

Between chaos and control:

Rethinking operational leadership

Paul Knox Clarke

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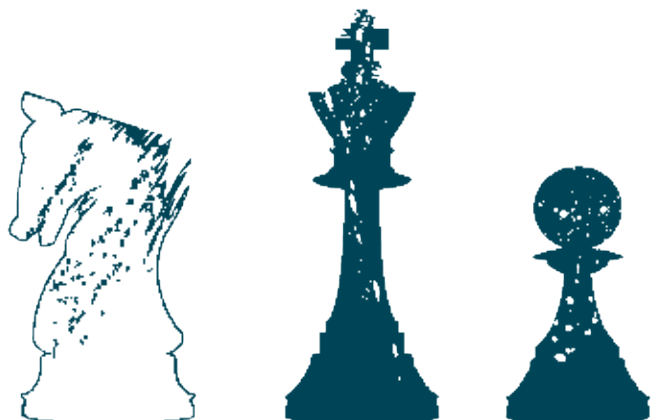
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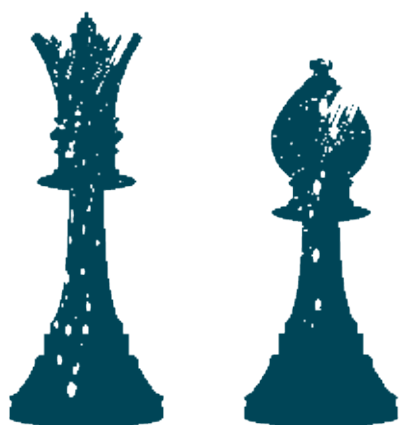
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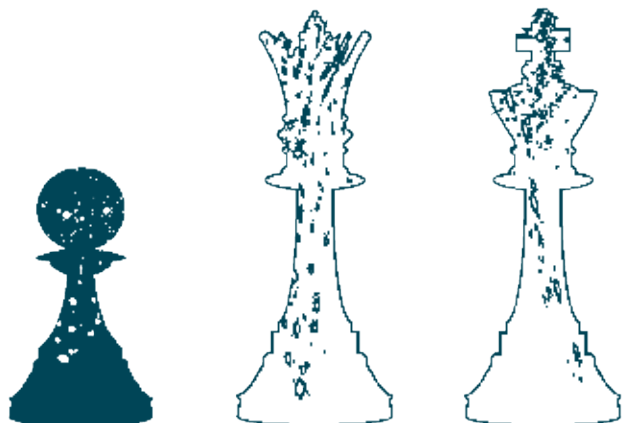


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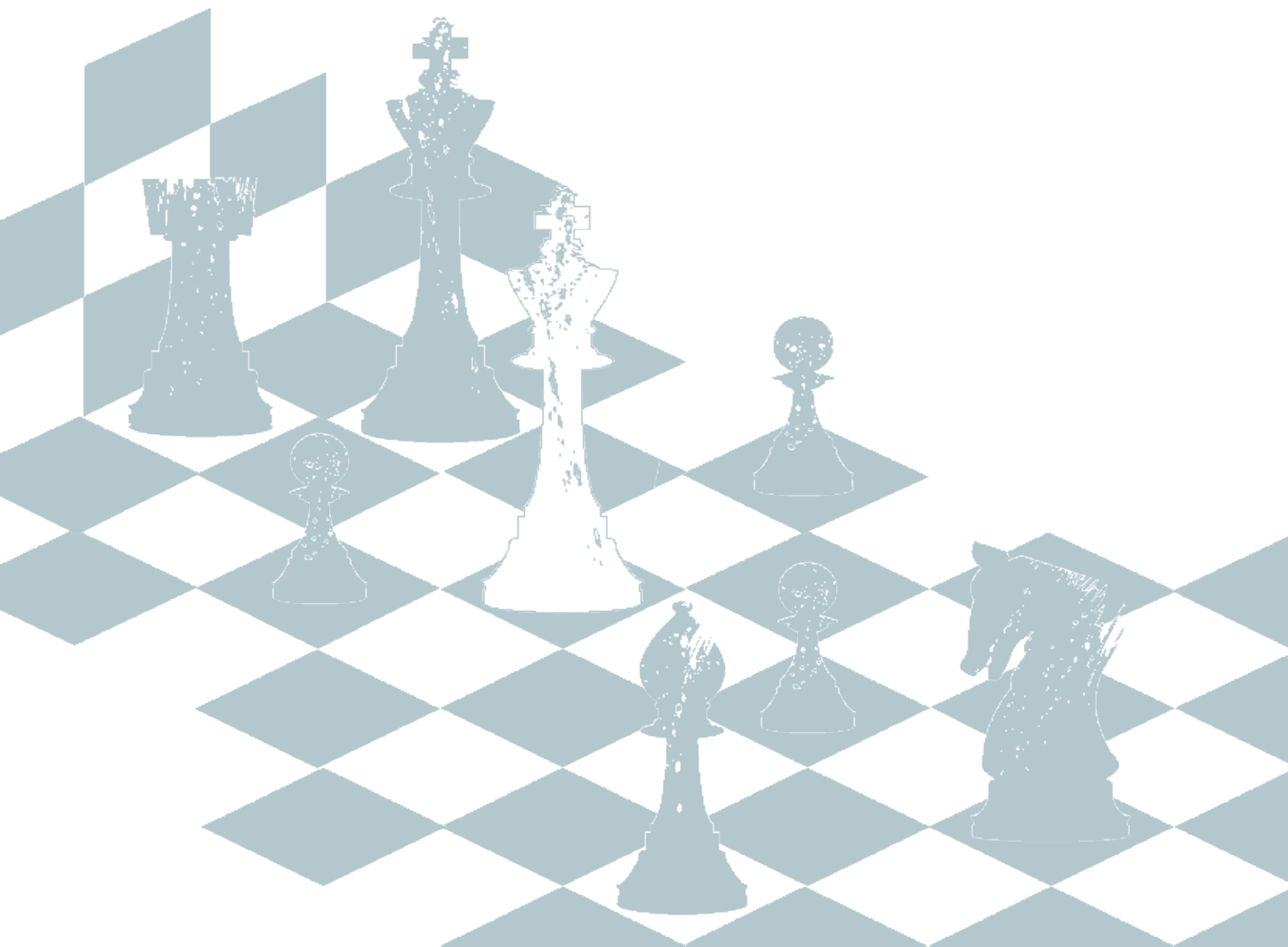


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Abbreviations and acronyms¹

ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action
CARE	Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere
CBHA	Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies
CCRM	Center for Catastrophic Risk Management
CoAR	Coordination of Afghan Relief
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
HQ	Headquarters
HFP	Humanitarian Futures Programme
IASC	Inter Agency Standing Committee
ICS	Incident command system
ISO	International Organisation for Standardisation
NATF	Needs Assessment Task Force
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PHAP	Professionals in Humanitarian Assistance Programme
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WFP	World Food Programme



1. Background and introduction

In recent years the topic of operational leadership has been the subject of increased attention in the humanitarian sector. Practitioners and policy-makers have regularly expressed concern over the quality of operational leadership and the effects that this has on humanitarian response. ALNAP's 2012 edition of *The state of the humanitarian system*, the most complete overview of humanitarian activity available, suggests that 'the responses in Haiti and Pakistan were seen to be "defined by poor leadership" and the evaluations frequently cite failures of leadership in early stages of the responses' (ALNAP, 2012: 64). It also notes that 'where leadership has been effective, such as in South Sudan, it is striking the impact this has had on many aspects of the humanitarian operation' (ibid.). Obviously, leadership matters. In light of this, many donors have focused attention and resources on improving operational leadership (e.g. see Ashdown and Mountain, 2011; Ausaid, 2011; DFID, 2011; IASC, 2012a; b).

In support of these initiatives and of related work in the areas of leadership and organisational development being conducted by the Network's membership, since 2010 ALNAP has engaged in a process of research and discussion designed to identify the factors that lead to effective operational leadership in humanitarian organisations and make recommendations that will allow such organisations to improve their operational leadership (see Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011; Knox Clarke, 2013). This report, which is part of this work, addresses leadership in humanitarian agencies (as opposed to the leadership of inter-organisational bodies, such as clusters, humanitarian coordination teams and NGO fora). It makes concrete recommendations on the basis of a literature review, a questionnaire and interviews with operational leaders.

In making recommendations aimed at improving leadership, the first challenge is to define what the term actually means. Despite the attention that the subject has received, the meaning of 'leadership' is seldom made explicit in policy documents, evaluations and other humanitarian literature.

For the purposes of this enquiry we have followed the definition used in previous ALNAP research: operational humanitarian leadership is the function of *providing a clear vision and objectives for the humanitarian response; building a consensus² that brings aid workers together around that vision and objectives; and finding ways of collectively realising the vision for the benefit of the affected population, often in challenging and hostile environments.*



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One notable feature of humanitarian thinking around leadership has been an assumption that the three functions of leadership – the creation of a vision, the design of a strategy and the implementation of this strategy – will be conducted by a single individual.

”

This definition emphasises three things: (1) the identification of a desired end state that is different from the current state (vision); (2) the creation of a plan to reach this end state (strategy and planning); and (3) the successful implementation of the plan.

One notable feature of humanitarian thinking around leadership (at least at the policy level) has been an assumption that these three functions of leadership – the creation of a vision, the design of a strategy and the implementation of this strategy – will be conducted by a single individual, i.e. the leader. This leader is generally held to be accountable for the results of these actions and responsible for carrying them out. He/she is expected personally to create the vision and strategy, and provide the energy and drive that ensures that implementation occurs. Policy documents make clear that it is the individual who provides ‘the necessary leadership capacity’ for a response (IASC, 2012b: 3), so effective leadership is a matter of finding ‘the right people’ to lead (Ashdown and Mountain, 2011: 200).³ By extension, improving the humanitarian sector’s capacity to create vision and strategy on the ground and to implement this strategy is very largely seen as a matter of ‘develop[ing] a cadre of capable humanitarian response leaders’ (ibid.) through selection and training.⁴ In this context the successes or failures of leadership (and, perhaps, particularly the failures) are often seen to be the responsibility of the individual leader rather than a failure of the humanitarian organisation as a whole or the system.

The abilities and experience of the individual who is assigned the formal leadership role (often a country director or country representative) are undoubtedly important contributory factors to the success or failure of the leadership function in an emergency response. However, it is instructive to compare the way leadership is understood in the international humanitarian system with the way it is seen in other ‘emergency response’ sectors.

International standards on emergency management, for example, make it clear that accountability for the success of an emergency response lies with the response organisation and is not primarily the result of the individual leader displaying the right skills (ISO, 2011). When the organisation understands itself to be accountable for the quality and success of its emergency leadership, one might expect to see less concentration on training individual leaders and more on ensuring that the structures and systems are in place to ensure clear direction, strategy and implementation.



There is a growing recognition in the humanitarian sector that this highly individualised model of leadership may not be effective in humanitarian contexts and that, as a result, leadership improvement efforts should broaden their focus from the individual to the organisation. In effect, this evolving model suggests that leadership is a function not just of the individual, but of the organisation, the team and the individual working together. Research conducted for *The state of the humanitarian system* ‘supports the notion that the problem is one of structural, not necessarily personal, leadership’ (ALNAP, 2012: 11). In an inter-agency context the concept of ‘empowered leadership’, while still strongly focusing on the individual leader, aims to provide the humanitarian coordinator with support in the form of (organisational) tools and processes to properly manage decision-making and information. It also recognises that the individual leader is working in a social context and that the other members of the group matter: the humanitarian coordinator ‘can only be effective as a leader ... if the other leaders within the Humanitarian Country Team ... are also empowered to meet their responsibilities, and if actors within the humanitarian architecture abide by their already defined commitments, roles and responsibilities’ (IASC, 2012a: 1). In (some) humanitarian agencies steps have also been taken to recognise the role of the organisation as a whole in ensuring effective leadership. UNICEF, WFP and World Vision, among others, have undertaken significant programmes aimed at improving the structural element of leadership (Robinson and Joyce, 2012; UNICEF, 2012; WFP Operations Department, 2012), particularly in larger-scale responses.

This report aims to support these and similar initiatives by providing evidence of ‘what works’ in terms of operational leadership – i.e. in terms of the formulation of vision and the development and implementation of strategy. In considering what contributes to effective operational leadership, we have explicitly considered the roles of the individual leader, the ‘leadership team’ – the senior managers around the leader – and the organisational structures and procedures. The report has been produced in three stages. In the first stage we conducted a literature review (Knox Clarke, 2013) that allowed us to identify the factors that we hypothesised would make the strongest contribution to effective leadership (these are outlined in section 6, below). In the second we used a survey to establish whether there were correlations between these factors and effective leadership. In the third stage we conducted interviews with leaders and leadership teams in the field to investigate the nature of these correlations and to provide examples of how factors contributing to effective leadership had been put in place. More information on the methods used in this research is given in Annex 1.

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There is a growing recognition in the humanitarian sector that this highly individualised model of leadership may not be effective in humanitarian contexts. Leadership improvement efforts should broaden their focus from the individual to the organisation.

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In Brief

- The topic of operational leadership is currently receiving a great deal of attention in the sector; however, there has not been much consideration of what ‘leadership’ consists of.
- 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 this strategy.
- It is commonly assumed by humanitarian policy-makers that a single individual performs these three functions the leader.
- ALNAP’s previous work on this topic suggests that, in fact, the functions of leadership are shared among the individual leader, the leadership team around her/him, and organisational procedures and structures that ‘substitute’ for leadership by making certain decisions automatic.
- In this research we tested the contribution of all three elements – leader, team and procedures/structures – to successful leadership.



2. Who's leading? The composition of humanitarian leadership teams at the country level

Before considering the results of the questionnaire and related interviews in more detail, we should perhaps start by asking who the humanitarian leaders are. The questionnaire on which this report is based was sent to individual members of the country-level 'leadership teams' of various humanitarian organisations.⁵ It is worth considering what the information provided by respondents tells us about the leaders and leadership teams at the country level, in particular in terms of who is involved in making the key decisions related to the goals, strategy and implementation of humanitarian responses.

