**Assignment 10: Leadership in humanitarian operations**

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Introduction

The operational humanitarian leadership provides a clear vision and objectives for the humanitarian response; building a consensus that brings aid workers together around that vision and objectives; and finding ways of collectively realizing the vision for the benefit of the affected population, often in challenging and hostile environments. This definition emphasizes some of the most commonly encountered definitional elements of leadership: the identification of a desired end state that is very different from the current state; the creation of a plan to reach this end state; the creation of support for this plan; and the (arguably more ‘managerial’) responsibility for implementing the plan.

The tensions between individual agency and collective action are most evident in the large number of inter-agency structures that are increasingly part of the humanitarian landscape. Over the last decade, there have been a series of attempts to address the challenge of collective action in humanitarian operations. Many of these initiatives have led to the creation of inter-agency structures. The most obvious examples of these structures are: the Humanitarian Country Teams and the Cluster system, but there are many others operating at country or operational level. This review considered, among others reviews and evaluations of the Malawi NGO consortium (Goyder and James, 2002). The South Sudan NGO Forum (Currion, 2010), an NGO cash consortium in Southern Somalia (Majid, Hussein, and Shuria, 2007) and a District Steering Group in Kenya (Levine et al., 2011), as well as mechanisms for coordinating different members of the same organizational ‘family’ (Donnell and Kakande, 2007; Humanitarian Futures, 2012; Simpson et al., 2011).

Hence, the role of the Humanitarian Country Team includes ‘*setting common objectives and priorities, developing strategic plans, and providing guidance to cluster lead agencies*’. Several observers have noted that the role of the clusters appears to ‘go beyond mere coordination’ to encompass ‘the organization of a common response’ (Steets et al., 2010: 24), ‘forming a common vision, and translating this into concrete activities’ (Bourgeois et al., 2007: 11) and ‘jointly moving towards common objectives’ (Cosgrave et al., 2007: 3 ).

In this presentation, we are going to talk about humanitarian, neo-humanitarian and decolonization terms; the leadership lessons can we learn from international responses towards an emergency like the 2004 Tsunami; difference between structured approach and shared leadership approach; the bottleneck of exceptional individual approach in humanitarian leadership vs overcome approach; and the leadership definition, and contract leadership in and management.

# Definition of the following terms:

## Humanitarian

The Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Humanitarian Reform process, building on the findings of the 2005 Humanitarian Response Review, identified ‘effective leadership and coordination in humanitarian emergencies’ (IASC, 2007) as one of four priorities for action. In 2010, aid workers interviewed for ALNAP’s pilot edition of the State of the Humanitarian System report identified poor leadership and coordination as the single most important constraint to effective operations (ALNAP, 2010).

## Neo – humanitarian

In 2012, the authors of the State of the System 2012 see little improvement, and conclude that ‘interviews and evaluations focused on the last three years have consistently continued to point to gaps and failures in leadership’(ALNAP, 2012a). Meanwhile, several aid donors have identified the need for improvements in humanitarian leadership as a strategic priority (AusAID, 2011; DFID, 2011).

## Decolonization

The problem appears to be widespread. While much attention has focused on inter-organizational leadership, and particularly on poor leadership at the level of the Humanitarian Coordinators. And the Cluster Coordinators (*De Silva et al., 2006; Featherstone, 2012; Grunewald et al., 2010; Polastro et al., 2011; Steets et al., 2010; Ashdown and Mountain, 2011*), evaluations also suggest that leadership challenges exist within individual organisations (Bhattacharjee and Lossio, 2011; Bhattacharjee et al., 2011; Thammannagoda and Thileepan, 2009). In the words of one senior aid worker: ‘we have issues around leadership everywhere’ (Webster and Walker, 2009: 28)

Many humanitarian organizations are responding to these challenges ( *Featherstone, 2012; IASC, 2012c*). However, to date there has been only limited research to support the humanitarian system’s efforts to comprehensively improve standards of operational leadership. That research which has been conducted has tended to focus primarily on one aspect of leadership: the skills and abilities required of the humanitarian leader (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011; CBHA, 2011; Hochschild, 2010; IASC, 2009).

