

ALNAP Study



ALNAP

Leadership in Action:
Leading effectively in
humanitarian operations

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Executive Summary and Recommendations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Leadership has long been an important topic in the commercial, political and military arenas. However, despite the challenges inherent in leading humanitarian operations, leadership has, until recently, received limited attention in the humanitarian sector. The last decade has seen a marked increase in the time and resources devoted to identifying and developing humanitarian leaders; however, evidence from ALNAP's State of the Humanitarian System report (Harvey et al. 2009), and from elsewhere, suggests that ineffective leadership is still a major constraint to effective humanitarian action.

This study seeks to contribute to improved humanitarian leadership by considering the factors that make humanitarian leadership successful, and identifying actions that actors within the humanitarian system can take to improve the quality of leadership in humanitarian responses. It focuses specifically on the operational level of leadership. For the purposes of the study, operational humanitarian leadership is defined as:

■ **Leadership in-country, that provides a clear vision and objectives for the humanitarian response to a specific crisis (whether at the programme, organisational or system-wide level), focused on the affected population, and building a consensus that brings aid workers (organisationally and individually) together around that vision and objectives. It also means finding ways of collectively realising the vision for the benefit of the affected population, often in challenging and hostile environments.**

The aim of the study is to develop a better understanding of what effective leadership looks like, to identify the determinants of good leadership and ways in which it can be fostered. It is based on modelling excellence, through 11 case studies of effective leadership, in different crises, different countries and at different levels. The findings are related to the wider literature and current thinking on leadership, and compared with research on leadership in other sectors.

A consistent finding across all the case studies was the significance of personal authority as the determining factor of effective leadership, as opposed to the authority vested in position or status. The qualities and experience of the individual leader matter as much as, or more than, their job title. Five main areas of leadership qualities emerged from the case studies:

- (i) Strategic leadership skills that relate to the bigger picture, comprising:
 - a. the ability to understand the context and dedicating time to contextual analysis

- b. a clear and strategic vision of what the humanitarian operation is attempting to achieve, beyond short-term funding horizons, and building ownership around that vision
 - c. a focus on the affected population and their needs, both for the long-term vision and in day-to-day decision-making
- (ii)** Relational and communication qualities, comprising:
- a. the ability to listen and to learn from others
 - b. the ability and willingness to share information and be transparent
 - c. the preparedness and ability to speak out, to have courageous conversations
 - d. the ability to build relationships with key political stakeholders
 - e. connecting with staff
 - f. presentational skills
- (iii)** Decision-making and risk-taking skills, comprising:
- a. the ability to make decisions rapidly when needed, according to the situation on the ground, and knowing when to end consultation
 - b. being able to make decisions on the basis of incomplete, unreliable and sometimes contradictory information
 - c. the flexibility to change decisions as the situation changes
 - d. the willingness to be held accountable for decisions taken
 - e. a mature and balanced approach to risk-taking, prepared to innovate, yet quickly learning from and correcting mistakes
- (iv)** Management and organisational skills, including:
- a. putting together a strong team in the spirit of distributed leadership, leading by example and mentoring staff
 - b. being a good manager, with an eye for detail, as well as being a good leader with visionary and strategic skills
- (v)** Personal qualities, such as:
- a. being principled and acting with integrity
 - b. being self-aware as well as having an inner self-confidence
 - c. humility – willing to credit and to learn from others
 - d. tenacity and determination
 - e. energy and enthusiasm

Taken together, these qualities point to the importance of 'relational leadership' based on networking, communication and team-building that brings out the leadership potential of others. The relational nature of operational humanitarian leadership is underscored by the finding that the ability to build consensus across agencies is critical to effective leadership; however, it is equally important for those in leadership positions to know when to bring consultation to an end in order to make a clear decision. This requires judgement, courage, and being comfortable with dissent.

This ability to judge when particular skills and approaches are relevant and desirable in a given context emerged as an important theme in the study, and serves as a warning against reducing leadership to any single list of competencies. Leadership happens when individuals engage completely with a situation. The ‘magic’ that can transform a list of skills from ‘competence’ to ‘excellence’ is often to do with the essence of the individual and how that person engages with the context in which they find themselves, the people with whom they are working, and with themselves. In fact, the study found that when a particular

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leadership strength is overplayed it can become a weakness: a leader’s tenacity and energy can, for example, result in pushing colleagues too hard, with negative effects for the team and the programme. This can lead to burn-out. Leaders and organisations should be aware of this ‘shadow side’ of leadership, and take measures to address it.