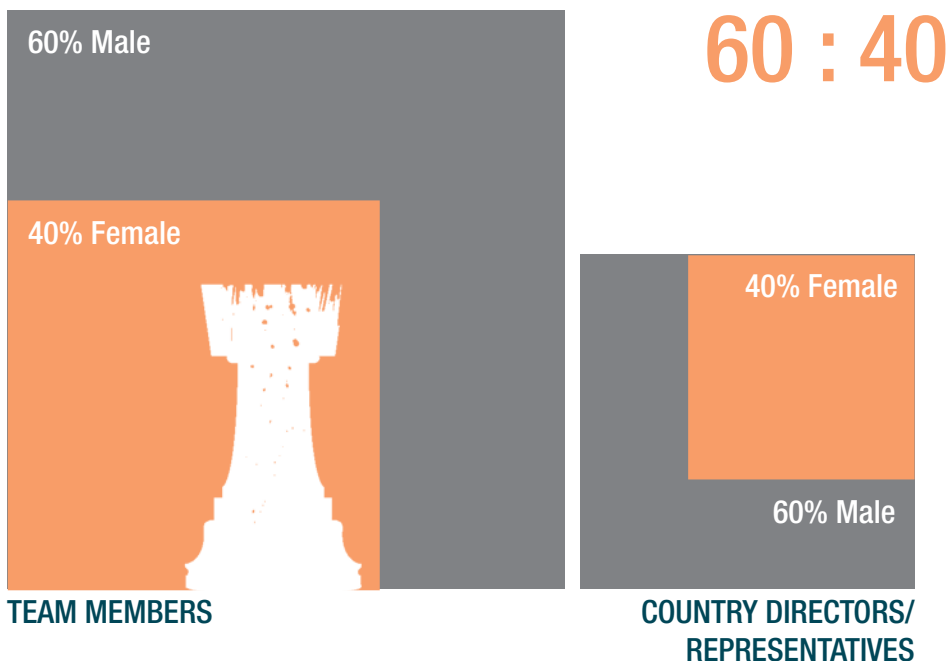
To the degree that this sample is representative of country-level humanitarian leadership as a whole, the results are perhaps surprising. While the majority (roughly 60%) of team members are men, fully 40% are women. Interestingly, the percentage of female country directors/representatives is also just over 40%, suggesting that there is virtually no 'glass ceiling' separating senior management from the top leadership positions at the country level. A 60:40 ratio does not, of course, signal gender parity or that agencies should abandon attempts to move towards gender parity. However, it does suggest that, overall, the situation with

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The situation with regard to gender and leadership in humanitarian responses may be better than it has appeared in previous research.

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FIGURE 1. GENDER DISTRIBUTION IN HUMANITARIAN TEAMS AND SENIOR MANAGEMENT



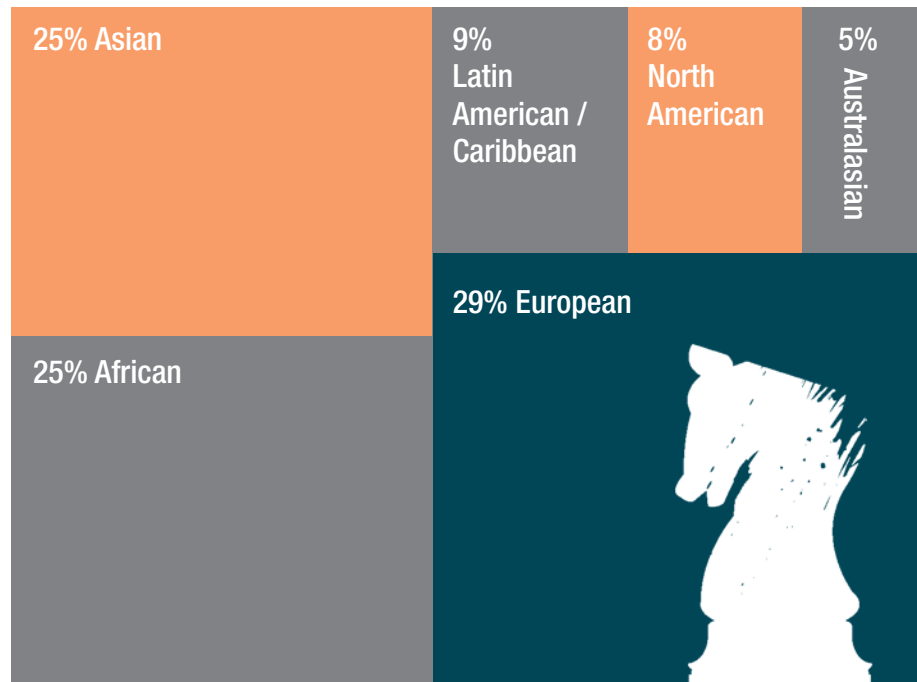


FIGURE 2. DEMOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION IN HUMANITARIAN SENIOR MANAGEMENT

regard to gender and leadership in humanitarian responses may be better than it has appeared in previous research (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011; Schneider and Kim, 2008).

With respect to nationality, the composition of leadership teams was 29% European, 25% Asian, 25% African, 9% Latin American/Caribbean, 8% North American and 5% Australasian.⁶ The nationality of country directors/representatives showed a stronger European bias: 46% were European; 18% African; 11% North American; and 7% each from Asia, Australasia and Latin America/the Caribbean. These figures may not be representative of the sector as a whole: participant organisations were not chosen with respect to their country of origin, and six of the 13 participating agencies were NGOs or Red Cross societies headquartered in Europe. Nevertheless, the findings among this set of organisations are equivocal. On the one hand, management teams, while still disproportionately white, are composed of a majority of staff who are nationally recruited or who are ‘international’ staff from outside Europe, North America and Australasia. On the other hand, these staff do not seem to be progressing seamlessly to country director positions.

In Brief

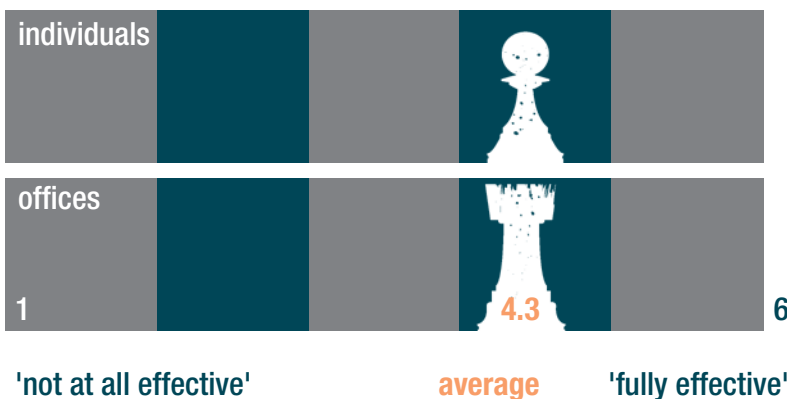
- Humanitarian leadership teams may be more gender balanced and culturally diverse than has been previously assumed.
- At the level of the individual leader, women were fairly well represented in the sample (although there was not a 50:50 ration of women to men). In terms of cultural background, a disproportionate number of formal leaders appeared to be European.



3. How effective is leadership – and does it make a difference to responses?

ALNAP’s research into leadership grew out of a series of related ideas that, as we have shown above, are widely held by both policy-makers and practitioners in the humanitarian sphere. The first such idea is that, generally speaking, humanitarian responses are inadequate: in its most extreme iteration they are seen as the products of a ‘broken system’. The second is that operational leadership in these responses is generally poor or ineffective. The third is that these two elements are related: the quality of leadership has a direct impact on the quality of emergency responses – i.e. poor leadership leads to poor responses. Before considering what makes leadership effective, we wanted to test the following questions: are responses ineffective, is operational leadership somehow ‘failing’, and does leadership have a significant effect on the quality of responses?

FIGURE 3. AVERAGE RESULTS | 'HOW EFFECTIVE ARE YOUR ORGANISATION'S HUMANITARIAN OPERATIONS IN THE COUNTRY?'



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The people responsible for designing and implementing humanitarian responses in these country offices think that the responses are working fairly well.

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When questionnaire respondents were asked, ‘overall, how effective are your organisation’s humanitarian operations in the country?’, the average (mean) individual response was 4.3/6 (where 1 represents ‘not at all effective’ and 6 represents ‘fully effective’). Aggregating these results by office, there was a significant range of responses: the lowest average for a single office was 3/6 and the highest 5/6, with a mean response for all offices of 4.3.⁷ A mean score of 4.3/6 does not immediately suggest that humanitarian responses are broadly ineffective. This is an interesting correlative to frequent discussions about poor responses and ‘broken’ response systems. Admittedly, the people affected by humanitarian crises may well think that responses are less effective than did the agencies’ leadership teams.⁸ But it is important to bear in mind that, by and large, the people responsible for designing and implementing humanitarian responses in these country offices think that the responses are working fairly well – although there were some differences from one office to another.

If country offices are more positive about humanitarian response than humanitarian policy-makers, this may also be related to levels of expectation about what humanitarianism (and, by extension, humanitarian leadership) can reasonably achieve in the varied and complex situations in which humanitarians work. Several researchers have pointed out that critiques of humanitarian aid can often be situated in an idealised world ‘where disasters incur no victims’ (Neuman and Brauman, 2014: 2). There can be a tendency to ‘demand perfection of global response’ and to believe that this global response goes beyond simple response activities to the seamless provision of ‘global welfare in war and disaster’ (Slim, 2006: 14). It is possible that those ‘at the sharp end’ of humanitarian responses are more acutely aware that such responses ‘by their nature, [are] not pretty, and no response structure ... yet invented will make them so’ (Leonard and Snider, 2010: 11). Their expectations are lower, both in terms of the scope of what humanitarian aid can achieve in any given situation and the degree to which it can be

FIGURE 4. AVERAGE RESULTS | 'HOW EFFECTIVE IS YOUR OFFICE IN CREATING A COMMON VISION... STRATEGY AND PRIORITISING ACTIONS IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE THIS VISION?'



FIGURE 5. AVERAGE RESULTS | 'HOW EFFECTIVE IS THE INDIVIDUAL WITH OVERALL RESPONSIBILITY FOR HUMANITARIAN OPERATIONS IN THIS OFFICE?'



effective within this scope. As a result of lower (and perhaps more realistic) expectations, their responses may be more positive. This, however, remains conjecture, as neither the questionnaire nor the interviews concentrated on this question.

Nor did respondents share the predominantly negative opinion of leadership that is found in much of the literature. The average (mean) score for questions about the effectiveness of leadership (in terms of creating a vision, developing strategy and implementing operations) was 4.2/6,⁹

while – again on average – respondents rated the leadership skills of the individual with overall responsibility for humanitarian operations (the country director or representative) as 4.4/6.¹⁰ While these results suggest that there is room for improvement, they are still fairly high and worth considering in discussions on the degree to which the humanitarian system regularly demonstrates poor operational leadership.

In designing the study the third assumption that we set out to test was that 'leadership', as we have defined it above, does actually make a difference to the effectiveness of humanitarian operations. To test the relationship between leadership and humanitarian effectiveness, we compared responses to the question about the overall effectiveness of humanitarian operations with responses to questions about the quality of leadership in the office. The results of this comparison showed a strong and statistically significant correlation between effective leadership and an effective response.¹¹ We did not explore the nature of this correlation further and so cannot say that effective leadership *leads to* effective response. But we can say that in situations where there is effective leadership, there is likely to be an effective response – and vice versa.



In Brief

- The respondents to the questionnaire (leaders and members of leadership teams at country level) appeared to be fairly positive about the quality of leadership in their offices.
- They were also fairly positive about the effectiveness of their organisations' humanitarian operations in the country in question.
- The questionnaire responses showed a strong and statistically significant relationship between effective leadership and effective response.

4. What makes leadership effective? Some hypotheses

What, then, are the factors that create effective leadership? What does it take to ensure that in the midst of an emergency a country office is able to create a vision for its response, establish a workable plan to achieve this vision and implement this plan effectively? On the basis of the literature review (Knox Clarke, 2013) we developed a series of hypotheses that outlined the factors that we expected would lead to effective operational leadership in country offices:

1. Ideas of operational leadership in the humanitarian sector are culturally constructed. As a result, the idea of what constitutes and what contributes to 'good' operational leadership will differ from one person to another, but individuals from similar cultural backgrounds will have similar views of what constitutes 'good leadership'.
2. Irrespective of cultural and personal assumptions, the process of operational leadership is more effective where:
 - decision-making and accountability do not rest exclusively with one individual, but are dispersed throughout a team

- the decision-making authority, accountability, and resources controlled by each individual and group involved in the operation, together with their relative responsibilities, are clear and agreed
 - the organisation has flexible operating principles for working in commonly encountered operational situations
 - the organisation has and uses clear procedures for determining the information set required in decision-making, and for collecting, analysing and disseminating this information to existing and incoming team members.
3. Each of the factors listed above is as important to an effective leadership process as the skills and abilities of the individual ‘leader’.

5. Leadership and culture: to what degree are perceptions of leadership influenced by culture, gender or organisational affiliation?

In considering the first hypothesis we were particularly interested in looking at the degree to which respondents associated the idea of ‘leadership’ with a single, strong ‘leader’ figure. This was because the literature review had suggested that this heroic, individualised model of leadership was culturally specific, and also that the association might be particularly strong among men and less so among women.

To test the hypotheses we initially asked survey participants to choose one of three statements about ‘good leadership’ that they most agreed with.¹² These statements represented the three different conceptual ‘models’ of leadership identified in the literature review: (1) the ‘exceptional individual’ approach, where effective leadership relies on the skills of an individual leader; (2) the ‘shared’ leadership approach, where leadership functions are distributed throughout a team and so effectiveness is a function of the combined skills of the team; and (3) the ‘structured’ approach, which to a large degree substitutes individual leadership skills and decision-making with organisational procedures.

The majority of participants who responded to this question (59%) agreed that ‘leadership works best where decisions are made by a team, who work together to implement these decisions’. Around a third of respondents



Few humanitarian professionals ‘in the field’ see effective operational leadership as being exercised by a single ‘leader’ and being dependent on her/his ‘leadership skills’ for success.



