

Train for Success, Guide to Significance

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ABSTRACT

This paper was written in response to the theme of the Bible Translation Conference 2008 held in Dallas, TX. The conference organizers posted several questions as topical guides. I will try to answer the question, 'What should be included in consultant training?' This essay may touch on other guiding questions without attempting specific answers for each. I might add that I can speak from experience limited to North America and Nigeria.

1. Consultant Academic Training

The values and history of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) clearly indicate that we have always emphasized training in the academic fields needed for doing our specialist work. The Forum of Bible Agencies International finalized a statement in April of 1997 that lists minimum qualifications for translation consultants, and Katy Barnwell summarized these in her *Handbook for Translation Consultants*.¹ Consultants are encouraged to increase their knowledge and better their skills beyond their initial training through formal and personal study programs, and through experience in translating and consulting so that they will become more effective as consultants. We are known as task-oriented people who put their training to work and complete the task.

SIL has a very good reputation among national and international institutions for doing quality work in terms of linguistics, literacy and socio-linguistics. Many people praise our translation efforts: as a result, people and communities are being empowered. For example, people have recognized that our various efforts have helped to "preserve their language."

Consultants have had a great deal to do with this. The corporation has set goals, and the individual members have agreed to fulfill their part of the task. Consultants have helped members by encouraging them to do well and by holding them accountable for their results.

If we can attribute so much to consultants, do we actually need anything different or more than what we have done in the past? My answer to this last question is, "Yes, we do."

2. Consultant Attitude Training

At our Bible Translation conference in 2005, Keith Benn read a paper about awareness for and development of a proper attitude for work relationships. He said, "We have all sorts of curricula available to us to train students in grammar, phonology, semantics, lexicography or translation principles, including, for example, exegesis. But I am unaware of any curriculum in SIL for training students in attitude." Benn also quoted outside sources, one secular and one Christian, as saying that employers look more for good morals and character in new employees than for needed skills.

In our work as consultants, we deal with the whole person. Each person exists as body and soul, and the soul as rational and emotional mind. Since earliest childhood our minds were impressed with knowledge and experiences. This information is stored in our sub-conscious mind; it cannot be erased, though we can "forget" it, meaning, the information is no longer part of our conscious mind. The present and the stored information influence our volition and decision-making at all times. It is good to remember that emotional information is more powerful than rational information. Therefore, we should place at least as much emphasis on *character* as we do on acquired knowledge and skills.

¹ Katherine Barnwell, *A Handbook for Translation Consultants*, SIL International, 2000, pages 17-20

The behavior or the reaction of every person is influenced by all past experiences. The following excerpt from the book *Emotional Intelligence*² can give us needed insight: “There is a little-known part in the human brain, called the *amygdala*. The amygdala can take control over what we do even as the thinking brain, the neocortex, is still coming to a decision. It scans every experience in memory and compares incoming signals from the senses for a possible match. If those previous experiences cause the amygdala to recognize trouble, it reacts instantaneously, sending a signal of crisis to all parts of the brain so that the body can prepare for action. This little structure can interrupt the rational process and force a decision that the decision maker later regrets. The amygdala lets the decision maker jump to a conclusion – literally. Branching inside the brain allows the amygdala to respond *before* the neocortex, which would have produced a more finely tailored response through the regular thought process. Those feelings that take the direct route through the amygdala include our most primitive and potent feelings. This circuit does much to explain the power of emotion to overwhelm rationality.”

It would be ideal if people could be free of prejudice and could ignore guilt from past mistakes. God made our physical bodies with this little part in the brain. But he also gave us his instruction book, the Bible. In Gen. 4, we read how Cain related to his brother Abel and how Cain became angry. This is an illustration for how the amygdala caused havoc and ultimately death. At the same time, God gave Cain – and us – a warning and a prescription for behavior. He says, “If you refuse to do what is right, then watch out! Sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you. But you must subdue it and be its master.” (Gen. 4:7, NLT) In other words, God advises people – including us consultants – to take time for a decision, as Jas. 1:19 (NLT) advises, “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”

Why did I mention this? No one can ever escape making irrational decisions that one later regrets. Prejudice, or dislike, causes the irrational response. So the explanation about the amygdala helps us understand how the brain hijacks the rational decision-making process.

How does this information work out in practical experience? Let me now give you examples of real life situations in which someone made a quick decision.

- You have worked with a team as a translation consultant several times. On your last visit, you met a new member of the team for the first time. Something strange happened: for some reason you immediately dislike the person, but cannot explain this aversion rationally. You interact with this person more or less on the basis of your first prejudice.
- You assigned a team member a certain job, but you failed to give specific parameters for the work. The member returned his work to you. You did not accept it because it failed to meet your expectations and did not reflect your preferred method. You reacted with a strong emotional outburst.
- You have explained a process or a principle to a team member several times and in various ways, but this member repeated the mistake again. You felt justified in reprimanding the member. You spoke firmly, but the member interpreted your words as harsh and reacts to you on the basis of that perception.
- You discuss the work of a colleague with him in the presence of his co-translators. You are pointing to factual mistakes and your colleague accepts these. Yet your tone and body language cause your colleague and his coworkers to feel put down. They remember mostly your offensive behavior.
- Your comments to field members and Mother Tongue Translators alike make them feel unappreciated. You are not aware of it, yet you keep using phrases such as, “I would have expected you to...” or “I thought I had told you ...” which tend to force the addressee into the defensive.

