Leadership in action: leading effectively in humanitarian operations

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The ‘leadership void’ in humanitarian action

- Anecdotally, raised for a number of years
- Confirmed in ‘State of the System’ first report: lack of effective leadership one of the main challenges to humanitarian action
- Raised in evaluations
- Despite growing investment in leadership development programmes – do we know enough about what is valued as leadership?
Objectives of this study

1) Through examples of effective operational leadership, to identify what is valued and what appears to determine effective leadership

2) To explore how the qualities of leadership may vary in different types of crises

3) To begin to identify how the sector, and individual organisations, can promote and foster effective operational leadership
What is ‘leadership’?

Our focus: operational leadership, 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.
How did we study leadership?

- Modelling excellence – Recent case studies of effective operational humanitarian leadership

- 11 case studies (mostly response phase):
  - different types of humanitarian crises
  - 3 levels:
    - to international humanitarian response in-country
    - collective leadership – across agencies/actors
    - Leadership within an agency

- Tested 11 hypotheses about leadership
What did we find?

- How leadership has to be earned
- The qualities that were widely valued in operational leadership – 5 categories
- The significance of political skills
- The ‘weaknesses’
- What is different about humanitarian leadership

Systemically:
- what fosters leadership
- what obstructs leadership

- How leadership is learned
- The value of collective leadership
Qualities of leadership – strategic leadership skills

- **Strategic leadership skills** that relate to the bigger picture:
  - ability to understand the context
  - clear strategic vision of what the humanitarian operation is attempting to achieve – and building ownership of vision
  - focus on the affected population:
    - ‘I put myself into the shoes of the affected population… I try to see it from the lens of the survivor – what kind of assistance do they want – and thinking ahead, so it’s not just bags of rice but is it really working from their perspective of what’s needed’
Qualities of leadership – relational and communication qualities

‘Despite a tendency to focus on the results achieved by operational humanitarian leaders, it is often their relational and communication abilities that distinguish truly effective from ‘strong’ leaders’

- The ability to listen and learn from others
- Ability to speak out, to have courageous conversations
- Connecting with staff – ‘if staff feel you care for them, they are willing to work for you’
Qualities of leadership – decision-making & risk-taking skills

- Balancing the ability to make decisions rapidly, with the need to build consensus
- Often based on incomplete and unreliable information
- Willingness to be held accountable for decisions taken
- Mature & balanced approach to risk-taking, quickly learning from mistakes:
  
  “She was never afraid to take the next hurdle, to stumble where others might be more cautious”

  “If you don’t, it is all routine. You are a typical civil servant. Try things and make mistakes”
Qualities of leadership – management & organisational skills

- Putting together a strong team, leading by example & mentoring:

“If you haven’t got something you have to build a team. A good leader recognises where his or her gaps are and calls on others to fill those gaps. No one person can be a humanitarian leader”

- Being a good manager as well as a good leader
Qualities of leadership – personal qualities

- Principles & integrity
- Self-awareness & self-confidence
- Humility:
  “you need to lose your ego a bit – it’s not about you, you have to put yourself in other people’s shoes, with respect, and build trust”
- Tenacity & determination
- Energy & enthusiasm
Fundamental importance of political skills

Key to negotiating and opening up humanitarian access

- Understanding of the crisis through a political lens
- Political stakeholder analysis – rapid, intuitive, and constantly updated
- Relational and networking skills, across actors
- Strong diplomatic, negotiating and facilitating skills

‘This is not about being a politician, but about being a humanitarian professional with political acumen’
In summary...

- An unusually broad range of qualities & traits
- ‘Relational leadership’ is key
- Leadership is an art, based as much on judgement and intuition as on pre-defined skills
- Experience is key to developing and applying that judgement
What do we need to watch out for?

- When strengths become weaknesses, e.g., pushing colleagues too hard

- The personal cost of humanitarian leadership:
  - long hours and lack of work-life balance
  - risk of burn-out
  - ‘unhealthy’ role model for staff
So what is different about ‘humanitarian leadership’?

- Edge to operational humanitarian leadership - extreme context, working with people in distress
- Values-based

How it varies between crises:
- Few distinctions that can be generalised, although some sequencing of task-oriented vs people-oriented
- But the context should determine the leadership style

‘If you give context its due respect, you will be more effective as a leader; if you seek to fit the context into your vision, a lot of time and energy will be wasted’ (Binney et al, 2005)
What fosters leadership?

- Space to lead
- Rewarding risk-taking
  N.B. case study leaders mostly took risks in spite of their organisations, not because of them
- Structures can strengthen a leader’s role
What obstructs leadership?

- Growing tendency towards risk-aversion, related to:
  - drive for accountability and compliance
  - constraints of bureaucracy

- Incentive systems that reward managerialism rather than leadership:
  ‘The incentive for people to make bold decisions and to step out of the mould is lacking. If you irritate a government or a major agency, and if you don’t have a lot of experience, then you are putting your whole career on the line’

- Selection and recruitment processes

- Obstacles to national staff becoming leaders
Collective leadership – the way forward?

Many of our case studies of individuals were successful because of the high-performing teams they built around them.

3 case studies of collective leadership: TCG (Myanmar); IFRC FACT (Haiti); NGO Joint Initiative (Zimbabwe):

- importance of establishing ground rules & operating procedures at the outset
- a finite period of cross-organisational leadership?
How can we foster operational humanitarian leadership in the future?

International humanitarian aid sector

- Challenge and change the risk averse culture that has taken root
- Promote model of ‘leader as host’ rather than the ‘heroic leader’
- Urgent need to invest more in national leadership
How can we foster operational humanitarian leadership in the future?

Humanitarian aid organisations

- Give field managers space to lead
- Review the organisation’s appetite for risk
- Do incentive systems reward, and recruitment processes seek out, key leadership qualities?
How can we foster operational humanitarian leadership in the future?

**Leadership development programmes**

- Leadership development as part of career development, not just a ‘bolt on’ for senior staff
- Recognise wide range of skills & qualities and beware of overly reductionist approaches
- The value of role models and mentoring, of support through coaching