WHO SHOULD MISSION AGENCIES LISTEN TO?

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Category: Observations

If mission agencies are to be relevant in a changing world, they need to be aware of what is actually happening and this means that they need to engage with sources of input from beyond their normal scope of action. In practice, agency boards tend only to listen to internal sources. From my own experience, boards will often have their own missionaries or staff come and talk to them about their experience on the field, or they will receive reports from partners and grant recipients explaining ways in which the agency has impacted their lives. This would be an appropriate approach if the world were not changing and in which the agency could be certain that its existing activities needed no adaption to the situation. However, in todayâ€™s context, agency boards need to be open to a wide range of voices so that they can ensure that they have the information that they need for long term planning. Among the voices that agency boards might choose to listen to are the following:

- Missionaries or leaders from other agencies: people who understand the context that the board is working in, but who come with different presuppositions and experiences.
- Academics who study mission. Mission theology is developing rapidly as leaders from the majority world bring new insights from Scripture. Boards need to be challenged in their understanding of what is and what is not appropriate in mission today. There may be particular value in arranging from input from those who have reservations about some aspect of the agencyâ€™s work.
- It is good to have ex-pat missionaries report to the board when they are on home assignment. However, there is much more to be gained by having national field partners sharing openly and honestly about their experiences with the agency in their home country.
- Taking this a step further; it can be very instructional to seek input from people in the agencyâ€™s field of operation who do not partner with the agency. This is probably the only way to get an accurate understanding of the way in which the agency and its work are perceived by outsiders.
- If they are really prepared to consider the bigger picture, boards could (should?) invite input from people who disagree with some aspect of their work. For example, agencies who are involved in child sponsorship would do well to listen to input from people who are opposed to this sort of intervention.

This is a short section from a booklet that I am writing for mission agency trustees. It should appear in the next six weeks or so, I hope.