3. Consultant Skills in Communication

So what is the necessary part that a consultant needs to know in his relationships with people? Does the consultant need to acquire better communication skills? Certainly! Does he need to get a degree in psychology in order to be effective in dealing with people? Not at all! Many times, emotional intelligence rather than rational intelligence is required. The willingness to listen with one’s heart and to spend some

² *Emotional Intelligence, Why it can matter more than IQ*, Daniel Goleman, Bantam Books, 1995, pages 13-17

time is required. The willingness to lay aside one's position and title and to be a brother (or sister) to another person is required.

God's instruction book gives us help again in Rom 12:3 (NIV) where the apostle Paul says, "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought." This attitude might be labeled "humility." Years ago I took CareerTrack courses on management which emphasized repeatedly, "Ask yourself, 'What is in it for them?'" The "it" can be a business deal or a consultant session. The literature advises, "Look out for the benefit to others." Doesn't that resemble biblical advice? Someone said wisely, "People with humility don't think less of themselves; they just think about themselves less." Humility is required in our working relationships.

More help comes from the Lord's Prayer in Mat 6:9-13. It enables us to make changes, not in content but in our priorities. In verse 9 we pray, "Hallowed be your name." All of us tend to build up our own name recognition, but Jesus revolutionizes our thinking by pointing away to God and *his* name and *his* honor. In verse 10 we pray, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Again Jesus allows us to change our priorities – it is not important that we can influence people, but that God can change the people. We are offering ourselves to God as instruments for his agenda and plan. We are telling God in this prayer, "I don't want to hinder the progress of your work. I want to help it. Use my words and deeds so that your name receives honor."

Let me relate a positive experience as an example. A consultant came to check the translation of our Iñupiaq Eskimos inside the Arctic Circle in northwest Alaska. We lived far away from cities and the road system; so a consultant had to fly into our community and stay for several weeks. One consultant left an especially good impression not just on us or our co-translators, but also on our then-teenaged children. He fit right in and became part of our family for his time with us. Staying together for up to four weeks in an isolated community with little to do could feel like a prison, but he made the best of it by playing games with us or listening to the events that took place in the lives of our children. I endeavor to be a consultant such as he was. It feels good when translators remember, "We worked hard and changes in the text were needed, but this consultant was a good person to have around."

4. Further aspects of consulting with people.

In his book *Putting the One-Minute Manager to Work*, Ken Blanchard related this principle, "People who produce good results, feel good about themselves."³ These people feel good about themselves because they have and pursue a purpose that gives significance to their lives. They hold to their purpose because they believe in themselves and they have faith in their abilities. They also hold to their purpose because they have spiritual faith and can weather the storms of life; they do not give up. These people have the ability to see what is *really* important in a situation. They have learned to separate the urgent from the essential and concentrate on the latter.

These are the kind of people we all would like to work with as consultants. But we will encounter people who have low self-esteem, which appears as false pride or as false humility. Some people expect all the credit for their work and expect the consultant not to find fault with it. They are convinced that what they know is correct. On the other hand, people with self-doubt strive to be accepted. These people usually don't accept themselves, or praise from others. Both behaviors are a result of low self-esteem.

How can a consultant help a field member or a translator feel significant? First, a consultant can help by listening. One CareerTrack seminar that I attended emphasized that listening is more than being silent for a while and waiting for one's turn to speak again. It is intense activity. It is dedication to the concern of the other person.

³ *Putting the One Minute Manager to Work*, Kenneth Blanchard & Robert Lorber, 1984, Wm. Morrow & Co, pg. 18

David Thomas wrote a paper entitled *Consultants as Encouragers* in 1987⁴. He shows how just by listening and an occasional guiding question, a consultant can encourage another person. The most striking example in his essay are the remarks about Merrill Piper, a Jaars pilot, who flew to villages in the Amazon jungles of Peru many years ago. He had to stay overnight in one isolated village. The field member there was frustrated about a vexing linguistic problem in the language. Even though he understood very little about the problem, Merrill encouraged the member sympathetically to verbalize it, and the translator explained. The next morning the field member thanked Merrill for his help. The member found a key for the problem just by explaining it.

