Orientation: Provide thorough training and coaching for new leaders. The orientation ought not to be completed until the leaders feel they are adequately up to speed in their role; i.e. the leader sets the pace of the required orientation. The suggested time frame is 1-3 years.
 - b. On-going development - Ideally training is personalized addressing specific personal developmental areas and professional competencies. Each leader should have a personal life and ministry growth plans as well as field strategies and corresponding objectives which are reviewed monthly.
 - c. Mentoring and Coaching: We consistently find that personal coaching is *the* single most crucial missing link in leader growth and effectiveness. Compliment any formal or informal training sessions with personal coaching to enhance application of learning. Ideally, coaching comes both from within the organization as well as from outside. In order to be effective, the coaching relationship must develop trust through face-to-face contact before relying upon the available distance communication tools (e.g. Skype, email, etc).
 - d. Learning Organization: Be intentional about evaluating organizational practice and doing strategic analysis of your context for areas of affirmation and growth. Use these findings to develop strategic directions using a collaborative process.
2. Do not assume Spiritual and Family Vitality. These issues need constant attention for field leaders to remain strong. Struggles in these areas do not indicate a weak leader, but a

- real one who needs the support from his or her supervisors and peers. Specific growth areas must be agreed upon and regularly addressed.
3. Give field leadership the regular and effective oversight it requires and deserves.
 - a. Affirm field leaders' importance at meetings and in public communications, including communication with their donors. Celebrate exceptional service.
 - b. Communicate with them:
 - Be sure you have a regular communiqué for them in which they can share their specific challenges and opportunities; encourage spiritual vitality; provide a forum for peer learning; overview some field leader development opportunities; etc.
 - Require that each supervisor of field leaders have monthly in-depth contact with each field leader. The discussion must be balanced with personal and strategic elements.
 - Practice good people management: The job description must be current and individualized to each field leader. Use the job description to create role specific goals and personal development strategies. Provide holistic, empowering appraisals (for more information you can write ken@thedyanamisgroup.com).
 - c. Identify potential, emerging leaders early. Develop a leadership pipeline. One surveyed organizations requires each field leader to identify an immediate successor if he or she should die or have to leave tomorrow, and another that had potential in 3-5 years. This is an excellent model for developing a system of identifying and developing emerging leaders. An organization can never be developing too many leaders.
 4. Remember – organizations and leaders are unique. Each organization is unique and needs its own plan of development. Each field leader is unique and deserves foresight and attention in developing his or her focus and direction.
 5. Listen to your field leaders. Take a systematic survey of your own field leaders in a way that ensures confidentiality. You can do it yourself or be part of the next IMPACT survey cycle. The IMPACT team is revising its survey based on the data and input from mission leaders. It will give you possibility of comparing your mission results with the aggregate data from other agencies. If interested, please contact Jim Feiker (Jfeiker@barnabas.org).

Our Pledge to keep listening and learning so we can serve more effectively.

By January of 2009, we plan to have a revised survey available for the next round. We want six to eight mission organizations who will give their commitment to learn from their field leaders and take proactive steps to improve their field leader development and effectiveness

In revising the survey we want to gain a better understanding of these areas:

1. the dynamics surrounding spiritual nurture and family dynamics
2. a clearer picture of the mentoring/coaching practices and issues.
3. how dynamic issues such as change and ministry sustainability impact field leaders.

If you would like more information on the next round of research or have input for us, please write Jim Feiker (Jfeiker@barnabas.org) or Scott Shaum (sshaum@barnabas.org).