Between chaos and control:
Rethinking operational leadership

Discussion starter

Leadership is a vital element in humanitarian operations. Good leadership can lead to more effective humanitarian response while poor leadership can create delays, confusion, and missed opportunities.

Both agencies and their staff in the field are well aware of this. When polled for ALNAP's 2012 State of the Humanitarian System report they singled out poor leadership as the greatest constraint to the performance of humanitarian operations. Yet despite the interest, there has not been much consideration of what 'leadership' means.

In this research, we define operational leadership as a combination of three functions: defining a vision for humanitarian response, developing a strategy to achieve this vision and implementing the strategy.

Humanitarians often assume that these three functions are performed by a single individual – the leader.

ALNAP's new research challenges this and suggests that effective leadership in humanitarian action needs:

leaders, teams and procedures.

Who's leading?

40% are **women**

32% from **global south**

The study did not find any evidence that cultural background influences views of leadership.

What makes leadership effective?

- ☑ decisions made by team
- ☑ office structure with clear roles and delegation
- ☑ simple operating procedures
- ☑ effective information management
- ☑ skills of the leader and leadership team members

Decisions made by team

- The study showed a clear link between the degree of support that the formal leader received from the team and the effectiveness of leadership in an office.

- The most important element of support was in decision-making. Effective leadership teams either made decisions jointly or provided significant input to decision-making.

- In all cases the formal leader had the 'final say' in any office-wide decision for which he/she was accountable. In practice, however, the decision of the leader was often the same as the leadership team's one, and the boundary between consultation and consensus was often blurred.

Office structure with clear roles and delegation

- Good structures divide authority vertically into levels of decision-making. They split tasks horizontally into specialised units, and they ensure that there is adequate communication among the various levels and teams.

- When dividing authority, effective offices tend to delegate as much authority to those responsible for implementing a decision as possible.

- In all cases, structure should be flexible and should be reviewed as the situation develops. Staff should be prepared for changes in levels of authority and personal responsibilities.

INDIVIDUAL DECISION MAKING

accountability and decision making shift from the individual to the team....

SHARED DECISION MAKING

How effective is leadership?

AVERAGE RESULTS | 'HOW EFFECTIVE ARE YOUR ORGANISATION'S HUMANITARIAN OPERATIONS IN THE COUNTRY?'

1 'not at all effective' — 4.3 average — 6 'fully effective'

AVERAGE RESULTS | 'HOW EFFECTIVE IS YOUR ORGANISATION IN CREATING A COMMON VISION... STRATEGY AND PRIORITISING ACTIONS IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE THIS VISION?'

1 'not at all effective' — 4.2 average — 6 'fully effective'

SImple operating procedures

- Standard operating procedures can serve as 'substitutes for leadership'. They can make certain decisions routine and free up time for leaders to concentrate on other things, while ensuring that staff can work autonomously and according to best practice.

- For standard operating procedures to work they need to be simple and to be generated or approved at the country level.

- It is also important that an organisation review progress during a response to ensure that standard operating procedures remain relevant as the context changes.

Skills of leader and team members

- Leadership teams appear to be more effective when their members have a range of technical skills and are experienced in emergency response.

- It is also important that they include people with a good knowledge of the local context (often nationally recruited managers).

- They are also more effective where the membership, functions and roles of the team are clear.

- The amount of time that members of a leadership team have spent working together does not appear to influence the degree to which leadership is effective.

Effective information management

- Humanitarian agencies often focus on information collection and place less emphasis on the scoping (ensuring that information collected fits real decision needs), storage and dissemination/distribution of information.

- Agencies on the ground should regularly identify the key decisions they face and ensure that they are receiving information that informs these decisions.

- They should also ensure that relevant information is shared with decision-makers and should identify who holds the 'big picture' of the response.

Recommendations

In any emergency response agencies should consider and explicitly clarify the respective role and level of accountability of:

- the organisation
- the country director/representative
- the country leadership team

In many cases this will mean increasing the role and accountability of the organisation and the team.

Role

- In **country offices** leadership teams should regularly identify the role that the organisation can best play in emergency responses, based on the global orientation of the organisation and local capacities and needs.

Information

Country offices and clusters should:

- identify minimum information sets required for key decisions using global guidance as a starting point, determine where and how this information can be accessed, and who will be responsible for its collection and analysis (paying particular attention to the keeper of the 'big picture')
- establish monitoring systems to collect information on the emergency as it unfolds to update this 'big picture'
- consider how best to use information technology to store, disseminate and present information

Decisions

- **Agencies** should clarify their attitude and expectations on decision-making steps at the country level.

Country offices should:

- clarify which types of decisions are 'office wide', and need to be taken 'at the top'
- clarify the decision-making process and the respective roles of the formal leader and the senior staff in this process

Flexible operating principles

- **Country offices, clusters and humanitarian country teams** should consider reviewing previous successful/unsuccessful responses to establish 'simples rules' .

Training and staff development

- ensure that any training or development programmes for individual leaders include guidance on organisational structures and delegation, decision-making approaches, information collection and management, and 'simple rules' procedures
- focus attention on training both **leadership teams and individual leaders**. Simulations and exercises may be particularly effective in developing group leadership capacity
- ensure that **leadership teams and individual leaders** support the development of nationally recruited staff to ensure that these individuals can achieve senior positions and participate in leadership teams at the country level

Structure

- **Country offices** should ensure that the structure of the office allocates human resources according to operational requirements and provides each unit with clear responsibilities and regularly review this structure.

Delegation

- **Agency**-level generic templates should clearly identify the levels of delegated decision-making authority and resources. In most cases authority should be delegated as close to the site of implementation as possible.

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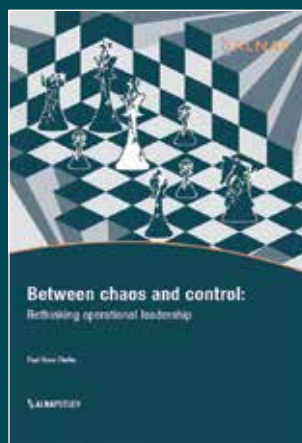
The study 'Between chaos and control' and related material are available online at

www.alnap.org/leadership