BOOK REVIEW

Strong Together: Building Partnerships Across Cultures in an Age of Distrust

by Andrea Nelson Trice

Reviewed by Roxanne Addink de Graaf

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Why do cross-cultural partnerships and businesses often fail? How and why do Americans and Majority World leaders differ in their approach to building social enterprises? What are the most beneficial ways in which Westerners can engage with the Majority World? How do we build bridges in an era of growing distrust?

Andrea Nelson Trice's *Strong Together: Building Partnerships Across Cultures in an Age of Distrust* examines these questions and seeks to equip readers with ways to unlock the potential of international partnerships. Beyond Nelson Trice's expertise in cultural and organizational dynamics, the insights presented in *Strong Together* emerge from interviews with ninety Majority World and US American leaders working in cross-cultural social enterprises and international development organizations. The result is both a cautionary tale and a call to action to be more intentional when building partnerships across cultures.

We live in a world in which technology allows increasing connectivity, yet we are witnessing growing divides within and across nations. As Nelson Trice points out in the title, we are living in an "Age of Distrust." Within the US, a focus of growing distrust is often associated with government interventions, As Nelson Trice points out, "only 20% of Americans believe the government can be trusted to do what is right" (36). Globally, this distrust has included international development efforts, especially when involving government interventions, big aid packages, traditional charities, and global North to South interventions (a critique famously brought to the forefront in Dambisa Moyo's *Dead Aid* in 2009). What has risen from the ashes of this critique of big government and aid is an increasing awareness of the essential role of market-based solutions to global challenges, and of the need for local ownership and leadership in these solutions. The result? "It is estimated that 8% of the U.S. population is involved in social start-ups" (36).

In *Strong Together*, Nelson Trice recognizes and celebrates this growing investment in market-based social enterprise solutions, and the increasing integration of Majority World leaders in solutions to the complex global challenges of our time. She also recognizes the risk of repeating mistakes of the past, like culture- and power-blind approaches to cross-cultural partnerships, in this growing enthusiasm for social enterprises. What she presents in *Strong Together* is an approach that does not shy away from building bridges, businesses, and partnerships across cultures, but one that builds awareness of what is required to do so effectively.

In part one, Nelson Trice identifies some often-unrecognized cultural undercurrents that can undermine cross-cultural ventures. Using real-world examples and well-established frameworks, Nelson Trice helps readers recognize common cultural differences and how to leverage them as unique strengths in partnerships. One example she shares is the differing view of achievement. "Americans generally thrive on competition and define success by what we have achieved" (71), she argues, while James Owolabi provides the contrast; "In Non-Western culture you

don't get things done by working with data. You work through people, through relationships" (71).

Nelson Trice's examples and insights of cultural differences resonate with my twenty years of work with Partners Worldwide, a faith-based organization that builds partnerships with business volunteers and entrepreneurs from across the globe, working together towards a world without poverty. I have witnessed real world examples of every cross-cultural difference highlighted in *Strong Together*, representing both the challenges and complementary strengths, synergy, and impacts that can result from partnering across cultures. Still, one question that arose as I read this section and reflected on the dynamics of the global team I work with is if the cultural differences identified are shifting or merging with younger generations. With increasing exposure to global media, connectivity and the resulting cross-pollination of ideas and values, are the cultural differences less prominent with social entrepreneurs in their 20s working across cultures? This could be a topic for Nelson Trice's to dive into for her next book.

In part two, Nelson Trice unpacks the relationship between cultural values and the problems we seek to solve through enterprise. As she points out, "Differing problem definitions often lead to friction and power struggles between Americans and those they are trying to help" (283). She asserts that US Americans tend to define problems in more material terms, with an urgency to scale, while those from the Majority World more often mention empowering individuals and communities "by building hope, respect and trust" (283). These differing perspectives often result in points of friction. Among the seven common friction points Nelson Trice identifies, the "primacy of innovation vs. restoration" (142), stands out as a fresh and relevant insight. US Americans embrace innovation and have a high tolerance for the inherent change that results, whereas the Majority World values more highly the relational threads that are essential for resilient, restorative communities, threads that can be severed in the midst of fast-paced innovation.

In part three, Nelson Trice shares five case studies of enterprises that have successfully partnered across cultures. The cases vary from a US American-initiated water enterprise to a Majority World-led microfinance entity. Each example utilizes Majority World and US American leadership, illustrating the need for, and benefit of, recognizing the strengths and limitations of each partner in cross-culture ventures. Nelson Trice points out that the leaders in these case studies of success made three common assumptions: 1) They recognized their own limitations; 2) They recognized the importance of the community systems that surrounded their Majority World staff and clients; and 3) They emphasized empowerment in their enterprises. One discerns these assumptions in the words of Alice

Grau, the Creative Director of Global Mamas in Ghana, when she says "We focus on the needs of our employees and what they are requesting.... We care for them in community" (209).