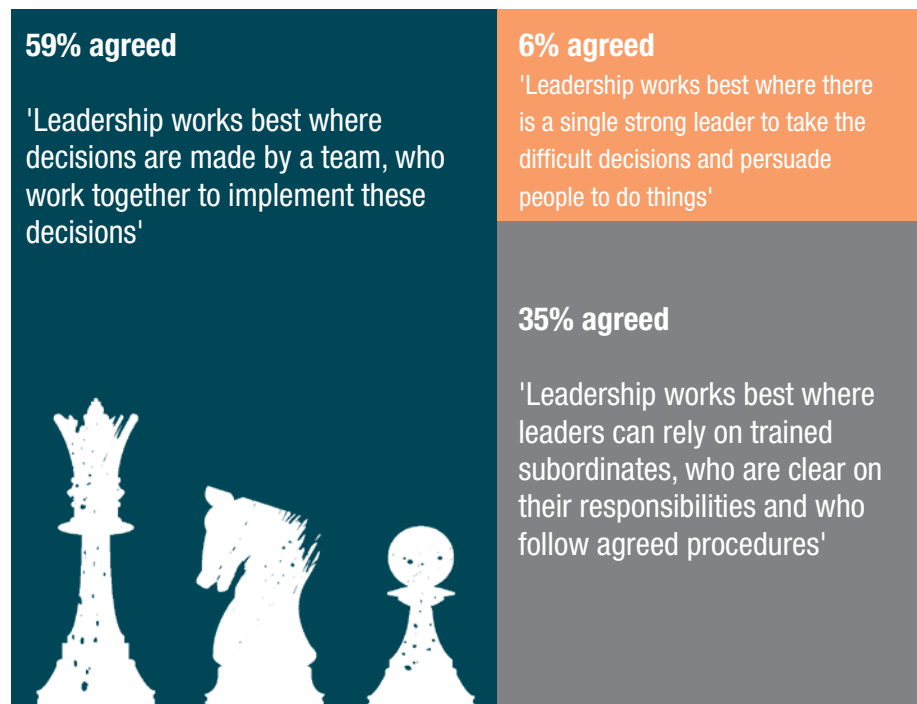


FIGURE 6. AVERAGE RESULTS | 'WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS ABOUT LEADERSHIP DO YOU MOST AGREE WITH?'

(35%) agreed that 'leadership works best where leaders can rely on trained subordinates, who are clear on their responsibilities and who follow agreed procedures', while only a small minority (6%) agreed that 'leadership works best where there is a single strong leader to take the difficult decisions and persuade people to do things'.

Participants were also asked to rank seven factors in order of their relative importance that contribute to successful leadership outcomes. One of these seven factors was 'the skills of the individual leader' (others referred to factors related to the leadership team and to structures and procedures). Again, a small minority (10%) of respondents ranked individual leadership skills as the most important factor in establishing effective operational leadership.

Both sets of responses were interesting, because while they show that there was diversity in the respondent group, they also appear to show that few humanitarian professionals 'in the field' see effective operational leadership as being exercised by a single 'leader' and being dependent on her/his 'leadership skills' for success. In this, the experience of field staff seems to be in opposition to the assumptions made in much of the humanitarian literature coming from many agencies, which, as we have seen above, often

seems to see the skills and abilities of the formal leader (the country director or representative) as the key element in developing an effective vision and strategy, and in implementing this strategy effectively.

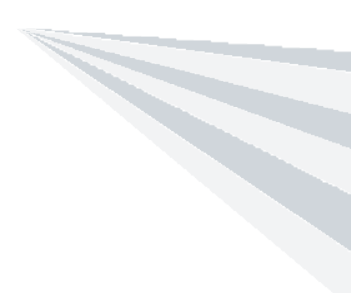
The literature review suggested that individuals' understanding of what 'leadership' means and their expectations of what would contribute to successful leadership might be largely determined by their cultural background and gender (Acker, 1990; Bolden and Kirk, 2005; Collinson and Hearn, 1996; Fletcher, 2003; House et al., 2004; Jepson, 2011; Prince, 2005; Tayeb, 2001). Specifically, we hypothesised that 'Anglo-Saxons'¹³ and men would be more likely than average to equate the idea of leadership with a single individual and less likely to think of leadership as a team or group activity. However, the results of the questionnaire did not provide significant support for this hypothesis. Men were no more likely to agree that leadership worked best 'when placed in the hands of a single strong individual' than were women; similarly, Anglo-Saxons were no more likely to agree with this than any other regional/cultural group. When it came to ranking the seven factors that contributed to leadership effectiveness, there was no significant difference between the responses of men and women, and only very limited difference among regional groups: while Anglo-Saxons did rate individual leadership skills as more important than did other groups, the correlation was only of borderline significance.¹⁴

Interviewees also generally rejected the idea that a person's expectations around leadership might be strongly influenced by their national culture. One member of a multicultural leadership team explained: 'there's the younger generation now: they come from somewhere but they're really global citizens and the culture and cultural influences get a bit diluted and it's more about these other global influences.' Several interviewees felt that organisational culture was much more important in determining attitudes to leadership than national culture, although when the results of the survey were disaggregated along agency lines they did not support this; i.e. there was no discernible pattern that suggested respondents from the same agency would rank the factors contributing to successful leadership in the same way. In fact, across the questionnaire as a whole the only responses that did seem to differ by agency were those related to the effectiveness of leadership (respondents from some agencies consistently gave more positive responses around leaders' ability to create a vision, design a strategy and implement operations) and the degree of trust among managers.¹⁵

Overall, when asked to rank in order of importance the factors that

“ Interviewees also generally rejected the idea that a person's expectations around leadership might be strongly influenced by their national culture.

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contributed to effective leadership, respondents answered in a highly individual way. There was no discernible correlation between the way people answered and their gender, organisational affiliation or – with one borderline exception – regional background. Nor were there any other discernible patterns across the responses; i.e. there was no general agreement about the relative importance of the various factors. The results, then, do not support the original hypothesis; i.e. they do not provide any evidence that individuals with similar cultural backgrounds will hold similar models of ‘good leadership’. At the same time (and still with regard to the original hypothesis), we can say that responses differed from one person to another and were highly individual.

In fact, the exercise of asking people to consciously rank the factors that contribute to effective leadership failed to throw up any clear or compelling argument as to what constitutes or contributes to good leadership. Everyone has an opinion, these opinions differ significantly and there are no discernible patterns in the responses. While this may reflect a failure in the question design, it might also suggest that asking direct questions about leadership, which rely on people’s conscious and considered responses, does not provide meaningful results on which to base policy improvements. A variety of reasons could explain why this might be the case. The factors that contribute to effective leadership may differ from one place to another (although if this were the case we would expect to see similarities in responses from people in the same office, but this is not the case). Alternatively, when answering questions, people may be strongly influenced by personal assumptions and expectations, and so respond on the basis of what they think they see rather than what is actually happening. A third explanation would be that the variables that contribute to effective leadership may be too interconnected and so difficult to rank effectively. We should therefore perhaps be sceptical of taking what people tell us about leadership at face value and of research based on interviews alone.

In Brief

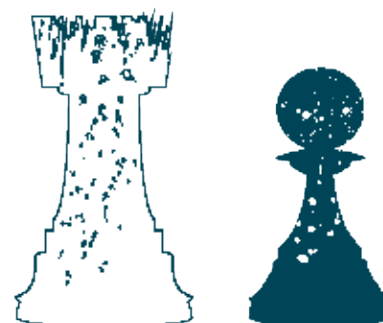
- In contrast to the humanitarian policy documents and evaluations consulted as part of this research, humanitarians in country offices tend to see effective leadership as a team rather than an individual activity.
- The results of the questionnaires did not show any correlation between cultural background and attitudes to ‘leadership’.
- The results of the questionnaires did not show any correlation between gender and attitudes to ‘leadership’.
- In general, responses to *direct* questions about the nature of effective leadership and the factors that contribute to it were highly individual. No pattern emerged across the group as a whole, or when the results were disaggregated by organisation, gender or place of origin.



6. Identifying the factors that contribute to effective leadership

A more effective way to consider whether and to what degree different factors contribute to effective leadership was to ask questions indirectly. We did this by asking about the success of leadership in an office and then, separately, asking about the degree to which certain factors (a good leader or clear decision-making processes) were present in the office, and finally analysing the results to see whether there was any statistically significant correlation between the two sets of responses: where there are clear decision-making processes, are offices better at developing a vision and strategy?

As noted in section 4, we began this enquiry by hypothesising on the basis of a literature review that four factors in particular contribute to the effective fulfilment of operational leadership functions in a humanitarian context, and that each of these factors is as important to successful leadership as the skills of the individual leader. The four factors are:



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The great majority of respondents reported that in their offices there was a formal management team.

”

1. the existence of a leadership team with shared accountability;
2. clarity around individual roles in this leadership team and the broader office;
3. clear, simple operational procedures; and
4. a common understanding of information requirements.

In the questionnaire we asked respondents whether these four factors were in place in their offices, and analysed the correlation between their presence or absence and the quality of leadership in the office, i.e. the degree to which respondents said their offices were good or bad at creating a vision, creating a strategy and implementing the strategy. This provided a more objective view of the degree to which the different factors relate to effective leadership than asking people to consciously rank the importance of the same factors.

Of course, this approach could only show that there is a correlation between the two elements – it does not explain the nature of the correlation and so, in the example above, cannot show that having a clear decision-making process directly leads to a better vision. For this reason, we conducted interviews with respondents to try to establish the nature of the relationship between the two, and also to clarify what the office had done to ensure that success factors (such as role clarity) were in place.

In the following section we consider, in turn, the responses to the questionnaire and interviews as they relate to each of the four factors listed in point 2 in section 4.

6.1 The role of the leadership team in effective operational leadership

The first factor that we considered was the leadership team, following the hypothesis that *operational leadership is more effective where decision-making and accountability do not rest exclusively with one individual, but are dispersed throughout a team.*

We have already seen that the majority of survey respondents agreed with the statement that ‘leadership works best where decisions are made by a team, who work together to implement these decisions’. This expressed preference for team-based leadership was matched by the realities in country offices: the great majority of respondents reported that in their offices there



was a formal management team (although not everyone in the office might agree – in 16 offices, all respondents said there was a formal team, while in 19 offices the majority of respondents said that there was a formal management team, but at least one respondent said that there was no formal team, although there was an informal group). The ubiquity of leadership teams or informal leadership groups is not surprising: previous studies have pointed out that operational humanitarian leadership often has a fairly strong collective or group element (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011; Hochschild, 2010).

There are strong arguments for moving the functions of the individual leader – and particularly some of the decision-making functions of this individual – to the group. Research outside the humanitarian sector has tended to suggest that leadership undertaken by a group of people rather than by a single individual leads to improved performance (Carson et al., 2007; Hiller et al., 2006; Pearce and Sims, 2002; Sivasubramaniam et al., 2002). Partially as a result of this there has been increased interest in shared leadership approaches in other sectors (e.g. see Benson and Blackman, 2011; Gronn, 2002; Pearce et al., 2008).

In the literature review undertaken in the first stage of this research three main arguments emerged for distributing decision-making across the team in humanitarian situations:

1. It improved the quality of decisions and prevented the individual leader from becoming overwhelmed (e.g. see Grunewald et al., 2010; Khaled et al., 2010; Kirby et al., 2007; Thammannagoda and Thilepan, 2009).
2. It ensured continuity in situations where there might be frequent changes of leadership.
3. It created support for decisions, thereby making it more likely that they would be implemented (see Cosgrave et al., 2007; Khaled et al., 2010).

FIGURE 7. THE LEADERSHIP CONTINUUM



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The members of the senior staff ‘team’ make a very important contribution to effective leadership.

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With respect to the first of these arguments – that shared decision-making improves decision quality – we had hoped to use the questionnaire to see whether shared decision-making (on the one hand) or individual decision-making (on the other) correlated better with the speed and quality of decisions. However, we were unable to do so, because there were too few examples of leaders taking decisions by themselves to allow for an effective analysis.

At the same time the results of the survey strongly suggest that the people engaged in humanitarian operations think that some form of group or distributed leadership is more effective than individual leadership (as noted above, when asked to say whether individual or team leadership ‘works best’, a large majority favoured team leadership). Specifically with respect to decision-making, survey respondents appear to favour group involvement over purely individual decision-making. In this case they ‘voted with their feet’, because over 95% of respondents reported that important decisions were made using consultation among the management team, majority opinion or consensus.

Another factor that underlies the importance of the team to effective leadership, and in particular to effective decision-making, is the strong correlation evident in the survey between the degree to which the group of managers in the office provide support to the ‘leader’ and effective leadership. Of all of the factors considered in the questionnaire, this one – the degree of management support given to the formal leader – had the strongest correlation with effective leadership, even stronger than the individual skills and abilities of the leader her-/himself.

All of these results strongly support the hypothesis that the members of the senior staff ‘team’ make a very important contribution to effective leadership. This does not imply that the formal leader does not have a particular role to play or even that individual leadership cannot be successful ‘for a short

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



SHARED
DECISION
MAKING

time' (although 'if that one person is away, everything falls to pieces'). But interviewees – and particularly those in offices that rated their own leadership as effective – tended to see good leadership as more of a group activity, with high levels of support offered by the group and solicited by the formal leader.

What does this support look like in practice? Several heads of office spoke of moral and emotional support: this was particularly true where humanitarian teams were living in close proximity to one another ('compound living') in situations of particular stress or insecurity. However – and again, in accordance with the original hypothesis and the finding that most decisions involve senior managers – the most important form of support was in terms of decision-making. Here, senior managers were doing two things: they were taking decisions related to their specific areas of competence using delegated authority and they were participating in the decision-making process for 'office-wide' decisions.

We will consider delegated decision-making below. For now it is enough to note that however much delegation is practised in an office, a fairly large number of decisions will still need to be made 'at the top' by the person or persons who are held accountable for the overall performance of the office.

The survey revealed that in the majority of cases (69%) these decisions were made by the 'leader after consultation with other managers'. It was rare for important decisions to be made by the 'leader acting alone' (1%) and less usual (18%) for the final decision to be made by the whole group. It should be noted, however, that in no office did all responders answer the question in the same way, suggesting that in many offices no clear decision-making process existed that was used in all cases, and also that the boundary between consultative and consensual decision-making is often blurred. Several interviewees noted that in practice the process of consultation generally led to a consensus decision in terms of which a recommendation emerged and the agreement of the leader was 'just a formality'.