Leadership, then, is an art, based as much on judgement and intuition as on pre-defined skills. The study found that experience of humanitarian operations is key to developing and applying this judgement. Demonstrated experience is also important in establishing the personal credibility and authority on which successful humanitarian leadership rests. Political skills, including political acumen, emerged as fundamental to operational humanitarian leadership, even in humanitarian crises triggered by natural disasters. This means having a strong understanding of the political economy of the crisis, carrying out a political stakeholder analysis, both rapidly and on an ongoing basis, having strong relational and networking skills across actors and across boundaries (for example with parties to the conflict, or with the military), and having strong diplomatic, negotiating and facilitation skills. This combination can be critical to successfully negotiate and open up humanitarian access, which is key to an effective operational response.

The importance of operational experience suggests that leadership, far from being innate, is a learnt skill. Although some individuals may have natural propensities towards displaying the qualities outlined above, the study suggests that leadership can be learned, fostered and developed. The case-study leaders had acquired their skills in a number of different ways: from role models from both childhood and adulthood, from experience in the humanitarian aid sector, from being coached by a supportive line manager, and occasionally through formal training programmes.

While individuals can develop their own leadership skills, it is the organisation and the system as a whole that create a context within which these skills can most effectively be put to use. The case studies show that in order to foster leadership, humanitarian organisations should consciously give operational leaders and teams space to work, and should reward risk-taking. Unfortunately, this seldom happened in the case studies. Instead, many of the examples of effective leadership emerged in spite of a deeply constraining context, and the case-study leaders were

“In order to foster leadership ... give operational leaders and teams space to work”

prepared to take risks knowing that they would not necessarily receive the support of their organisations. There is alarming evidence of a growing tendency towards risk-aversion in the sector, associated in part with the drive for accountability, which is resulting in a stifling culture of compliance, and in part with the constraints of bureaucracy. This results in incentive systems that reward compliance with procedures and financial targets rather than innovation and leadership. Within the UN especially, risk-taking by individuals was more likely when they disregarded their own career paths and prioritised humanitarian objectives. In addition, many humanitarian organisations appear to value technical expertise at the expense of people and relationship skills in the process of selecting operational leaders, and pay inadequate attention to context and to the particular leadership skills required for specific situations.

“what is unique is the context: working with people in distress, taking decisions that will affect lives and livelihoods on the basis of incomplete and ambiguous information, while under pressure to act rapidly”

The international humanitarian system also appears to be neglecting the opportunity to capitalise on the wide range of potential leaders. The study found that drawing on diverse cultural identities can be a real asset to leadership. Examples emerged in the case studies of leaders consciously and unconsciously drawing on their different identities (and life experiences) in order to cross boundaries and make connections with different actors to facilitate the humanitarian response. However, commitments to diversity notwithstanding, operational leadership opportunities currently favour internationally recruited staff. Nationally recruited staff – who offer wider sets of cultural identity – face structural and attitudinal barriers in developing their

leadership potential and moving into international leadership positions. In a similar vein, it was striking how hard it was to find examples of women showing effective operational humanitarian leadership when drawing up the list of potential case studies. This begs a question about the gender balance among field-based managers and the importance of exploring possible barriers to women assuming leadership roles and developing their leadership potential.

Although most of our case studies focused on individual leaders, many of these were successful because they were able to build high-performing teams. This implies an element of collective leadership, yet highlights the individual's role in creating a leadership environment around them that was valued by their colleagues and peers. This approach strengthened what could be achieved, especially where the team's skills complemented the leader's abilities. Where a collective leadership structure is formally set up, it is vitally important to establish ground rules and operating procedures at the outset, although our case studies indicate that there may be a finite period for cross-organisational leadership to work, and that this depends on the stage in the crisis and the particular set of individuals coming together. This kind of collective leadership structure needs to be sustained to be effective, and may need to be recreated as circumstances and individuals change.

Is humanitarian leadership really different from leadership in other sectors? The study suggests that, although many of the qualities possessed by effective leaders are not unique to the humanitarian sector, what is unique is the context in which they are being applied: working with people in distress, taking decisions that will affect lives and livelihoods in a fluid situation and on the basis of incomplete and ambiguous information, often in a dangerous environment with a wide range of different actors some of whom may be hostile to the humanitarian endeavour, while under pressure to act rapidly. As a result, the study suggests that successful humanitarian leaders generally exhibit an unusually broad range of leadership qualities, and that compared to leaders in other sectors they show a strong values base. A relational approach and demonstrated sectoral experience may be particularly important.