Second, make a habit of praising someone at the appropriate moment. “Catch someone in the act of doing something right.” I am sure you have heard this phrase before. And when you praise, make your remarks specific. I can remember several instances when a supervisor wanted to be nice to me and said words like, “You have done such a nice job,” or “We appreciate what you have done.” For your remarks to effectively meet the emotional needs of a field member or translator, they have to be more specific. For example, you can say, “I appreciate that you completed the translation of the letter to the Colossians during this past month. I especially like the way you handled verse 24 in chapter One.” Of course, you can add more detail to it, as is helpful. Likewise, if you need to suggest a correction, make your remarks equally specific, and always end such session with a specific praising. If you do that, people will think about *their* behavior, not *your* behavior. A reprimand without praise leaves a person downcast or angry about you, but if you end the reprimand with honest and specific praise, the person may be willing to examine his own behavior and understand the need for the change you requested.

The important thing is: the translator needs to know that the consultant has noticed his work, and that he is satisfied. This helps the translator to be proud of his accomplishment, which in turn motivates him to do at least as good or better the next time. Nothing motivates better than specific praise at the appropriate time. Nothing makes a person feel better than knowing that his work is noticed and appropriately appreciated.

Third, in our life and working together as national and expatriate translators, consultants and administrators, in our multi-national organizations, we need to apply the art of human relationship. Each one of us has “feet of clay” as standard equipment, and it is good to be aware of that. We can check our activities of each day against a list of desired attitudes and behaviors. The following list can help us do just that⁵:

- ◆ Have I shown disrespect instead of respect?
- ◆ Have I prompted anxiety and fear instead of providing security?
- ◆ Have I expressed criticism instead of appreciation?
- ◆ Have I communicated rejection instead of acceptance?
- ◆ Have I been cold and distant instead of displaying affection?
- ◆ Have I been neglectful instead of giving attention?
- ◆ Have I prompted discouragement instead of encouragement?
- ◆ Have I been insensitive instead of offering comfort?
- ◆ Have I been standoffish instead of providing support?
- ◆ Have I displayed disapproval instead of approval?

By means of this list we can confess our failures to ourselves and, more importantly, to God. If we are honest in our self-assessment, it will show in our behavior and will influence more helpful interaction with others. The people with whom we are consulting will benefit from this attitude and be blessed by it.

⁴ *Consultants as Encouragers*, in: Notes on Linguistics 38:31–35, 1987, SIL

⁵ *The Great Commandment Principle*, David Ferguson, 1998, Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, IL, pg. 160

5. Consultant Motivating Practices

A consultant is not the immediate supervisor of the field member. His job is to check the quality of the field member's work. Yet he has opportunity to remind the field member of the relevant theoretical knowledge. The consultant, as well as other administrators, needs to allow the field member to do his work. Any occasional mistake is an opportunity for retraining.

In the multiplicity of voices, it was Antoine de St-Exupéry (1900-1944) who stated the principle of motivating and encouraging coworkers in a unique way,

"If you want to build a ship, don't just give instructions to your men for them to gather wood and do the work. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea."

If a consultant was able to instill this "yearning" for something intangible in a translator and he was able to see a "vision," then the consultant has done his work right. Let me illustrate this with an observation about a man from the northeast of Nigeria. He serves in the Lutheran church in his community, but also has begun working as a translator for his language. Recently he remarked, "God gave me the vision to translate the Bible for my people, just like Martin Luther did for the German people." He got motivated independently. Though he knows what he can expect as a translator, he "yearns for the vast and endless sea." This man knows with conviction who he is, why he believes what he believes, and that his work provides meaning to his language community. This awareness of significance is partly due to the consultant who works with him.

Eric Hoffer (1898-1963), the American longshoreman philosopher, once observed that "the feeling of being hurried is born of a vague fear that we are wasting our life. When we do not do the one thing we "ought" to do, we have no time for anything else – we are the busiest people in the world."⁶ The "one thing" in a person's life is the most essential part, the part that has transcendent (or eternal) dimension. That simply means to leave as much of the "clutter" in one's life as is possible and concentrate on that which promotes the kingdom of God and brings us closer to Him and into fellowship with our fellow man. The "one thing" in my life is to "yearn for the vast and endless sea," to strive for the intangible. This is what the Apostle Paul meant when he said: "I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me" (Phil. 3:12).

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, how do we guide people to significance? As I said above, we can do that by being willing to look for the benefit to others, by being willing to listen, by praising others for their work in specific ways, and by being willing to involve them in decisions. We can guide people who are willing to be lead and who "yearn for the vast and endless sea." However, we can lead people into such yearning only if we ourselves have experienced significance in our own lives. W.H. Griffith Thomas (1861-1924) wrote words that summarize our aspirations and our potential dangers in these words, "Those in places of spiritual leadership cannot take others beyond their own spiritual attainment." So let us all strive to attain to higher levels of spiritual maturity. Let us continue to train people for success, but most importantly, let us guide people to significance.

⁶ Quoted in: *Halftime*, Robert P. Buford, 1994, Zondervan Publishers, Grand Rapids, MI, pg. 101