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An open letter to Mission Executives.....

*Seven things mission leaders are doing right to enhance resiliency and longevity in missionaries who have gone through traumatic events.*

1. **CREATING NETWORKS OF RELATIONSHIPS.** The retention factor most often cited by missionaries who had survived trauma was the network of good relationships missionaries enjoyed with each other. Sending agencies which ensured people worked on teams and provided training and coaching to nurture good team relationships had the pay-off following a trauma when the local team members helped provide a “soft landing” for each other. A second useful network which had been established was the regional network used when missionaries evacuated to surrounding countries and found temporary shelter and safety. Agencies which plan regional gatherings are also, inadvertently, providing for the developing and expanding of a network of relationships which sometimes pays dividends in a person’s resiliency down the road.
2. **ACKNOWLEDGING THE TRAUMA.** There is an elephant in the room if mission leadership does not acknowledge in some way the trauma which a missionary has endured. The worker in the middle of Africa who has endured the trauma is experiencing an enormous personal impact. Yet as the mission executive in the home office is quickly scanning a report of the trauma via an email, his/her emotional response can be minimal.

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After a very traumatic event a family was back in the homeland for a short time. They spoke in glowing terms of their mission leader who, along with his wife, came to visit them. It was “more than an email message, and he came with his wife.” The action spoke volumes, and they felt that the pain they had endured had been validated by the visit of a key leader. This contrasted with another family who, after a very tense and traumatic robbery, did not hear anything from their leadership. It was “as if they didn’t care.” The family felt very much on their own and hurt by the lack of leadership response.

**3. STAYING IN THE REGION, INITIALLY, HAS RESILIENCY BENEFITS.**

Teams that have evacuation protocols which include the first level of evacuation being to another country in the region as opposed to a direct return to the homeland seem to fair better. The data shows that for purposes of survival and resiliency, what benefits the evacuee most is the loving support of existing relationships. These relationships are often stronger on the field than in the homeland and team members are certainly more understanding than loved ones at home since many of them are likely to have gone through similar traumas.

**4. SPEAKING WORDS OF WISDOM IN LOVE.** At crucial junctures in a missionary’s life the careful words of a leader can be most welcome. It is evident from the data that missionaries are strongly committed. They are not easily dislodged. In fact, leaving or moving can often be framed as failure or betrayal of a heavenly mandate and therefore guilt-producing. What can override this false guilt is a well-spoken, timely word by a mission leader who has developed an adequate trust level with the missionary, who has clearly listened and understood the situation, and who can, as it were, speak for God.

One woman had worked faithfully for twenty years in her country of service. She had been evacuated once, yet she was committed to returning despite dangers which lingered. During that time other opportunities elsewhere had presented themselves. When her mission leader was onsite and said to her, “You have permission to leave; I think you should take up an assignment in

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another country,” only then did the burden lift. She no longer felt guilty about abandoning her post and the project.

5. **DEVELOPING A THEOLOGY OF RISK AND SUFFERING.** The ReMAP 2 study<sup>i</sup> underlined the fact that good practice agencies are those which have good candidate screening systems. Today’s ministry context requires an added component to that screening - the requirement that candidates develop their own position on risk and suffering. It has been standard practice in the past for agencies to require candidates to agree with a doctrinal statement. Often those statements do not include a statement on suffering. As more and more candidates are placed in high security alert nations, it can be safely assumed they will face trauma. They will be robbed, they will get sick, and they will be traumatized in many other ways. A theology of risk and suffering, developed before departure, will soften the blow of future trauma, will build faith and will foster resiliency. The task of developing a personal theology of risk and suffering seems more crucial for those growing up with a western cultural view of suffering.
6. **FOSTERING A SENSE OF DUTY.** A surprising number of respondents referred to their farm upbringing where they had learned values such as hard work, finishing a task, duty, perseverance and sticking with the project. A Vietnam veteran had also learned these core values and brought into his missionary career the notion that one stayed at his post until the orders were changed. The data showed quite a few who had that sense of determination to not be run out of town when trouble came. They seemed more determined to survive trauma and to push on and get the task done. The question for mission executives is how can those values be cultivated in today’s candidate?
7. **AFFIRMING THE CALL.** Sending agencies need to continue to grapple with how the concept of the call is expressed today. How is a call developed? If candidates are applying out of a desire to do something good in the world, or because of a set of felt needs, or from a sense of injustice, how does that translate or morph into a strong conviction that holds during troubles and trials. Where do new recruits have a chance to develop their sense of call? Maybe the deeper question is

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how God speaks and calls people today to follow him in apostolic work. Whatever the language or semantics, sending agencies assigning people to high security alert nations must feel

satisfied and confident through the screening process that new recruits are called to serve in such places. Ensuring a firm call at the beginning seems to definitely contribute to resiliency at the other end of the trauma.