The study also asked whether effective humanitarian leadership was different from one type of crisis to another. Here there seemed to be few distinctions that could be generalised between types of emergency. Rather, each emergency is different: the qualities that determine if a leader in one crisis can play as effective a role in another depend critically upon that individual's sensitivity to context, avoiding a 'one size fits all' approach, and therefore their ability to identify locally-specific opportunities and limitations.

The findings of the study are inspiring in terms of examples of exceptional leadership provided by individuals and some teams. They also present cause for concern, because leadership often seems to have happened in spite of, rather than because of, the organisational culture in which they were operating. The emerging message is that much more needs to be done in the international humanitarian aid sector to foster operational humanitarian leadership, with implications for the culture of the sector as a whole, and for individual organisations and their chief executives and senior management teams in particular.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

There is no blueprint for understanding leadership. This would be a contradiction in terms; leadership is an art, and it is also something of an art to capture what this elusive yet critical concept means in practice. This study has attempted to learn from other, usually more extensive, research into leadership in other sectors in order to throw some light on what we have called operational humanitarian leadership. Modelling excellence was the chosen research method, exploring in some depth 11 case studies of leadership at different levels, in different organisations, and in different contexts.

The findings are both inspiring and worrying. At the individual level they are inspiring. A number of individuals in very different contexts provided exceptional leadership and, as a consequence, achieved impressive results, often in difficult and hostile operational contexts. At the organisational or sectoral level the findings are more worrying because leadership often seems to have emerged in spite of rather than because of the organisational culture. A growing aversion to risk, in turn a consequence of the compliance culture and bureaucratic approach that has taken a grip of the humanitarian sector, are squeezing the space for leadership to flourish, instead favouring managerialism, and stifling initiative, innovation and risk-taking. Where space has opened up for individuals to develop and demonstrate their leadership potential these appear to be isolated islands, created by an unusual coincidence of factors, for example a line manager who sees the potential of their staff member, and an organisational culture that gives space to its field-based managers. In some of our examples of leadership it is the individual who has created that space, working around organisational obstacles and procedures that could confound the less experienced or less tenacious.

For this study, as stated earlier, our working definition of operational humanitarian leadership is:

» **Leadership in-country that provides a clear vision and objectives for the humanitarian response to a crisis (whether at the programme, organisational or system-wide level), focused on the affected population, and building a consensus that brings aid workers (organisationally and individually) together around that vision and objectives. It also means finding ways of collectively realising that vision, for the benefit of the affected population, often in challenging and hostile environments.**

Our definition combines strategic vision, values in terms of a focus on the affected population, and behaviours and skills in terms of consensus-building and delivery. The case studies confirmed the importance of these qualities. Political skills also emerged as critical in all humanitarian crises. What was remarkable about most of the case-study leaders was

the wide range of leadership skills and qualities they each demonstrated. Their qualities were mostly well balanced. They were able to engage at the strategic contextual level, as well as having strong relational and communication skills, yet balancing these people-oriented skills with task-oriented decision-making skills, and bringing inspiring personal qualities to their work that drew people towards them, for example being principled and working with integrity. The 'magic' that transforms these skills and qualities from 'competence' to 'excellence' often depends on the essence of the individual and how they engage with the context in which they find themselves, the people with whom they are working, within and outside the humanitarian sector, and with themselves.

Although we searched for evidence that certain types of leadership style and approach are commonly required in particular types of humanitarian crisis, the lack of a clear pattern in our findings warns against making unwise generalisations. Instead, we conclude that context is extremely important, and that a context-specific analysis of leadership needs is essential to indicate the appropriate balance of skills required, and thus to inform recruitment and selection criteria and processes. Individual leaders who are sensitive to the context rather than assuming 'one size fits all', who listen and are open to learning, are likely to be the most versatile in terms of adapting their leadership style appropriately to different humanitarian crises.

Likewise, although we set out with a set of expectations and assumptions about the difference between individual and collective leadership, some of the distinctions started to blur as the case-study research got underway. Collective leadership emerged as a feature in many of the case studies of individual leaders. Although an individual leader may have played a key role in terms of their strategic leadership, and their relational skills in drawing people around them and putting together high-performing teams, that they also fostered a leadership environment in which others could contribute and were motivated to do so and encouraged to develop their potential. Thus, the 'results' of the case-study leaders often relied upon inputs from a range of people. This fits well the kind of leadership that Wheatley and Frieze (2010) identify as appropriate to the contemporary world, 'leader as host' rather than heroic leadership. In effect the individuals concerned created a 'micro-culture' that fostered leadership among their colleagues and staff that their wider organisations had sometimes failed to create.