We have noted elsewhere that the ideas of 'shared decision-making' or 'collaborative decision-making' cover a wide variety of forms and that, rather than making a clear separation between individual and shared decision-making, it may be more helpful to consider a continuum with autocratic, individual decision-making at one end and entirely communal decision-making at the other. As one moves along this continuum, increasing degrees of accountability and decision-making authority move from the individual leader to the group (Knox Clarke, 2013).



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There was not a significant difference in the speed or quality of decisions made through ‘consultation’ as opposed to those made through ‘consensus’.

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The interviews revealed that different offices were positioned on different points of this spectrum (and that even in one office the degree of group input to the decision might vary from one decision to another). However, in all cases the senior staff in the most effectively led offices had a significant involvement in the decision-making process. At the very least the formal leader sought the opinions of senior staff: ‘I never take any important decision without calling my heads of programme and logistics, at least two people.’ However, in the majority of situations the group went beyond providing information to making specific recommendations, often as part of a structured decision-making process: ‘we have established various groups ... to frame the issues, challenges and bring to the table for discussion and final decision a set of information already prepared.’¹⁶

As we have noted above, although this model was not one where the leader attempted explicitly to obtain consensus, in practice it generally led to the team rather than the individual leader making the decision: ‘It is really rare that the head of office disagrees with a recommendation of the country management team because [he/she] is also a member of this country management team.’ In some cases – a minority – the leader would explicitly attempt to have the team make the decision, and he/she made the decision as an individual only where group agreement was not possible. Here, the knowledge that if decision proved elusive the country director would step in tended to speed up the process and encourage team members to look for agreement.

The results of the questionnaire suggested that there was not a significant difference in the speed or quality of decisions made through ‘consultation’ as opposed to those made through ‘consensus’: consensus was not slower, nor did it lead to better decisions. On the basis of the interviews, we believe that this (unexpected) finding can be best explained by the fact that most offices were using a model that combined elements of consultation and consensus, and that there was in fact little difference between the models described as consensus and those described as consultative.

The main elements of this consensus/consultation model, then, are a formal leader who is clearly accountable for the consequences of major, office-wide decisions: ‘the neck on the line is the representative’; ‘the buck stops at his [sic] desk.’ Following on from this, it is widely understood that the formal leader has the ultimate decision-making authority: he/she will make a decision when there is no agreement in the group, if there is not time to convene the group and – albeit fairly rarely – when he/she does not agree



with the senior managers. At the same time, the group of senior managers will generally meet as a group on a regular or ad-hoc basis and make recommendations to the formal leader based on agreement in the group, and in most cases these recommendations will be adopted. In some cases sub-groups of senior managers will meet to create recommendations that are put to the wider group or leader.

For this model to work team members must respect one another's expertise; be prepared to support decisions that they do not fully agree with, but do not think are actively bad; and disagree with one another constructively. They should also be prepared to accept a measure of accountability for the outcomes. At the same time, the team leader needs to be comfortable with giving away some power and acting more as a member of the team than as an individual separate from the team: 'the head of the office is part of the team, not someone who is there telling people what to do'; 'A good team leader is a team leader ... you are colleagues, not boss and other person.'

The benefits of expanding decision-making to include other senior staff in the office, as reported in interviews, seem to be very similar to those reported elsewhere. Perhaps the most important of these is the inclusion of better-quality information in the decision-making process. Interviewees pointed out that consultative or consensual decision-making allowed decisions to be influenced by up-to-date information on the situation on the ground (a particularly important consideration in rapidly changing situations); by a variety of informed opinions on how any particular situation might develop in the future; by local knowledge, particularly where leadership groups included local staff; and by specialist technical expertise that the formal leader may not have. As one country director said: 'No [country director] can be a programme director, an operations expert, a finance expert, etc. I get massive support from [the leadership team].'

A shared decision-making process could also provide some insurance against inexperienced leaders, or leaders who have simply 'not had enough sleep'. Interestingly, given the frequent argument that group decision-making processes slow down decision-making, several interviewees suggested that the opposite might be the case: a system relying on a single decision-maker 'takes forever; there's a lot of back and forth'. The individual may have too much to do to make decisions or may not realise the urgency of certain decisions being made. A group was less likely to become overwhelmed and more likely to successfully identify priorities: 'There's a [regular meeting for] discussion and decision-making, so it's much faster. We take decisions, we



Team members must respect one another's expertise; be prepared to support decisions that they do not fully agree with, but do not think are actively bad; and disagree with one another constructively.



have a mechanism to raise the issues jointly, to take decisions on how that's going to be done.' The fact that the formal leader would be expected to make a decision if agreement could not be reached seems to have prevented long and ultimately fruitless discussions.

Not only does a more collective approach to decision-making lead to better – and in some cases quicker – decisions, but it also leads to decisions that are more popular, have greater management support and so are more likely to be implemented. Formal leaders and team members alike mentioned the importance of 'buy-in': 'decisions are always made collegially ... once the decision is taken, everybody is fully involved.' A final and perhaps unanticipated benefit of involving the group in decision-making was that it helped individuals – and the group itself – to reflect on decisions, learn and improve. Which brings us to a second, important question around leadership teams: if they are important (either as formal teams or less-formal groupings of leaders), how can they be developed?

In Brief

- Most respondents to the questionnaire believe that leadership is best exercised by a team.
- In most country offices respondents reported that there was a formal management/leadership team.
- In most country offices respondents reported that the formal team or an informal leadership group were involved in decision-making.
- There was a statistically significant correlation 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. 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 formal leader was often the same as that which would be made by the leadership team, and the boundary between consultation and consensus was often blurred.



6.2 Developing effective leadership teams

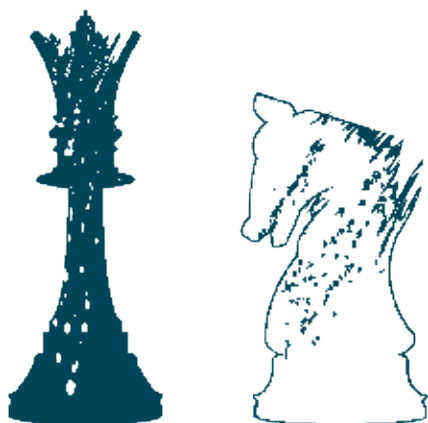
In order to benefit from the potential of a more shared approach to leadership and decision-making, an agency needs first to ensure that it has the right individuals on the team. Decisions can only be influenced by technical or local knowledge if at least one of the individuals present possesses that knowledge, and interviewees consistently highlighted the importance of ensuring that team members possessed among them the requisite skills and experience. In particular, they emphasised the importance of sectoral knowledge (e.g. in the areas of nutrition, vaccination or education); experience of putting different response options into practice in a variety of different contexts; and knowledge of local social structures, politics and conditions. In particular, this latter area is often overlooked. As one expert in emergency management explains: ‘a system in failure is fundamentally different from the system in normal operation ... if you want to intervene effectively, you should understand how the system worked before it failed.’¹⁷

Beyond the qualities of the individuals who compose the group, however, the ability of the group to be usefully engaged in decision-making relies on the degree to which its members can work effectively together. The results of the questionnaire showed that both clarity around membership of the decision-making group – clear, consistently followed criteria for who should be a member – and clarity around the role and functions of the group itself correlated with effective leadership.¹⁸ This is unsurprising, because both elements have been identified as contributing to effective team-working more generally – e.g. see Beckhard (1972) and, with specific relation to groups who collaborate with limited knowledge and experience of one another, Debra et al. (1996).

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Interviewees consistently highlighted the importance of ensuring that team members possessed among them the requisite skills and experience.

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The results also suggested that, beyond these ‘structural’ elements, specific behavioural elements are related to the success of leadership in emergencies, notably the ability of group members to resolve disagreements among themselves¹⁹ and the degree to which individuals trusted one another.²⁰

While it may be fairly easy to establish criteria for membership of a decision-making group or leadership team and to agree on the role of the group, it is much harder to build trust and the ability to ‘disagree without being disagreeable’. In general, country directors had fairly limited discretion over who joined the management team and so were not able to ‘hand pick’ a group of people who would work well together. On the other hand, in at least three cases members of leadership teams suggested that ‘if you’re accepted, then you’re alright. If you’re not accepted, that’s a very uncomfortable place to be’; people who didn’t fit into the group ‘don’t last long’. To a degree, teams seem to address issues of trust and interpersonal ‘fit’ through the selection (or perhaps more accurately, through rejection) of team members rather than through activities to develop the team’s ability to work together.

Several interviewees also suggested that the nature of living conditions in many humanitarian contexts – and particularly in insecure environments – led to team members living in very close proximity to one another: ‘you work all day together, you probably travel back in the same car, have dinner together and have to socialise in the evening.’ This and the sometimes emotionally intense nature of the work that teams were doing together ‘make for strong bonds’.

Interestingly, it seems that it is the intensity of the work that leadership groups did together that counts rather than the amount of time they spend together. On the basis of the literature review we had expected that teams that had experience of working together for some time would be more effective at creating vision and strategy, and implementing relief activities (Brooks and Haselkorn, 2005; Cosgrave et al., 2007; Goyder and James, 2002; Murtaza and Leader, 2011). However, analysis of survey responses did not support this view: there was no correlation between the amount of time that a team had spent together and their (self-reported) leadership effectiveness.

Two other elements seemed to be critical to building and maintaining trust in a team. The first was perhaps unexpected: interviewees suggested that teams that shared common ways of working – common operating procedures – trusted each other more. This was true both where the

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It is the intensity of the work that leadership groups did together that counts rather than the amount of time they spend together.

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operating procedures were implicit (i.e. unspoken ways of working that developed over time) and where they were written down, explicit and 'learned' by new arrivals, suggesting that the use of common procedures led directly to increased trust, rather than the alternative explanation, where trust and procedures developed together over time. As one leader said, 'the emergency team has to follow the procedures in order for us to get trust. [If] there is a procedure for that, they shouldn't do another thing in order to maintain trust.' This emerging finding is interesting and might suggest that procedures, by decreasing uncertainty about how people will behave, can increase trust, or that by following procedures people show that they are not 'rule breakers' and so are more trustworthy.

The second element, which is less unexpected (and perhaps related), is that group members – and the formal leaders, i.e. country directors and representatives – were more likely to trust colleagues with significant experience of emergency response and with relevant technical skills: 'The programme heads are at [technical specialist grade] so they come with a certain amount of experience and technical knowledge. So you would imagine or expect that there wouldn't be major disasters.' The importance that operational humanitarian workers put on relevant experience has been noted before (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011) and was underlined by the number of times skills and experience came up as important factors in the interviews (we did not include questions on the skills and experience of the leadership team in the questionnaire, which was an oversight). Of course, the importance of having a multi-skilled team for effective collective leadership goes beyond the trust that this creates in the team: as we have noted above, it is also an important element in the quality of decisions. But it is important to recognise that skills and experience go beyond decision quality to influence other important elements of leadership.

A substantial body of literature from outside the international humanitarian sector suggests that training teams in advance of emergencies through simulations and exercises can be an extremely effective way of developing both the capacities of the team and trust among team members (Bechky, 2006; Moynihan, 2009; T'Hart, 2010; Waugh and Streib, 2006; Yanay et al., 2011). Traditionally, humanitarian agencies have tended to do less simulation-based training than civil defence agencies and have generally tended to prioritise the training of individuals over the training of teams: until recently, simulations were still seen as an 'innovative' approach (Dickmann et al., 2010). However, there are signs that this is changing, with an increase in interest in simulations in the past five years. Since 2009

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Training teams in advance of emergencies through simulations and exercises can be an extremely effective way of developing both the capacities of the team and trust among team members.

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the IASC Sub Working Group on Preparedness has been tasked with the development of simulation exercises: in 2012 the group conducted four exercises involving IASC and host government agencies (IASC, 2012c). In particular, simulations have been used to develop coordination among agencies. In the UN they have been included in resident coordinator regional workshops on humanitarian coordination and in humanitarian coordinator training (Featherstone, 2012): in 2013 the UN conducted a ‘table-top’ simulation of an L3 emergency. Meanwhile, the NGOs involved in the Emergency Capacity Building Project have developed guidance on simulations (Klenk, n.d.) and run 16 multi-agency simulations (Hockaday et al., 2013). In a single-agency context several agencies, including UNHCR, WFP (WFP Operations Department, 2013) and World Vision, have implemented simulations. The latter have conducted between 30 and 40 simulations in the period 2009-2014, finding them particularly useful for increasing awareness of working in dynamic environments, making rapid decisions/decisions under pressure and applying skills to complex environments.²¹ These exercises are ‘increasingly recognized ... as a highly effective ... way of increasing preparedness and building capacity’ (Hockaday et al., 2013: 22). They ‘allow a ... depth of understanding and can provide a safe environment for failures and challenges to be addressed’ (Featherstone, 2012: 21). In particular they ‘provide excellent opportunities for relationship/trust building’ (Hockaday et al., 2013: 23).

In Brief

- 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.
- In interviews, members of leadership teams suggested that sharing common operating procedures and ways of working contributed to the success of the leadership team.



6.3 The role of organisational structure in effective leadership

A number of evaluations of humanitarian action conducted over the last decade suggest that the effectiveness of emergency response is often hampered by confusion over roles and structures (Bhattacharjee et al., 2011; Bourgeois et al. 2007; Foster et al., 2010; Thammannagoda and Thileepan, 2009). A lack of clarity over who in an organisation is responsible for doing what can mean that important issues are overlooked or that different parts of the office carry out different – and even contradictory – actions. Both failure to act in an emergency and contradictory actions are important symptoms of a failure of leadership.