# What major leadership lessons can we learn from international response towards an emergency like the 2004 Tsunami?

If humanitarian leadership needs to be effective in the specific context of humanitarian emergencies themselves, it also needs to be adapted to the realities of the international humanitarian ‘system’. This system is highly atomized. It is composed of: governments; the United Nations; international non-governmental organisations (NGOs); the Red Cross/Crescent movement; and national civil society actors. It articulates with numerous additional actors, including diaspora organisations, the military and the private sector. As a result, a very large number of organisations will typically be involved in any response. These organisations will have varying mandates, priorities and philosophies, and will often be in competition for funds and media attention. So it is not surprising that intense competition and disagreement are common elements of humanitarian responses. However, despite these differences, international humanitarian organizations will in most cases need to work collaboratively with a wide variety of actors: national authorities (who may provide strategic leadership of the response, delegating tactical or purely operational roles to international organizations). Third-party governments (in the guise of donors, or, particularly for the UN, as important elements of the agencies’ governance structures) and with one another.

# Differentiate between these two Leadership models discussed in the module: Structured approach and Shared Leadership approach

The structured approach is perhaps most common in national fire and civil defense services (the Incident Command System, or ICS, used in the USA, Australia, Ethiopia and elsewhere, is a good example of the approach). However, in the literature review, elements of the approach were also found in other high-pressure, time-critical environments, notably hospital emergency departments (Klein et al., 2006) and film sets (Bechky, 2006). Currently, some international humanitarian organizations are considering variants of the ICS (Robinsonand Joyce, 2012) for implementation within their own systems; others are incorporating elements of a more structured approach to operational leadership, particularly around role clarification (IASC, 2009; Lake, 2011). Many groups ‘in the field’ appear to have spontaneously adopted parts of a structured leadership approach.

The ‘shared-leadership’ approach to establishing vision and strategy, and ensuring that the group act collaboratively. The argument for shared leadership is based on the ideas that a group can handle the workload better than an individual, and that multiple perspectives create a more rounded vision, and better strategies and plans, than an individual working alone. In terms of ensuring group action, expanded ownership increases the commitment to put plans into effect. There are several ways in which leadership can be shared, some of which are detailed below. Generally, shared leadership does not mean dispensing with the individual leader, and it requires a high level of skill on the part of that leader – although the skill-set is rather different from that required in the skilled individual model, being more facilitative and less directional. A shared-leadership approach would lead to increased interest in group dynamics: team structures, processes and behaviour.

The following table below explores the potential and demonstrated strengths and weaknesses of all two models in a humanitarian context:

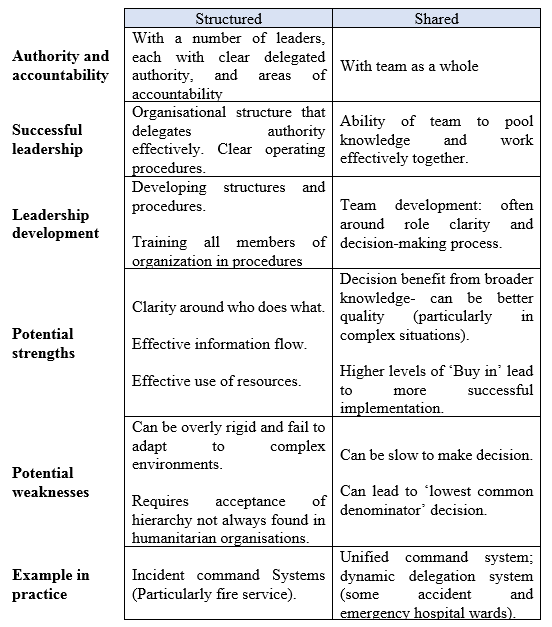


Figure : Leadership Model

# What are the bottlenecks of exceptional Individual approach in Humanitarian leadership? How can it be overcome?

The “exceptional-individual” approach, relying primarily on the personal qualities and attributes of individuals in leadership positions to ensure that leadership functions are conducted successfully. The (often tacit) assumption behind this approach is that these individuals use their skills and knowledge to form effective strategies and plans, and then exercise their powers of influence and negotiation to inspire others to collaborate in implementing these strategies. As we shall see in the next section, this appears to be the dominant model in the international humanitarian response system.

Where this approach works, it appears to work well. However, before endorsing the ‘exceptional individual’ as the best way to ensure effective humanitarian leadership, there are some considerations that should give us pause. The literature considered in this review suggests three main arguments against relying too heavily on individual skills to ensure effective humanitarian leadership:

* The difficulty of finding enough exceptional individuals
* The fact that this approach to leadership may work very well in some cultures but can be alien to others – an important consideration in a sector which is, by its nature, international
* The degree to which the approach is well adapted to decision-making in high-pressure, complex environments.

The ‘exceptional-individual’ approach underlies judgments about leadership in much of the humanitarian literature, and forms the theoretical basis of many of the actions that humanitarian organizations have taken to address perceived failures of leadership. While not, as we shall see, the only model of leadership in the humanitarian system, this appears to be the dominant model.

# Define Leadership. Compare and contract Leadership in and management.

Three possible approaches that humanitarian organizations can take to leadership. The first one, an ‘exceptional-individual’ approach, relying primarily on the personal qualities and attributes of individuals in leadership positions to ensure that leadership functions are conducted successfully. The second one is to take a ‘structured’ approach, creating clear hierarchies and formalized procedures, so that the leader bases strategies very largely on standardized. The third leadership option, is to open the strategic and planning function up to a group, and use a ‘shared-leadership’ approach to establishing vision and strategy, and ensuring that the group act collaboratively.

The third approach that we have considered here is the shared-leadership model, where, in various forms, decisions are made jointly, and accountability is held jointly by a group of people. Shared-leadership approaches have been demonstrably successful in humanitarian operations and in other contexts. However, the benefits of shared leadership are hard to achieve. To embed shared leadership successfully, agencies would need to: make their commitment to shared leadership clear and explicit; clarify criteria for membership of the leadership group; establish decision-making procedures that do not rely on unanimous consent; undertake joint training and decrease turnover to increase trust within the team; and place more emphasis on the facilitative role of the leader, and less on the decision-making role. The cost of implementing these changes will not always be justified in single agencies, where leaders have some level of authority over the ‘led’. However, leaders in inter-agency bodies cannot rely on this type of hierarchical authority, and in these situations there may be a stronger case for establishing shared-leadership mechanisms.

Conclusion

Leadership as relating to efforts that guide a single set of common actions forming a single plan, and coordination as relating to efforts to ensure complementarity and prevent overlap between diverse actions and diverse plans. Leadership relates to working together, whereas coordination relates to working in parallel. In short, there are two slightly different contexts for humanitarian leaders: single-agency and inter-agency. The two contexts share many features; the requirement to make important decisions under time pressure with limited information.

Humanitarian leadership should be like, and would suggest changes in the approaches that we take to improving operational leadership and to selecting, training and ‘incentivizing’ leaders. They could lead to better leadership and better operations. The conclusions point to the danger of basing investments of time, energy and resources on untested assumptions about what leadership is, and how best to support it. For this reason, we intend to work with ALNAP members to test these conclusions through a more detailed examination of the realities of leadership practices, and particularly of group leadership practices, as they occur in ‘the field’.

# References

Netherlands, S. (2018). Leadership & Management: Leadership in Humanitarian Operations. *Module 10*.

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