A lurking question throughout was: what is different about humanitarian leadership, or is it the same as leadership in other sectors and with other objectives? While many generic qualities are the same, for example balancing strategic visioning and planning skills with communication and relational skills, there are also differences. The humanitarian sector is by definition at an extreme end of the spectrum where leadership decisions affect people's lives, their survival and their livelihoods in challenging and dangerous environments. The humanitarian system is relatively non-hierarchical, so consensus-building is critical, especially across agencies, and often under pressure of time where speed of response is vital. The combined effect of these distinctions is to give a particular edge to operational humanitarian leadership. And values lie at its heart.

Recommendations

The message emerging from this study is that much more needs to be done in the international humanitarian aid sector – the focus of this study – to foster operational humanitarian leadership. This has implications both for the culture of the international humanitarian aid sector, and for individual organisations. Developing effective leadership requires engagement and commitment at the highest level. We therefore make a number of recommendations to chief executives and their senior management teams. Our recommendations are presented according to the different target groups, including individuals in the sector who aspire to develop their leadership skills and potential.

For the international humanitarian aid sector

- (1) The findings of this study fundamentally challenge the **risk-averse culture** that has developed within the international humanitarian aid sector. Attempts to strengthen accountability and increasing corporatism have resulted in a culture of compliance that is stifling initiative, risk-taking and ultimately leadership. If leadership is to flourish beyond a few courageous individuals, this culture has to change. This has particular implications for how donor governments and other funders assert their accountability requirements. This study recommends that current accountability initiatives and compliance mechanisms be reviewed in terms of the extent to which they discourage healthy risk-taking and leadership, and to find ways of modifying accountability procedures where necessary. We would also suggest exploring what can be learned from organisations that have successfully instilled a risk-taking culture, and how such a culture could be replicated.
- (2) The model of effective operational leadership that emerges from this study is a **model of leader as host** rather than the heroic leader. The case-study examples indicate the value and benefits of collective leadership, and the potential and important role of the individual leader in creating an environment conducive to leadership and initiative within a wider team. The complexity of most humanitarian crises means that this distributed or shared form of leadership may be more appropriate. The study therefore recommends that this model of operational leadership that should be promoted within the sector. As mentioned below, further work and exploration is needed on collective leadership.
- (3) There is an urgent need to invest more in **national leadership**. While the UN has generally done most to embrace diversity it appears that many international NGOs and other organisations have not yet gone far enough, and that it is still unusual for nationally recruited staff to move into international leadership roles and for their leadership skills to be recognised. Initiatives like the CBHA's leadership development programme for nationally recruited staff could make an important contribution, but there is a sense that more needs to be done, for example through mentoring and challenging assumptions – albeit not openly expressed – about the experience and skills of nationally recruited staff.

For humanitarian aid organisations committed to fostering and developing leadership

- (4) Chief executives and senior managers should reflect on whether they give their field-based managers sufficient space to exercise their leadership potential while still engaging and challenging those managers constructively in order to develop and refine their skills. Staff surveys and/or 360° appraisals could feed into such a review.
- (5) Chief executives and their senior management teams should also review their **organisation's appetite for risk** and how this encourages or holds back their field-based managers. Finding the right balance in encouraging responsible risk-taking, identifying and learning rapidly from mistakes, and providing backing to field-based staff who take actions, and risks, in the name of the organisation they work for, is an art rather than a science. This deserves conscious and regular review at a senior level. Once again, staff surveys and 360° appraisals could feed into this. Responsible risk-taking also means clarifying respective responsibilities at different levels, especially in terms of the responsibility of field-based managers, and honouring and supporting staff in carrying out their responsibilities.
- (6) Humanitarian aid organisations and their senior management teams must re-assess their **incentive systems** in terms of what is being valued. In terms of meeting the needs of the affected population, what is the appropriate balance between incentivising compliance (for example, with the agency's procedures and financial targets), and incentivising leadership (such as perceptive political analysis, building high-quality relationships with key actors, developing innovative operational responses)? The former may be easier to measure in numeric terms, but the latter must be given the recognition it deserves if the organisation wishes to foster leadership.
- (7) In terms of **recruitment** of field-based managers, much greater emphasis must be given to relational and communication skills (including political skills), as well as to technical competence. This may require a rethinking of recruitment processes to obtain wider feedback from former colleagues, team members and line managers on such leadership qualities than is normally the case.
- (8) In terms of **identifying leaders for particular humanitarian crises**, a context-specific analysis of leadership needs is essential in order to identify the appropriate balance of skills required. The needs cannot be generalised by dividing crisis according to type – 'rapid-onset', 'conflict', 'slow-onset' etc. Key qualities that indicate versatile leadership include sensitivity to context and being open to learning.