We might expect the formal leader – the country director or representative – to organise the work of the office and determine ‘who does what’ as the response unfolds. However, organising work in this way is extremely time consuming, diverts energy from other tasks, and requires constant and consistent attention. It is therefore not surprising that many agencies specialising in emergency management outside the international humanitarian system have invested heavily in the creation of organisational structures that replace a stream of individual decisions about ‘who does what’ with a clear statement of roles and responsibilities for implementing a response. For many experts this creation of organisational structures is at the heart of effective emergency response: ‘incident management is about a set of functions that have to be performed and a system and structure that can perform them’²² (see also Buck et al., 2006; UK Government, 2013). This emphasis on developing organisational structures for emergency management is a good example of what Kerr and Jermier (1978) have called ‘Substitutes for Leadership’, i.e. substituting a leadership action – in this case ‘on-the-spot’ decision-making by the leader – with clear and agreed systems and processes, and so making the job of the leader more manageable.



Organisational structures replace a stream of individual decisions about ‘who does what’ with a clear statement of roles and responsibilities for implementing a response.



In the international humanitarian sector less emphasis appears to have been placed on ensuring that organisations have structures in place to clarify roles and responsibilities in a response. This is changing: over the past few years ‘leading humanitarian NGOs [and other organisations] have moved to invest in better understanding how their systems and structures affect their ability to respond effectively’ (Webster and Walker, 2009: 4). BRAC, World Vision and UNICEF, among others, have all incorporated elements of incident command structure into their guidelines for emergency management (Lake, 2011; Robinson and Joyce, 2012). However, the recent ALNAP literature review on this subject found that:

Research and evaluations in the international humanitarian sector suggest that the system has (at least until recently) undervalued the importance of structures in enabling – and in some cases substituting for – leadership ... key structures are generally not in place; where this is the case operational effectiveness suffers. On the other hand, where these structures and procedures are in place, leadership functions are exercised more effectively, and operations appear to be more successful. (Knox Clarke, 2013: 38)

Building on the findings of this literature review, the current research set out to test the hypothesis that *the process of operational leadership is more effective where ... the decision-making authority, accountability, and resources controlled by each individual and group involved in the operation, together with their relative responsibilities, are clear and agreed.*

The results of the questionnaire showed a strong correlation between clearly defined roles and effective leadership; indeed, role clarity correlated more strongly with effective leadership than did the skills of the formal leader.²³

In the follow-up interviews we attempted to investigate the nature of this correlation, and of the relationship between office structure and effective leadership. Essentially, structure is a way of organising work, i.e. dividing responsibility for tasks ‘horizontally’ into separate organisational units and dividing authority to make decisions ‘vertically’ into a series of decision-making levels. The result of this is an office that has separate units (or departments or divisions) to address issues of, for example, programme design, logistics, and financial and human resources. Within and above each unit are different layers of management tasked with making progressively more important decisions.

6.3.1 Vertical structure and delegation

We have already seen how in more successful offices the most important decisions – those that required the attention of the formal leader – were made with the support of the senior management team. The benefits of sharing decision-making included a decreased decision load for the formal leader, better information to support decisions and – in some cases – a quicker decision-making process. Interviews suggested that the corollary to this approach was to delegate decisions that did not require the attention of the country director to managers at lower levels in the organisational structure. In interviews, members of country management teams suggested that the structured delegation of authority provided similar benefits to group decision-making, e.g. it decreased the number of decisions coming to the country director's desk, ensured that decisions were taken on the basis of knowledge of conditions 'on the ground' and improved organisational morale. One interviewee suggested that delegation was not only desirable, but a necessary and inevitable consequence of operating in stressful conditions with short time lines: 'if you don't hear and you're on the ground, you are going to take a decision anyway.' This view closely accords with that taken by theorists of emergency management: 'the choice [for emergency organisations] is not centralisation or decentralisation. Big disasters always force decentralisation. The conditions for central control are non-existent in most disaster situations. The choice is if it is handled well or poorly.'²⁴

The interviews also provided some pointers on how to structure the delegation process so that it is handled well. The first step was to identify decisions that should not be delegated. Members of country management teams suggested that some decisions were 'out of the ordinary' and 'could matter' because they 'would tend to implicate the organisation'. Specifically, the list tended to include decisions that had a significant impact on the whole office (such as 'go/no go' decisions on whether to launch a response); decisions with a bearing on important external relationships – and particularly 'political' decisions that would affect relationships with donors or the host government; and decisions with a significant element of risk involving unanticipated expenditure or staff security. In some cases decisions would make their way 'organically' to the country director, because they could not be resolved at a lower level. This tended to happen where two functional units were unable to agree on an approach and sent the decision up the chain of authority for a final decision: 'When it becomes contentious or it needs discussion with a bigger team, it would come in here [to the country management team].'

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'If you don't hear and you're on the ground, you are going to take a decision anyway.'

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Structures may need to be revised and decision-making authority changed as a situation changes, particularly as an emergency increases in size and geographic scale.

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The second step in the process was to establish the right number of decision-making levels and to clarify what sort of decision should be made at each level. In smaller country offices this appeared to be fairly easy: decisions would either be made by the leader and leadership group (which would normally comprise the heads of functional units) or be delegated to the individual members of the leadership group whose unit was most closely concerned, e.g. logistics decisions would be made by the head of logistics. However, in larger country offices with more complicated structures – and particularly those with a large number of field offices – more levels of delegation were required in order to simultaneously prevent the leader from being ‘swamped’ and to keep the decision as close to the operational space as possible. Structuring decision-making in this way is not easy and there was sometimes tension between delegating on a geographic basis (to the field office) or a thematic basis (e.g. to the logistics unit): ‘we still have challenges in finding out what decisions and who should make it ... not all of the people in the structure can make such decisions.’ But several offices saw it as important and were in the process of instituting new levels of delegated decision-making.

In this process a series of principles were emerging. The first was the importance of clarity and comprehensiveness, i.e. ensuring that it was clear where all important decisions should be made. This prevents decisions ‘falling through the cracks’, thus creating a ‘blame game’ that decreases effectiveness and morale. The second is the importance of flexibility. Structures may need to be revised and decision-making authority changed as a situation changes, particularly as an emergency increases in size and geographic scale. Some systems have this flexibility ‘built in’. Incident command systems, for example, tend to be ‘modular’ in design, so that as an incident increases in size, larger units led by increasingly senior decision-makers progressively take control of the situation. In the same way, the procedures of many NGOs (such as Oxfam and World Vision) and of the UN system grade humanitarian emergencies according to a series of ‘levels’ generally based on the number of people affected,²⁵ which call for progressively senior leadership to make the key decisions. However, no structure can foresee all possibilities, and it is important to ensure that managers with delegated authority are prepared to have that authority overridden in exceptional circumstances, while at the same time not feeling that they are ‘locked in’ to making decisions and that if ‘they’re not happy to make a decision themselves [they can] bring it to [the country director] to take that responsibility’. At the heart of this flexibility is an understanding that in most organisations country directors or heads of office can delegate

authority, but cannot delegate accountability: they remain ultimately accountable for all the decisions that are made in the office and so must be prepared to take decisions and to retain the option to reduce delegation if required.

The third emerging principle is the importance of having a skilled and experienced staff to ensure that delegation works. As with the senior management team, the benefits of delegated authority to operational leadership can only be realised if the people to whom decisions are delegated are competent to take these decisions. In interviews senior managers consistently linked the degree to which they formally delegated responsibility to their staff and the amount of experience that these staff had in conducting emergency response.

These principles suggest that there is probably no single blueprint for establishing a successful structure for delegation. What is possible will be determined by the quality and experience of staff in any given office, and will always be a balance between structural rigidity and flexibility. However, the experience of the country offices that participated in this research suggests that a structured system of delegation is an important component of ensuring leadership effectiveness for emergency response. In designing these structures we should clarify what is and what is not delegated, accept flexibility, ensure that staff have the relevant experience, and – learning from emergency response professionals in civil defence and elsewhere – ensure that ‘nobody reports to more than one person ... nobody supervises more than a manageable number of people, and – critically – that authority is commensurate with responsibility: everyone in the system has full authority to effectively carry out their role effectively’ (Buck et al., 2006).²⁶

6.3.2 Horizontal structures and task specialisation

Organisational structures also allow complex, multifaceted work (such as an emergency response) to be divided ‘horizontally’ into sets of tasks and for these tasks to be consistently addressed by the same group of people with the relevant skills and experience. Interviewees were quick to point to the way in which structuring the office around specialised units increased the effectiveness of the response (and particularly the effectiveness of implementation – the benefits were less evident when it came to developing vision and strategy). A good organisational structure ensured that ‘Everybody knows what’s to be done and who’s doing what’ (in contrast, in one organisation where ‘there weren’t clear roles and responsibilities ...

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A good organisational structure ensured that ‘Everybody knows what’s to be done and who’s doing what’.

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it ended up very messy because we can't get hold of who is responsible'). Another interviewee explained that because 'the lines are not blurred ... things don't fall through the cracks and things get done'. At the same time, by apportioning work effectively, a good structure prevented any particular part of the office becoming overloaded. Some interviewees also suggested that structure had an important effect on morale, because it allowed everyone in the office to see the contribution that they were making to the response: 'people feel [they have] important things to do and are not just filling time during the day They feel empowered and responsible for those aspects. They know that the operation would fail without them, so they have responsibility and accountability.'

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The key to a successful structure was that it was designed locally and regularly reassessed to meet the demands of the response.

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In order to deliver these benefits, however, the organisational structure has to be designed around the work of the office. Several interviewees talked about the need to periodically adapt the office structure to fit the quantity, nature and location of the work that had to be done, e.g. creating new country-level units for resource mobilisation and management immediately after a rapid-onset disaster; opening a compliance unit to respond to significant challenges with donor reporting; establishing 'zonal' structures to better address distance management; and adding new layers of management to meet an expanded workload caused by increased programming. In all cases the key to a successful structure was that it was designed locally and regularly reassessed to meet the demands of the response. Where this was not done, structures could actually impede the response. This was particularly the case where the structure separated the control of resources from operational decision-making: one interviewee spoke of the frustrations caused where 'the people who actually implement the programmes' were located some distance from the managers who 'sit on the money'.



6.3.3 Keeping the organisation together: communications among different parts of the structure

By its nature, organisational structure divides the work of the office into sets of discrete tasks. Dividing an office up in this way – generally along functional or geographic lines – also increases the scope for disagreement and competition among different parts of the office. Most offices seemed to have experienced these tensions, which can be exacerbated under the stressful conditions of an emergency response. It was not surprising, then, that in designing structures for a humanitarian response (and so dividing work up) successful leadership teams also ensured that there were mechanisms for bringing different parts of the office together.

A shared understanding of the role of the whole organisation in the humanitarian response undoubtedly plays a unifying role under these circumstances, as does a decision-making mechanism that aims to achieve consensus among the heads of key organisational units, with the country director/representative acting as final arbiter. Equally important, however, are formal internal communications mechanisms which make sure that people in one part of the organisation are aware of what their colleagues in another part are doing, and why. The questionnaire used in this research did not ask any questions about the importance or otherwise of internal communications mechanisms, but it was a theme to which interviewees often returned. Senior managers meet weekly in some offices, or even daily (often by teleconference) in situations that were changing rapidly, to discuss the situation and make country-level decisions. These decisions are actively communicated through regular unit or sub-office staff meetings: ‘we have to do more than just making information available: people don’t have time to read emails.’ The same meetings provide staff with opportunities to make suggestions and present ideas around how to address difficult or unexpected situations, which could then be taken to the leadership team.

In at least two instances these ideas were cited as having had a significant and positive impact on the response.

Another successful approach to increasing internal communication and decreasing conflicts among units was to have unit members meet and explain the specifics of their jobs and the things they needed from their colleagues. In one country the representative explained, ‘Finance, admin and programme [units] don’t understand one another. I sent my finance people out in the field to work with their colleagues at a distribution, see how it is planned and then they understand.’



A shared understanding of the role of the whole organisation in the humanitarian response undoubtedly plays a unifying role.



In Brief

- The research suggested that attention to organisational structure makes a significant contribution to effective leadership.
- Good structures divide authority vertically into levels of decision-making authority. They divide tasks horizontally into specialised units, and they ensure that there is adequate communication among the various levels and units.
- When dividing authority, effective offices tend to delegate as much authority to those responsible for implementing a decision as possible. In doing so, they:
 - clarify what types of decision should *not* be delegated (decisions to be made by the leader and leadership team)
 - allocate other decision types to specific levels of the office (heads of units/heads of field offices)
 - ensure that those with delegated authority had the skills, experience and resources to implement decisions effectively.
- When dividing tasks, effective offices made sure that all key tasks for the response were allocated and that, to the degree possible, tasks did not ‘cross over’ the boundaries of units.
- 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.



6.4 The role of processes and procedures in effective operational leadership

Just as organisational structures can – if well designed – bring consistency and reliability to a response, while simultaneously decreasing the decision load on the formal leader, so (at least in theory) can the use of standard operating procedures. The idea here is that by standardising common processes – e.g. procurement, logistics, mass vaccination or food distribution – an organisation can ensure that everyone works in the most effective way, thus minimising the need for oversight and, critically, decreasing the number of ‘ad-hoc’ decisions required of the leader, and freeing up front-line staff to organise themselves and ‘get to work’ without the requirement for leadership input (Gawande, 2013). If they are well designed, procedures can be an effective ‘substitute for leadership’: ‘Effective leadership might ... be described as the ability to supply subordinates with needed guidance’ (Kerr and Jermier, 1978: 400), and in many circumstances this guidance can come from standardised procedures rather from the leader or leadership team.

On the basis of the experience of other sectors where standard operating procedures have been used effectively in high-risk, time-critical environments (Bechky, 2006; Klein et al., 2006) and on – admittedly fairly limited – information from humanitarian evaluations, we hypothesised that leadership functions (i.e. creating a vision and strategy, and implementing the vision) would be more effective where *the organisation has flexible operating principles for working in commonly encountered operational situations*.

Analysis of questionnaire results suggested that there was indeed a correlation between having ‘clear, simple procedures for commonly encountered operational situations related to emergency/humanitarian response (assessment, logistics, security, distributions, etc.)’, and successfully developing and then implementing a vision and strategy for a response.²⁷

Discussions with interviewees about the nature of this correlation provided a range of opinions. Several interviewees pointed to the specific benefits to the leader and leadership team of having standard operating procedures. One leader explained that such procedures freed up time to ‘focus on the high-level stuff’, and that they could provide consistency and continuity when you have ‘twenty, thirty, perhaps fifty new people coming in from all over’ as part of the response, all of whom may have different ways of working. Similarly, given the high level of staff turnover in many emergencies, interviewees saw written procedures as a good way of preventing locally

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Standard operating procedures freed up time to ‘focus on the high-level stuff’.

