

What Cross-Cultural Workers Ought to Know about Each Other: From Builders to Busters

“I just don’t understand them at all.” “They are so different from me and from the cross-cultural workers who came to the field when I did.” “The way they think just doesn’t make any sense at all to me.” Who are we? Are we really different? If so, how are we different? Why are we different? Can we work together effectively? Let us explore some of these questions.

Who are we?

George Barna, founder of the Barna Research Group, has studied the characteristics of people born at different times in the United States. Three groups of such people are now in the cross-cultural worker force.

- Builders. People born before 1945, before the end of World War II, were intent on building a comfortable lifestyle and building America into an economic and military super-power. As cross-cultural workers they were (and are) hardworking, committed, frugal, and ready to go anywhere at any time and do anything necessary to take the gospel to all people groups.
- Boomers. People born during the twenty years following World War II (1946-1965) were the baby boom, the “war babies.” Born into prosperity, they became well-educated, questioning, protesting, idealistic, and tolerant of many

different lifestyles. As cross-cultural workers they brought specialized knowledge, a desire to continue their personal and professional development, and a greater emphasis on caring for their families.

- Busters. People born during the next two decades (1965-1984) were called the baby busters because there were fewer of them. The baby busters, children of the boomers, grew up in a world different from that of any previous generation. Many who came from broken homes and were victims of violence feel alienated, forgotten, cheated, and disillusioned with life. As cross-cultural workers looking for meaning in life, they are interested in spiritual things, open, honest, and aware of their needs. As such they make good team members.

How are we different?

Builders, boomers, and busters are different in too many ways to discuss here. However, here are some of the major differences between builders and busters especially relevant to cross-cultural work. Of course, the boomers are somewhere between the builders and the busters on many issues, and they have additional differences with both. All of these differences are generalizations that are not true in every case, but they are often found in members of each group.

- Length of service. Builders are likely to be “career” cross-cultural workers who expect to spend their lives with one people group or agency. Busters are often short-term cross-cultural workers who expect to work on a project for a few years at the most, then return home.

- Loyalty to agency. Builders are likely to stay with their organization for life no matter what. Busters may leave when they become dissatisfied with something in the organization.
- Word meanings. The cross-cultural worker “family” may mean life-long commitment to certain values. Busters are more likely to think of that “family” in terms of support and relationships.
- Expected leadership. Builders usually respond well to authoritarian leadership, such as sitting in rows and accepting what the Bible expert tells them. Busters often want participatory leadership, such as sitting in a circle for Bible study, a circle in which anyone’s interpretation of Scripture is as valid as any other.
- Orientation. Builders are often task oriented and want to get the job done. Busters are likely to be social-emotionally oriented and believe that relationships are more important than turning in a good report to headquarters at the end of the year.
- Women’s roles. Women builders usually see their part as supporting their husbands. Women busters typically want to work in equal authority with their husbands.
- Choosing an agency. Builders frequently go with an agency to which they are called or one serving a people or country to which they are called. Busters tend to go with an agency that seems the most caring—an organization that will care for them.
- Expectations of agency. Builders often ask, “What can I do for my organization?” They wonder whether the job will be big enough. Busters are more likely to ask, “What can my organization do for me?”

They wonder whether the benefits package will be big enough.

- Attitude toward nationals. Builders are likely to take positions of leadership and be somewhat reluctant to turn responsibility over to the nationals. Busters often work well under the authority of the national leadership.
- Attitude toward conflict. Builders tend to deny that they are in conflict or approach the conflict indirectly. Busters usually openly acknowledge the presence of conflict and approach its resolution directly.
- Need for care. Builders tend to be independent and self-sufficient, saying they can make it on their own. Busters are much more likely to openly admit that they need help.
- Learning styles. Builders tend to be cognitive and emphasize such things as correct theology and biblical interpretation. Busters are often experiential and want time to experience God, to meditate and to relate to him.
- Spirituality and discipline. Builders are often highly disciplined and have their devotions daily. Although very interested in spiritual things, busters often find it difficult to maintain a consistent devotional life.

These differences, and many others, are not just minor ones but may be large enough to cause significant disagreement between builders and busters. On the one hand, builders may think of busters as immature, lazy, materialistic, lacking ethics or morality, disrespectful, and emotionally unstable. On the other hand busters may think of builders as rigid, inflexible, old-fashioned, cautious, predictable, boring and more interested in the past than in the future.

Why are we different?

Western culture, particularly that in the United States, between 1970 and 2000 (busters developing) was quite different from that between 1930 and 1960 (builders developing). Although builders and busters may have grown up in the same country, they grew up in quite different cultures. Since their developmental years were spent in these different cultures, they have often internalized different values.

Cross-cultural workers today are aware of the problems that face multinational teams, and they have come to terms with many of these problems. Cultural problems between cross-cultural workers from different countries have been recognized and dealt with to some extent. However, cultural problems between cross-cultural workers from the same country are often not recognized as being similar.

Included in those cross-cultural problems are the much deeper philosophical issues between modernism and postmodernism. Builders were reared under modernism, in which reason was king, individualism was prized, and scientific method yielded facts which were certain and objective. However, busters were reared under postmodernism in which experience is king, community is prized, and there are no absolutes. Over the years Christianity has grappled with modernism and come to some conclusions on which parts of it are compatible and which are not. The church has still not come to terms with postmodernism, nor separated the wheat from the chaff.

Can we work together?

Not only can builders and busters work together, they must work together. They both have strengths and weaknesses, and their strengths complement each other. However, rather than seeing themselves as being complementary, they often view themselves in conflict. Rather than complimenting each other for strong points, they tend to criticize each other for weak points.

Let us see how builders and busters can work together to help fulfill the Great Commission. To make disciples we need to be both rational and relational. On the one hand, the modernism-influenced cognitive builders may be so intent on getting the job done that they offend the very people they are trying to reach. On the other hand, the postmodernism-influenced experiential busters may spend so much time chatting with the people they are trying to reach that they do not get the job done before they leave.

Builders may spend an entire career in a relational culture and never win enough people to produce a national church filled with disciples. Busters may spend a term making great friends with people and bring them to Christ, but never actually disciple people there to leave a strong national church. However, working together effectively, with the career builders giving stability to the procession of short-term busters, may result in a sound national church.

There have always been, and will remain, generational differences between older and younger people. However these differences between builders, boomers, and busters are much deeper (cultural) issues, and they must be resolved to some extent for maximum effectiveness in carrying out the Great Commission. As these individuals from different generations form “multicultural” teams, they will find that they have the

differences in the cultural values discussed here as well as other differences (music, worship style, dress, etc). However, they will also discover that their core values are the same, and their goal is the same—making disciples of all people groups.

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