Instead of highlighting financial accomplishments or quantifiable impacts of these successful enterprises, Nelson Trice chooses to define and illustrate "success" from a more Majority World perspective, focusing on enterprises that shared power and that local communities embraced, which led to the desired impact. After identifying common traits of successful cross-culture ventures, Nelson Trice goes on to identify common impediments to successful US American-Majority World partnerships, including the common desire among social entrepreneurs to be heroes, a common stumbling block to building enterprises that sustain impact.

When faced with the plethora of challenges of partnering across cultures, Nelson Trice concludes people in the Global North have three choices; go home, build alone, or build with others (248). Not surprisingly, she recommends the third option, arguing that the path of building with others involves the "challenge of operating from a place of significant discomfort, but from a place that also offers tremendous opportunity" (249). She advocates that building with others, while risky and time consuming, offers three significant opportunities: 1) To build something bigger and better than anyone alone could build; 2) To release creativity and empower vulnerable people; and 3) To help everyone flourish (254).

With sound research and engaging examples, Andrea Nelson Trice reminds us of the many roadblocks to strong cross-cultural partnerships, while also affirming the need for the important work of bridging divides and merging our diverse strengths and perspectives. To facilitate dialogue and reflection on all these important ideas, she includes provocative questions at the end of each chapter. Altogether, *Strong Together* is a vital resource for development practitioners, social entrepreneurs, impact investors, and anyone studying or engaged in cross-cultural teams, businesses, or partnerships who want to work together for sustained impact. While the title and cover may not stand out to the business-minded crowd (there is no mention of business or enterprise on the front cover), this is a book that everyone involved in business enterprises across cultures should read. So much so, that I am adding this book to the essential reading list for all Partners Worldwide staff and volunteers.

Strong Together adds cultural insights and new perspectives to the market-based partnership stories in *My Business, My Mission: Fighting Poverty through Partnerships* (Seebeck and Stoner 2009), which highlights the highs and lows of the first decade of Partners Worldwide. *Strong Together* also makes a

great companion to a book on our current reading list, *The Culture Map*, by Erin Meyer (2014), which focuses exclusively on, and thus is able to go deeper into, the impact of culture on business. *The Culture Map* also builds on several of the cultural differences highlighted in *Strong Together*, offering, for example, practical suggestions for working in teams that combine high-context and low-context cultures.

Though Nelson Trice is herself a person of faith, *Strong Together* is not targeted exclusively to Christian audiences as it carefully avoids language that might resonate only with Christians. That said, she acknowledges the role and importance of faith for many people in the Majority World and refers to the Torah's framework of an integrated vision of a flourishing society as a common language of purpose that spans Jewish, Muslim, and Christian cultures (See figure 1). We also see elements of the biblical concept of Shalom clearly reflected in this book through her call to listen to our neighbors, acknowledge each other's strengths, share power, respect differences, and seek flourishing for all.
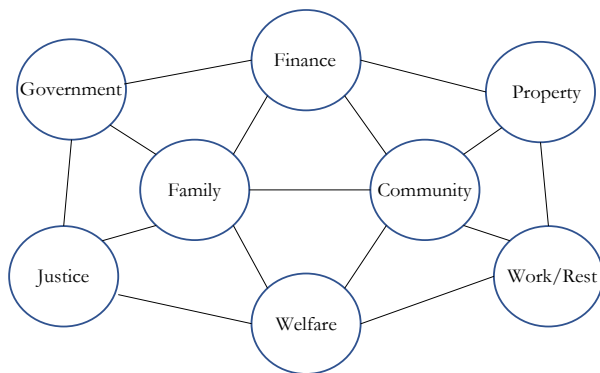

Figure 1: Visual of an Integrated Society in the Torah (151)

Nelson Trice provides insights that go beyond strong cross-cultural partnerships and impactful social enterprises; the insights from her work can help build restorative relationships that bridge divides, in the US and across the globe, an essential task as we seek to bring God's kingdom on earth as in heaven in this age of distrust.

References

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Roxanne Addink de Graaf is the Director of Strategy and Impact at Partners Worldwide in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where she has worked for the last two decades on global partnerships with local institutions and business leaders who are faithfully pursuing flourishing for all. She was the project manager for *My Business, My Mission: Fighting Poverty through Partnerships* (Seebeck and Stoner 2009) and lead author of *Business as Mission and the End of Poverty: BAM at the Base of the Pyramid* (Addink de Graaf 2013). She recently finished a 2-year research and pilot project, funded by the Templeton Foundation, on "entrepreneurial grit." This project studies factors of business resilience, focusing on enterprises in the Majority World (see https://www.partnersworldwide.org/2024/06/26/grit-and-resiliency-what-keeps-entrepreneurs-going-in-tough-times).

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