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developed best practice from being lost. By ensuring best practice was followed, procedures had also prevented arbitrary decision-making and ensured that important details of the implementation process were not forgotten. One interviewee suggested that this was particularly important when dealing with emotional or pressurised activities where there was an increased possibility of making mistakes.

In addition to benefits to the quality and consistency of decision-making and decision implementation, interviewees also suggested that standard operating procedures played an important role in ensuring accountability. Accountability is a challenge for leaders in emergency contexts. As we have noted above, formal leaders are generally accountable for the decisions that are made as part of the response – to their organisation, to the donors, to partner organisations, to staff and to the people affected by the disaster. At the same time leaders are unable to make all the decisions – some will be shared among a management team. Where this is the case the team will often acknowledge some degree of shared accountability, although this is generally an informal and often tacit agreement, and the boundaries of this accountability are not necessarily clear. However, many decisions will be made by people ‘on the ground’ with varying degrees of delegated authority. In this situation leaders (or leadership teams) will be accountable for decisions that they do not themselves make. Under these circumstances standard operating procedures based on best practices can provide leaders with a degree of certainty that ‘the right decisions’ are being made and, should there be any questions at a later date, such procedures will allow staff ‘to document the rationale and the justification’ for the decision. As one interviewee explained: ‘There are the trusts given to the emergency team, but the emergency team has to follow the procedures in order for us to get trust.’ Procedures create trust – in the leadership team and the broader organisation – and this trust allows the leader to delegate with confidence.²⁸

However, not all interviewees agreed that proceduralisation supported effective leadership. Two main criticisms emerged. The first was that procedures ‘make us slower to do our job’. Interviewees explained that their offices ‘focus ... time, resources, staff to understand the procedures. As soon as they understand, something new comes from global.’ They also saw procedures as slowing down action during operations: ‘you can get buried under all of the administration’, while following procedures ‘takes time and it’s complicated. Can’t we just dispense with it, go back to our world to do our own business?’

The second criticism was that proceduralisation leads to rigidity: at a time when ‘you need some flexibility in your work ... you should not have a stupid person in HQ to tell you, “No”’. One leader discussed a situation when the office had followed procedures based on previous experience which turned out to be inappropriate – even dangerous – in a new, unexpected situation. These experiences echo similar criticisms made in literature from outside the humanitarian sector (Buck et al., 2006; Lalonde, 2011; Leonard and Snider, 2010; Waugh and Streib, 2006) and in humanitarian literature and evaluations (Bhattacharjee et al., 2011; Kirby et al., 2007; Seller, 2010). Leadership – and particularly the flexibility required to respond to fast-moving, unexpected events – becomes impossible in situations where ‘all behaviour is heavily regulated by a plethora of standard procedures, rules and regulations’ (Hochschild, 2010: 104), while these rules and regulations – based on previous events – may be unsuited to new situations.

What is interesting in the interviews is that those people who considered procedures to be cumbersome and inflexible were almost invariably talking about detailed procedures imposed from outside, while those who highlighted the benefits of proceduralisation were normally talking about simple, locally generated procedures. In fact, some of the interviewees who were most critical of formal sets of rules imposed by HQ were also keen to point out that the members of the country team had developed their own (unwritten) way of doing things. It was striking how consistent humanitarian professionals were in talking about the importance of locally developed, informal and unwritten procedures: ‘When you work with colleagues you trust, you develop normative guidance, not always codified If you’ve worked together before, you have a common understanding of how things should be done’; ‘we do a lot of working together, so that if things are not written down, they are passed down in some way’; ‘it mainly comes with experience It’s not written anywhere that you can do it or you cannot do it’; ‘everyone knows [the basic procedures] and we don’t write things down.’

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Those people who considered procedures to be cumbersome and inflexible were almost invariably talking about detailed procedures imposed from outside, while those who highlighted the benefits of proceduralisation were normally talking about simple, locally generated procedures.

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This suggests that the benefits of procedures can best be achieved when they are based on local good practice and regularly updated to take account of new learning. Several of the organisations in the survey had ‘global procedures’ that country offices – with varying degrees of encouragement – adapted and contextualised on the ground. In one case country offices both developed global procedures and then, later, contextualised them: ‘Each country comes up with what works: this is consolidated at global level, and then goes back to local level where we are allowed to contextualise and adapt to the country where we are working.’

The interviews also suggested that the best procedures are often the shortest and least detailed: ‘a one pager that the team and community will understand.’ These locally generated ‘ways of doing things’ have many of the properties of ‘simple rules’: they provide an outline of agreed ways of approaching a situation, based on experience of what has worked and not worked in similar situations in the past. The concept of ‘simple rules’ has been promoted in the commercial and public sectors as an approach to succeeding in chaotic environments (Eisenhardt and Sull, 2001; Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, 1998). The idea is that simple rules provide some minimal boundaries or limits to individual action, which ensures that everyone in the group is working according to good practice while allowing each individual a high degree of flexibility and initiative within these boundaries. Typically, the rules are developed from an observation of patterns of success and failure, and provide guidance on whether to engage in a situation, how to engage, how to set priorities, and when to leave.²⁹ Importantly, they need to be constantly reviewed to identify whether they fit the context and are still leading to successful outcomes, or whether they have become outdated and need to be adapted or replaced.

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The best procedures are often the shortest and least detailed.

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Eisenhardt and Sull, who developed the idea of simple rules, note that ‘most often, a rough outline of simple rules already exists in some implicit form. It takes an observant manager to make them explicit’ (Eisenhardt and Sull, 2001: 113). Interestingly, the ‘ways of working’ identified as being important by interviewees were generally implicit and unwritten, and very often took the form of ‘simple rules’ about when to engage in a response³⁰ and how to conduct core activities such as assessment³¹ and distribution. In fact, one interviewee, in describing how he and his colleagues made decisions in emergencies, gave a very clear illustration of a simple-rules approach in action: ‘we have boundaries and then work within those boundaries ... there are a lot of decisions that we can make on the ground by showing some flexibility and agility within the rules.’ This suggests that successful leadership teams are already using a simple-rules approach, but could usefully make these existing rules explicit, which would have the advantage of allowing the rules to be passed on to newly arrived staff.

Making the rules explicit would also allow teams to clearly determine whether rules were appropriate for any given situation or whether they needed to be adapted or discarded. As with any other type of procedure, simple rules are based on the experience of previous programmes. The danger here is that a new or evolving situation may be very different from those that have occurred in the past and that in these circumstances rules based on previous experience may be redundant, or even hazardous. This danger can be significantly reduced if the rules are clear and explicit; if in any new situation a conscious decision is made that the rules are relevant and should be applied; and if there is continuous – or at least periodic – monitoring of the situation to see whether the application of these rules is leading to successful outcomes.

In some cases some of these criteria were in place. In one office the leadership team would ‘have a rapid assessment’ and then ‘use guidelines based on the parameters from rapid assessment’. In another the leadership team would meet and agree on changes if it became obvious that the rules and guidelines did not work in a specific context.

However, in most cases not only the rules, but also the situations in which they should be applied and changed, appeared to be tacit, i.e. unspoken, almost unconscious decisions, often made by individuals, as to which rules to apply and when. While this appeared to be working in many situations, it was also a cause for concern for some interviewees, who noted that this way of working was ‘not closely allied to what works and what doesn’t’ and could in some cases be ‘completely inappropriate’.

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Rules based on previous experience may be redundant, or even hazardous.

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Knowledge and experience form a key element of building flexibility into seemingly ‘rigid’ systems.

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This suggests that being more explicit about the rules themselves, and about the decision when to adopt the rules and when to let go of them, would improve the team’s ability to lead a response in chaotic, rapidly changing environments. This requires a number of conditions to be in place.

Firstly, of course, leadership teams would need to make the rules and the conditions under which they are used and adapted explicit. Secondly, leadership teams would need to have a good understanding of the emergency situation (through assessment) and also of the way in which their response actions were affecting the situation over time. Previous ALNAP research suggests that, while humanitarian organisations have made significant advances in rapid assessment, in general they are still poor at monitoring the situation over time, and particularly at monitoring the effects of interventions on the situation (Knox Clarke and Darcy, 2014). Without this information it becomes impossible to know whether the procedures that are being used are appropriate for the environment or not – and as a result whether to continue using the simple rules or whether to adapt or abandon them.

Thirdly, the leadership team and others with delegated responsibility need to have the knowledge to make effective judgements about when to use rules and which sets of rules are appropriate for the context: ‘how to organise a food distribution? You can do it in a variety of ways. [You need to] know the basics and can change as you go along. Mix thinking on your feet with very solid model of how to achieve things.’ Simple rules can provide the ‘solid model’, and better information and clear decision structures can indicate when you need to change. But ‘thinking on your feet’ also requires a high level of judgement, and in making these judgements teams and individuals need to rely on their experience of similar situations and their knowledge of the social, economic and political context in which the emergency has taken place. This point was underlined by several of the interviewees, and has also been made in the context of incident command systems, where knowledge and experience form a key element of building flexibility into seemingly ‘rigid’ systems (Bigley and Roberts, 2001). At the moment many leadership teams appear to rely on knowledge and experience alone to create and implement tacit simple rules. The approaches suggested here can, hopefully, make these decision-making processes more effective, but they are a support to and not a replacement for knowledge of the context and experience of emergency response.

One final – and rather tangential – observation may be of interest here. In the interviews it was noticeable that the HQ-mandated, explicit procedures that were used in country offices tended to be put in place to decrease certain kinds of risk: particularly financial risk to the organisation (financial and procurement procedures) and physical risk to the organisation’s staff (security procedures). Procedures and guidelines to reduce risks to crisis-affected people were less evident (although they do exist, particularly around issues such as protection from exploitation and abuse) and, as we have seen, tended to have been developed at field level. While not directly relevant to the discussion of operational leadership, this observation may illuminate discussions around the perception of risk by humanitarian organisations – a topic that will be addressed by future ALNAP research.

In Brief

- The results of the questionnaire showed a strong correlation between the effectiveness of leadership and the existence of clear, simple standard operating procedures in country offices.
- Standard operating procedures can serve as ‘substitutes for leadership’ by making certain decisions routine and so freeing 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.
- Many country offices are using simple rules, but these are often ‘implicit’, i.e. they have not been formally recognised or written down.



6.5 The role of information management systems in effective operational leadership

Effective leadership – and particularly the ability to take decisions, which is one of the key components of leadership – requires information. This is true of leadership in all areas, from a transnational corporation to a preschool. But obtaining and using information about the situation and the response is particularly challenging in many emergency contexts, where information may be scarce and politicised, time for analysis is limited, and the situation is constantly and rapidly changing.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that experts in emergency management consider the maintenance of situational awareness through the collection, analysis and communication of information as one of the three core challenges for disaster response (Howitt and Leonard, 2009). Assessments from outside the international humanitarian system suggest that effective information collection and management lead to better decisions and also enable actors to cohere around these decisions and execute them more effectively (Bigley and Roberts, 2001; Buck et al., 2006; Day et al., 2004; Flin et al., 1996; Jensen and Brehmer, 2005). Significant investments in areas such as early warning and assessment in international humanitarian response over the last decade (Knox Clarke and Darcy, 2014) suggest that humanitarian actors also recognise the importance of information systems.

In designing the current research, therefore, we hypothesised that *the organisation has and uses clear procedures for determining the information set required for decision-making, and for collecting and analysing this information and disseminating it to existing and incoming team members*. The results of the questionnaire seemed to bear out this hypothesis: there was a strong correlation between effective fulfilment of leadership functions, on the one hand, and the existence of an agreed information set, and of agreed collection and analysis procedures, on the other.³²

In the interviews, members of humanitarian leadership teams clearly suggested that better information (and, to a degree, better information systems) led to better leadership. Good information helped leaders to identify the issues that mattered most and focus their attention on these issues; it also, of course, led to better decisions. However, the importance of information also went beyond the decision-making process itself: good information increased the confidence of the team and of partner agencies in the leader(s), in the decisions, and in themselves, ultimately leading to greater support at the implementation level.

Given the important of information to effective humanitarian programming, it should not come as a surprise that the generic humanitarian ‘business process’ – as outlined in the humanitarian programme cycle (IASC, 2014) – is fairly information heavy. Three of the five phases of the cycle revolve around information collection and analysis.³³ Despite this, however, the literature review and interviews conducted for this report suggested that there are still a variety of ways in which country offices could significantly improve their information processes – and so improve the leadership of emergency responses.

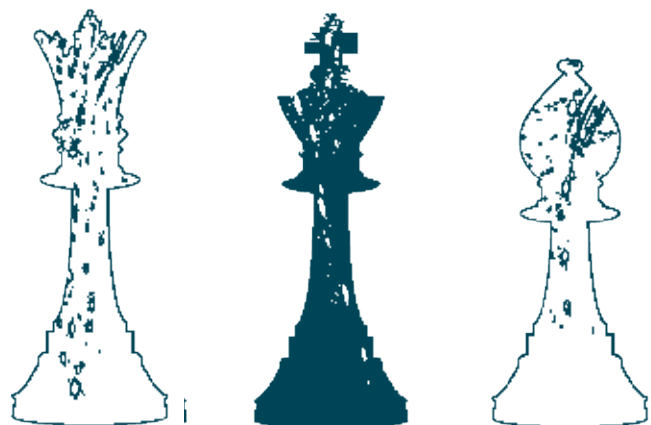
An overarching observation – and avenue for potential improvement – concerns the way that country teams (and humanitarians more generally) tend to approach information management. In many cases the focus is on the production of information rather than on the broader process by which information is produced, communicated and used (Bonino et al., 2013; Darcy et al., 2013; Knox Clarke and Darcy, 2014; Levine et al., 2011). Information is considered a product in itself rather than an element of or tool in decision-making processes. So, while the ISO International Standard for Emergency Management (ISO 22320) identifies six key activities required for a successful information management process (ISO, 2011),³⁴ discussions in the humanitarian sphere have tended to be concerned with improving only one or two of these activities (generally those related to information collection and analysis) and have generally neglected mechanisms for identifying information needs, information storage, ongoing revision, and dissemination and communication.