For leadership development programmes

- (9) Leadership development should be **part of career development** and start early rather than be a 'bolt-on' for more senior staff. This means fostering and developing leadership qualities through training, mentoring and coaching. It also means encouraging a habit of reflection to develop self-awareness. Organisations can foster this by providing structured opportunities for reflection during and post-deployment. Although this is a challenge in a sector that is action-oriented, making the space for reflection will help to develop a leadership culture within organisations.
- (10) While many **leadership development programmes** rely heavily on competency frameworks, organisations are encouraged to recognise the wide range of leadership skills and qualities that are key to effective operational humanitarian leadership and to avoid a reductionist or mechanistic approach. Sometimes it may be more appropriate to put this range of skills together in a team rather than to expect an individual to have them all.
- (11) As this study has demonstrated, **modelling effective leadership** can be a powerful and inspiring contribution to such leadership development programmes. The value of role models and mentoring should be recognised and incorporated.
- (12) As part of their efforts to develop leadership, humanitarian aid organisations should train their senior managers in **coaching skills** in order to foster the leadership potential of their teams and of more junior staff.

The implications for individual leaders

- (13) This study provides an insight into the range and types of skills that are needed in operational humanitarian leadership, against which individuals can assess their own performance. But leadership ultimately depends upon how individuals bring themselves to this role and makes these skills their own.
- (14) Leadership strengths can also be weaknesses when pushed to an extreme and it is important for individual leaders to be alert to this. Developing leadership skills is a continuous process of reflection, learning and self-development.

Areas for further research

While this study has sought to capture the essence of operational humanitarian leadership, focusing on what was valued as 'leadership' in a range of recent humanitarian crises, a number of issues emerged that deserve further investigation. Five are highlighted here:

- (15) The findings of this study point to some tentative conclusions about collective humanitarian leadership. The examples of individual leadership indicate that the individual's ability to create an environment that is conducive to collective

leadership, particularly through their relational skills, was much valued. And the examples of leadership that was collective from the outset, in which the influence of one individual was harder to identify, throw up some interesting lessons about how such collective leadership can work in practice, although each of our examples was clearly time-bound. There is a need to explore the extent to which this is a model of leadership for humanitarian operations in the future. And if so, how it can be fostered. The more formal examples of collective operational humanitarian leadership in practice, for example in UN Country Teams, would also merit further analysis.

- (16)** As described above, risk-taking emerged as fundamental to operational humanitarian leadership yet is at odds with the prevailing culture in many humanitarian organisations. This suggests that it may be a key point of leverage in transforming organisational cultures to become more conducive to leadership.

The area also deserves further investigation and research. For example, risk-taking by definition means the possibility of making mistakes. At an individual level what more can we learn about how 'successful leaders/ risk-takers' learn from their mistakes and correct them? At an organisational level, what does a risk-taking culture mean in terms of how failure is viewed and related to learning? What is an 'acceptable threshold' of making mistakes, or 'failing'? And most important of all, what needs to change so that humanitarian organisations reclaim and encourage a risk-taking culture that is appropriate to the contexts in which they are operating?

- (17)** The difficulty that this study faced in identifying examples of effective operational humanitarian leadership where women played a key role is disturbing. An analysis of the gender balance in field-based management positions is needed, supported by further investigation into possible barriers that women (nationally and internationally recruited) face in playing a leadership role in the field. This could explore in greater depth the gender determinants of leadership.
- (18)** The role of strategic leadership higher up an organisation's hierarchy, in supporting operational humanitarian leadership deserves further investigation. The study found some evidence of the power of this synergy, but not on a sufficient scale to make it possible to draw any general conclusions. Other examples should be sought so that lessons can be learned and success replicated.
- (19)** Although this study warns against some typology of leadership skills and styles for different types of humanitarian crisis, for example rapid-onset natural disasters versus protracted conflicts, there is more work to be done on situational humanitarian leadership and an individual's ability to adapt their leadership style to different contexts.

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