Specifically, the research pointed to a number of ways in which leadership teams at the country level could improve the information collection and management process – generally by addressing some of these neglected areas of the process.

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In many cases the focus is on the production of information rather than on the broader process by which information is produced, communicated and used.

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The first area relates to the identification of the minimum information set required to make effective decisions. The analysis of questionnaire results showed clearly that there is a strong relationship between clarity as to what information is required and effective leadership. A clear and agreed minimum information set prevents time and resources from being wasted on unnecessary data collection; focuses leadership attention on the most relevant aspects of an issue; and allows for different parts of an organisation, or different organisations, to more easily share information and contribute to a coherent understanding of the situation and of options to respond to it. Despite these potential advantages, however, ‘most agencies [have until recently] had their own non standardised survey forms, that often produced conflicting ... results’ (Darcy, 2009: 24). Different agencies working on the same issues in the same response have tended to collect very different types of information (Bourgeois et al., 2007; Darcy and Valid, 2012; Global Education Cluster, 2010; Grunewald et al., 2010; Young et al., 2007), and even in agencies and country offices there may not be agreement on the basic information set that should be collected. As one interviewee said, ‘often someone will develop a[n information collection] tool and take it with them from one place to the next. So we don’t necessarily have common approaches that are used everywhere, or all the time.’ In general there seems to be movement at the inter-agency level and at the level of many individual agencies to establish broad assessment and – to a lesser degree – monitoring guidelines that outline basic information sets (Knox Clarke and Darcy, 2014), and several of the interviewees were using organisational guidelines to clarify their minimum information requirements at the country level. However, in some (and admittedly a smaller number of) cases, the minimum information set seemed to be personal and implicit – based on the experience of the staff member and not written down or otherwise shared with colleagues. In these cases there was obviously room for confusion or disagreement in the office on what information should be collected and why.



As with procedures, there is ‘not a single standard package that can be rolled out at every disaster’ (ACAPS, 2012: 6). Different contexts require different decisions, and different decisions require different information. Interviewees stressed the importance of taking organisational guidelines on information collection – which include basic information requirements – and adapting them to a particular context: ‘It’s not like we come up with the methodology every time we do the assessment. The methodology is there and people try to adapt it to the situation.’ In doing so they were essentially following the recommendations of the International Standard for Emergency Management

– that in each situation the organisation should specify the key questions on which decisions are required and then identify the information needed to answer these questions, bearing in mind time and other constraints. Global guidelines can help, but they will need to be adapted to each case.

There are two important caveats here. The first is that, in deciding the questions on which decisions are required, operational leaders and leadership teams should be careful not to be constrained by tunnel vision, narrowing the questions down to those that will provide an answer that supports preconceived ways of working and decisions that have already been made. The best example of this tunnel vision is the assumption that international actors should be involved in any major response and that the only decisions to be made are about the nature of this response. As a result, questions asking *whether* a response is required in the first place (and particularly questions about local capacity to respond without the support of international agencies) are not asked. Recent global guidance on assessment (IASC, 2012; ICRC and IFRC, 2008) has emphasised the importance of determining whether assistance is needed or not before deciding on the nature of the assistance; however, when describing the information sets required for response, only a few of the operational leaders interviewed for this study mentioned information related to local (as opposed to organisational) capacities to respond to a crisis. The inclusion of locally recruited members of staff in the leadership team and the use of assessment methods that involve crisis-affected people in the collection and interpretation of information may go some way to addressing this problem.

The second caveat is that in many (although by no means all) situations a lack of readily accessible, up-to-date information, coupled with the need to respond urgently, may make it impossible to collect a full information set before making a decision. In these situations leadership teams cannot afford to become victims of collection perfectionism or analysis paralysis: decisions will need to be made on the best information available. Here again, global norms and guidance are helpful. ACAPS' *Coordinated assessments in emergencies. What we know now: key lessons from field experience* suggests that 'assessments in the initial phases of a crisis should focus on turning data into information that is 'good enough' for the informed decision-making' (ACAPS, 2012: 16).

In most cases these data will come from existing secondary information, possibly augmented by a small number of community-level exercises. Interviewees for this study appeared to be keenly aware of the danger of



Leadership teams cannot afford to become victims of collection perfectionism or analysis paralysis: decisions will need to be made on the best information available.



collecting more information than was required in initial assessments: ‘The information doesn’t really matter – you can always collect more There’s a big thing about trying to collect lots of info that won’t be useful in the response: as you refine the programme, then you can go into the dynamics.’

This comment – that information collection should become more detailed and refined ‘as you refine the programme’ – brings us to the second potential area of improvement for the information process: effective offices should ensure that the collection of information is a continuous process rather than a one-off event. Collecting, analysing, and distributing information over the course of the emergency allows for more detailed and specific information to be generated over time. It also – critically – allows leaders to understand the effects that responses are having and to determine whether the approaches being used (and particularly the ‘simple rules’ that the office has put in place) should be continued or abandoned. Humanitarian organisations have historically been poor at this form of continuous situation monitoring; e.g. despite long humanitarian engagement, the routine monitoring of key contextual indicators has not occurred in Somalia (Slim, 2012), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Darcy et al., 2013) or South Sudan (Poole and Primrose, 2010). Greater interest and investment in this area would undoubtedly improve operational leadership by providing information to prevent leaders ‘flying blind’.

The third potential area for improvement of the information process lies not in the collection or analysis phase, but in establishing mechanisms to share and communicate the information so as to create an accurate, shared, and evolving picture of the situation and response. The importance of communicating information cannot be overstated: experiments conducted with military teams in Sweden have shown that once a basic level of accuracy is reached, it is more important that the picture of what is happening is shared among the leadership team than that it is accurate: greater accuracy does not improve results, but greater levels of sharing do (Jensen and Brehmer, 2005). As a result, most ICSs place great emphasis on creating

shared mental models [that] help members to coordinate their behavior and solve problems presented by complex ... environments If the incident commander ... is able to achieve and maintain a quality operational representation, the system is more likely to be able to match ... demands and forestall catastrophic ... failures. (Bigley and Roberts, 2001: 10, 12)

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Effective offices should ensure that the collection of information is a continuous process rather than a one-off event.

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Creating this common picture requires several related actions. The first is to ensure that different parts of the organisation – or different organisations – are collecting elements of a common minimum information set (see above), which, when fitted together, create this ‘big picture’. The second – which we have also considered above – is to ensure that this information is continually updated as the situation changes. The third is to be clear about who needs to know what: staff working at the district level may not have time or space to assimilate the ‘big picture’ of what is happening across the country (although they should certainly contribute to it), whereas the leadership team do need to have this picture, even if they do not have the same level of detail, in order to make decisions about overall strategy and resource allocation.

The fourth action for developing a common picture is to ensure that information from a variety of places is brought together and explicitly informs decision-making. In most ICSs this task is conducted by a discrete organisational unit (often called the planning unit), which forms one of the four standard components of the organisational structure and is responsible for collecting, collating, analysing and disseminating a standard set of information, and – critically – for developing plans for the next operational period based on this information (Howitt and Leonard, 2009). In international humanitarian organisations, in contrast, ‘information management tends to be in a variety of places in the organisation’. In some cases interviewees spoke of logistics and programming units collecting separate sets of information for their own use, with only limited information exchange occurring among units. However, country offices had also developed sophisticated mechanisms for bringing information together. In several cases the leadership team itself was the forum where information from different parts of the organisation was synthesised to create a big picture, generally through regular (in some cases daily) meetings or conference calls.

In one case, in recognition of the amount of work involved in this exercise, the country director had established a separate office – similar to an ICS planning section – to build the big picture and communicate it to the leadership team. Interestingly, while advances in technology allow information to be collated virtually and graphically (with information being plotted onto maps, for example), making the information more accessible and decreasing the amount of time that leadership teams need to spend on information exchange (Letouze et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2011; Steets et al., 2010), the potential for using this sort of technology did not come up in interviews. This may be a fertile area for agencies to explore in future.

The fifth and final action in producing a common picture for decision-making is to ensure that as membership of the leadership team rotates, the picture is handed on to new team members. Again, practice differed from one agency and country to the next. In some situations interviewees spoke of fairly formalised handover and induction processes, while in others these processes were less formal or less evident.

In Brief

- There is a strong correlation between effective leadership and good information management.
- Information management is best seen as part of the ongoing decision-making process of an office. However, humanitarian agencies often focus on information collection (and, to a lesser degree, analysis) 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.
- Agencies should be wary of delaying decisions on the basis of inadequate information, but should aim to improve the quality and amount of information they collect over time, and be prepared to change direction as new information becomes available.
- Agencies should place emphasis on ensuring that relevant information is shared with the relevant decision-makers and should identify who holds the 'big picture' of the response.



6.6 The role of the leader in effective operational leadership

If there is an overall message coming out of this research into operational leadership it is that the international humanitarian system has tended to put too much weight and responsibility on the shoulders of the individual leader, and that operations are better led when some of these responsibilities are shared, delegated or turned into standardised procedures and 'ways of working'.

What, then, happens to the leader? Do the results of this research suggest that the individual is best replaced by a committee and a (small) pile of procedures and regulations? Not at all. It is important to remember the logic that lies behind most of these findings: firstly, that non-centralised organisational forms appear to work better in complex, dynamic environments than do centralised ones and, secondly, that expecting any individual in a complex environment to be aware of and synthesise all the available information, make all key decisions, and – by force of personality – align staff behind these decisions is unrealistic and, arguably, unfair.

The findings of this research follow this logic inasmuch as they suggest that the leader has an important role in building and maintaining effective organisational structures and processes, and that this role, while difficult and requiring experience and skills, is within the scope of a single individual.

The results of the questionnaire suggested that the higher the skills and abilities of the individual leader, the more likely the office is to effectively create a vision and strategy, and implement the strategy: there was a strong correlation between the leader's skills and the degree to which leadership was effective in the office.³⁵ Moreover the results of the interviews suggest, quite clearly, how leaders contribute to success in situations where there are fairly high degrees of delegation, shared responsibility and (in some cases) systematisation.

Essentially, effective leaders are doing five things:

1. taking responsibility for the final decision on issues that affect the whole office;
2. creating and maintaining the conditions that are required for group and delegated leadership to succeed;
3. maintaining an overview of the organisation and its position in the response;
4. reflecting the office back to itself; and
5. acting as an interface between the office and the larger organisation.

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The leader has an important role in building and maintaining effective organisational structures and processes.

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Almost all interviewees agreed that one of the key roles of the formal leader was to be accountable for the decisions taken in the office – and this meant that the ‘final decision’ was reserved for her/him. As we have seen above, in the majority of cases it was unusual for the leader to actually take the decisions alone – although the degree of input from the leadership team varied from one country to another. In all cases, though, leadership teams understood that, as the country director was ultimately accountable, he/she needed to be able to make difficult decisions alone if agreement among the team was impossible or if the situation otherwise required it: ‘it is my role to make those drastic decisions when it is required’; ‘[when there is] disagreement on how to do things at the management level, the country director will pick it up.’

A second important role for many of the country directors who participated in the research was to ensure that the elements for success were in place: that the structures and procedures we have discussed in the sections above were established, and regularly reviewed and updated. As we have seen, global guidelines on organisational structure, procedures, and information management can provide a useful template for country-level initiatives, but they have to be adapted to the specific context of the country and response. In many cases the decision to devote time to these ‘process’ issues had been taken by the country director: ‘everything gets taken care of if you have the right leader.’ Importantly, this work, if it was to be successful, was more than a mechanistic or box-ticking exercise. It appeared to require enthusiasm and recognition that these elements are important for success. It also required that the formal leader be comfortable with clearly handing over some responsibility.

The third element of leadership – and one that came up surprisingly frequently – was the importance of having and maintaining a clear and comprehensive picture of what was happening in the office. This is linked to the ‘situational awareness’ described above – the overall picture of the crisis, the actions being taken in response and their consequences, and the status of the responding agencies, i.e. the ‘big picture’ that the leadership team should aim to maintain. But it was striking how much emphasis both individual leaders and members of leadership teams placed on the importance of the country director actively finding out what was going on in her/his office: ‘Go[ing] to the corridors’; ‘passing into people’s offices’; ‘understand[ing] what staff are doing on a day-to-day basis.’ This role is, perhaps, particularly suited to the formal leader (and in some cases her/his deputy) because, unlike other members of the management team, he/she does not see the

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A key element of leadership was the importance of having and maintaining a clear and comprehensive picture of what was happening in the office.

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operation from a specific (logistics, programme, administration) perspective and so is more likely to achieve a balanced view. It also underpins her/his ability to initiate changes to staffing, structure or processes where things are not working, and to make choices around resource allocation among different elements of the response when the members of the leadership team are unable to reach consensus.

A fourth element of individual leadership, and one that was also raised by several interviewees (although it should also be noted that not all interviewees agreed with the idea), was to embody or symbolise the office on the basis of the ‘big picture’ understanding and ‘to reflect ... the whole team: be aware of what is happening ... to reflect that back to everybody, and to acknowledge that this is what we’re all trying to do’. This function was particularly important during difficult or transitional periods for the office: when operations were ramping up; when there were a lot of new staff and –often – poor living standards, or when they were winding down; and when staff were being made redundant. This act of reflection was selective, however. While leaders were expected to recognise, name, and help rectify faults and difficulties, the main purpose was to embody or magnify the strengths of the office and the response.³⁶

The specific elements that leaders reflected (or perhaps projected) and which were seen to have improved the strategy or implementation of the response were:

1. **internal communication** – clarifying by personal example the importance of taking the time to share information;
2. **maintaining organisational values** – and particularly focusing on the viewpoint of crisis-affected people by ‘taking the risk of seeing the programme from the point of view of the community’;
3. **maintaining team spirit** – showing concern for the physical and psychological well-being of staff; and
4. **repeatedly providing a ‘push to deliver’** in terms of ‘energy’, ‘urgency’ and ‘pace’.

The fifth and final role that interviewees suggested should be undertaken by the individual leader was also representational: in this case liaison with and representation to the outside world. While a team can usefully build a picture of the situation and make and implement decisions, external interlocutors can more easily work with a single, accountable representative



The formal leader, by virtue of her/his position, had a specific role to play in ensuring leadership success. This role is difficult and requires organisational, conceptual and political skills.



of the organisation. In many cases this could be a team member to whom authority has been delegated, but in dealings particularly with the host government and HQ, leaders and leadership teams suggested that it was generally the role of the formal leader to represent the office, which might involve interpreting the concerns and priorities of external parties to the office and vice versa, and in some cases might involve shielding the office from unwarranted interference.

In sum, while the great majority of interviewees thought that a good leadership team was as important as – or in some cases more important than – a good individual leader in ‘leading’ an operational response, they also thought that the formal leader, by virtue of her/his position, had a specific role to play in ensuring leadership success (particularly in terms of the accountability inherent in the position and the fact that the leader did not have a function-specific role and so could obtain and reflect a balanced view of the whole office). This role is undoubtedly difficult and requires organisational, conceptual and political skills. At the same time it is more realistic and achievable than a requirement to single-handedly lead the office through individual skills and force of personality alone.

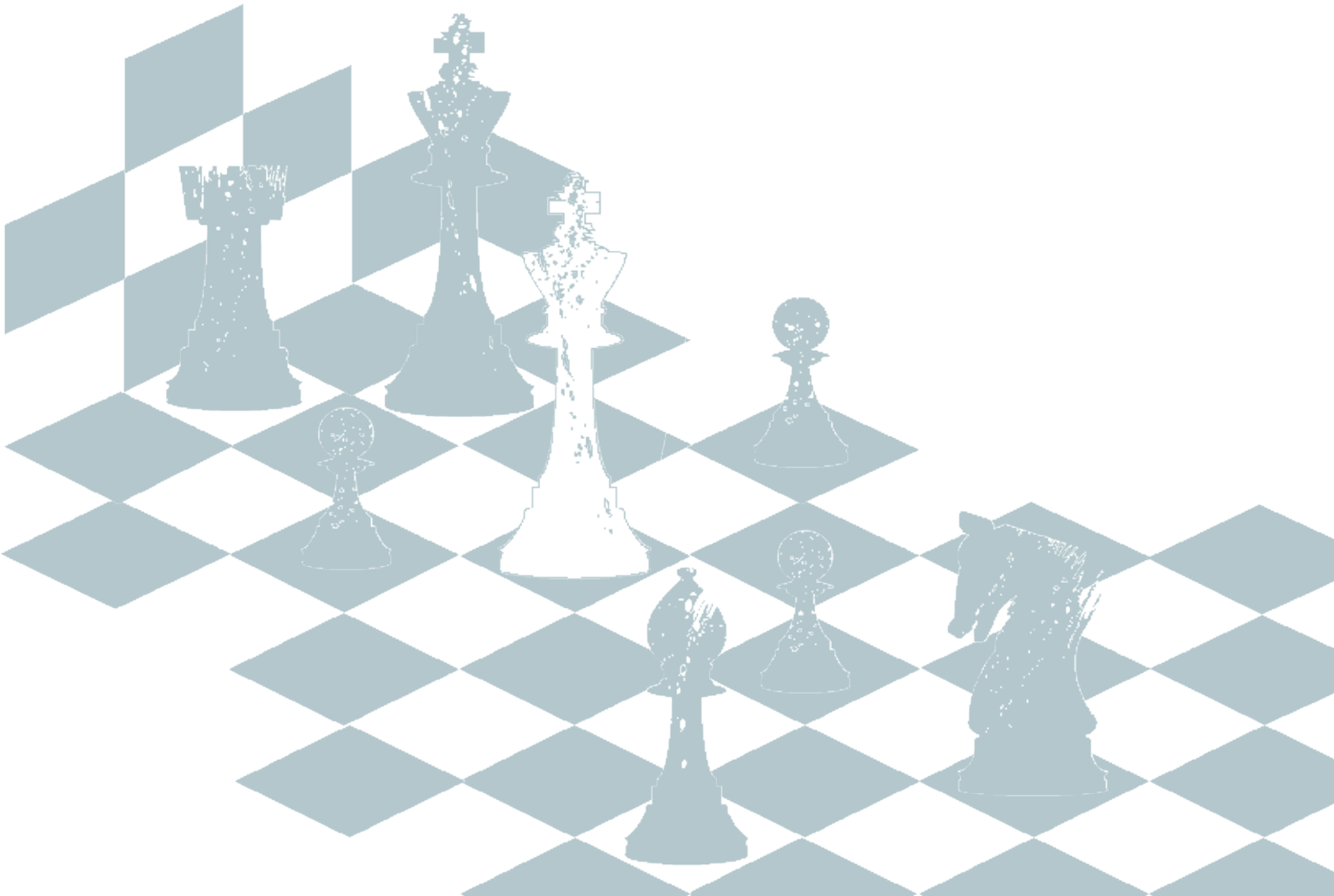
In Brief

- The leader does matter: the results of the questionnaire showed a strong correlation between the effectiveness of leadership and the skills of the individual leader.
- One of the most important contributions the leader makes to effective leadership is putting the systems and structures discussed in this report in place.

In addition, effective leaders:

- are accountable for the actions of the office and retain the right to take the final decisions
- reflect the office back to itself
- serve as the interface with other organisations.





7. Conclusions

This report set out to consider the degree to which a variety of factors contribute to the effective fulfilment of leadership functions in an operational humanitarian context. On the basis of previous work conducted in the ALNAP Network and of an extensive literature review (Knox Clarke, 2013) we expected that these factors would include elements related to the abilities and experience of the individual with formal leadership responsibility, but also – and perhaps more importantly – elements related to the way in which senior managers around the formal leader worked as a team, and elements related to the existence of organisational elements such as structures and standard operating procedures. These expectations were formulated as hypotheses, which were then tested through a structured questionnaire (to establish whether there were correlations between these elements being in place and the success of leadership) and through a series of interviews (which attempted to gain a better description of the nature of any correlations observed through the interview process).

The research provided evidence in support of the hypotheses that operational leadership is more effective where:

- *decision-making and accountability do not rest exclusively with one individual, but are dispersed throughout a team*
- *the decision-making authority, accountability, and resources controlled by each individual and group involved in the operation and their relative responsibilities are clear and agreed*
- *the organisation has flexible operating principles for working in commonly encountered operational situations*
- *the organisation has and uses clear procedures for determining the information set required for decision-making, and for collecting and analysing this information and disseminating it to existing and incoming team members.*

The research further provided support for the hypothesis that *the idea of what constitutes and contributes to 'good' operational leadership will differ from one person to another*, and suggested that individual – and subjective – beliefs about good leadership may be strongly influenced by a variety of assumptions and beliefs specific to the individual. As a result, it may be unwise to develop policy around leadership based on interviews alone (or other mechanisms that ask about the topic directly).

At the same time the research failed to provide support for the hypothesis that *individuals with similar cultural backgrounds will hold similar models of 'good leadership'* – an interesting and unexpected finding that may merit further study.

The design of the research did not allow us to incontrovertibly prove or disprove the hypothesis that each of the four factors listed above (team decision-making, clarity around roles and responsibilities, etc.) are as important to an effective leadership process as the skills and abilities of the individual 'leader'. We can say that each factor is important and that the individual leader is also important. We do not have information from the questionnaire that allows us to make a direct statement about the relative importance of these factors. While several factors correlated more strongly with effective leadership than did the skills of the individual, the difference was not great, and in any case the strength of the correlation is not a reliable guide to the relative importance of various factors in contributing to effective leadership. When interviewees were asked to determine whether the individual leader or other factors were more important in ensuring good leadership, results were mixed (although tending to suggest that the 'other factors' were more important). As outlined above, interviews are not necessarily a reliable way to understand the relative importance of the various factors contributing to leadership.

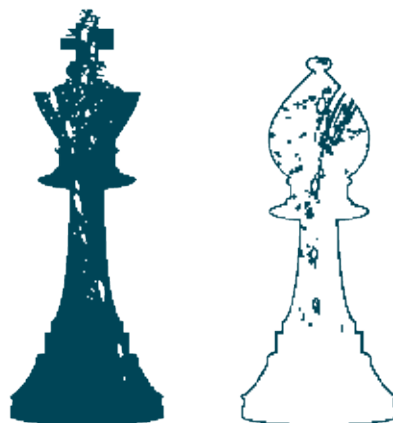
However, on the basis of other responses to the questionnaire (around the most effective type of leadership and the importance of support to the leader) and the broader responses to interviews, we feel confident to suggest that, while the knowledge and experience of the individual leader are important, these individual attributes form only one of a number of significant contributory factors to effective leadership, and that these other factors are at least as important as the individual. We should not think of these other elements as 'supporting' good leadership and we should not confuse the person of the leader with the fact of leadership.

In addition to these conclusions, the research provided a variety of other findings.

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Many teams at the country level were already using collective decision-making, extensive delegation of authority, effective information collection and management systems, and simple operating procedures.

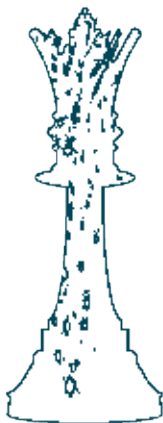
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Humanitarian leadership teams are generally more diverse in terms of gender and ethnicity than may have been previously assumed. Having said this, there is still some way to go to achieve gender parity (both teams and leaders in the sample were around 60% male, 40% female) and to ensure that formal leadership positions are held by a globally diverse group of individuals: fully 64% of country directors/representatives were from Europe, North America or Australia.

These teams generally feel that both the quality of humanitarian responses and the quality of leadership in these responses are acceptable or good (with mean scores of 4.3/6 and 4.2/6, respectively). While these results reflect the views of the leaders and leadership teams, and so do not tell the whole story, and while the system as a whole should continue to aim for consistent improvement, they do not in themselves suggest a crisis of leadership or widespread failures in humanitarian responses.

While humanitarian policy-makers in the main appear to have been fairly slow to recognise the importance of leadership teams and of organisational structures and procedures in the effective fulfilment of leadership functions, many teams at the country level (and particularly the teams rating themselves as more successful) were already using collective decision-making, extensive delegation of authority, effective information collection and management systems, and simple operating procedures. However, these approaches were often used informally and ‘tacitly’: while everyone in the team was using them, they had not been formally identified, recorded or agreed on as the best way to work. This may not matter in many cases, but it does prevent new arrivals from being brought ‘up to speed’ quickly, because – in the absence of written guidance – the only way to learn how things work in an office is through exposure and trial and error. Where teams have not made their ways of working explicit, it is also more difficult for them to consider – and improve – these ways of working.



This work of making procedures (and structures) explicit needs to take place in the country office itself. Global organisational guidance can serve as a useful point of departure for country teams, but, given differences in context and resource availability, interviewees were clear that each country office needed to consider its own structures and procedures, and regularly reassess the degree to which they were effective in an environment that in many cases was changing rapidly.

Finally, the research suggested that (at least) three elements that contribute to effective operational leadership had not been included in the hypotheses that were tested in the questionnaire and interviews.

1. The first of these is *clarity around organisational purpose*. When the role of the organisation in the country was clear the leadership team found it easier and quicker to create a vision for the response and a plan to implement this vision. Conversely, where the organisation had multiple mandates or conflicting priorities, leadership became more difficult and less effective. In several cases the organisational purpose came from HQ and was derived directly from the mandate or specialities of the organisation. However, as with other elements of effectiveness, such as structure and procedures, this organisational purpose had to be reassessed and contextualised at the country level.
2. The second element that emerged clearly through the interviews was *the importance of preparedness activities*. Effective leadership in an emergency context was based on work that had been done *before* the emergency. The – often chaotic – first hours and days of a rapid-onset emergency are not a good time to clarify organisational purpose, delegations of authority, decision-making processes, minimum information sets or simple procedures. Ideally, this work should be done well before it is needed so that it becomes a part of the daily working of the office and is a regular part of training and induction. In several cases one of the main contributions that the individual leader had made to the effective leadership of the office appeared to be to ensure that these preparedness actions had been taken, i.e. that roles, structures and procedures were in place, and were reviewed as the situation changed.
3. The third important element that was not included in the original hypotheses was *the experience and skills of individual members of the leadership team*. While many humanitarian organisations have placed emphasis on the importance of having a leader with relevant skills and experience, less attention has perhaps been paid to the importance of the skills and operational experience of the other senior staff in the office. But, as we have seen, leadership (and particularly decision-making) in emergencies is greatly enhanced when team members have among them the right technical skills (a set of specialisations beyond any individual) and where there is a diverse range of experience and ways of understanding a situation. Ideally, then, individual members of the leadership team will be highly skilled and experienced, and the team will work in such a way as to combine these skills effectively.

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Effective leadership in an emergency context was based on work that had been done *before* the emergency.

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This research suggests that this individualised idea of leadership is limited, unrealistic and fails to account for how things actually get done successfully in humanitarian operations.

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‘Leadership’ can be very hard to define. When we talk about leadership we are fundamentally talking about how things get done (successfully) in groups or organisations. ‘How things get done’ – and particularly how vision, strategy and implementation get done – is a broad and fairly amorphous topic, and as a result different people will have different ideas and assumptions about what leadership is and how it works. At the same time the humanitarian sector has appeared to settle – at least at the policy level – on a broad set of shared assumptions about what leadership is. This shared idea of leadership is centred on the person of an individual leader: the person who is accountable for the success or failure of a response and who uses her/his individual competencies to get things done or ensure that they get done. As a result the focus of leadership development in the sector has tended to be on identifying leaders with these skills or on developing these skills for individual leaders. Organisations, by devolving responsibility for leadership to individual leaders, have arguably failed to recognise their own accountability for effective response and to put the teams, structures and procedures in place to make leadership work.

This research suggests that this individualised idea of leadership is limited, unrealistic and fails to account for how things actually get done successfully in humanitarian operations. It provides a different – and hopefully more useful – understanding of what ‘leadership’ actually looks like in the field. Essentially, leadership is achieved through a series of interactions between the individual with formal leadership responsibilities and a broader group of individuals in senior management positions (often, but not always, acting as a formal leadership team), regulated by a series of structures and procedures. All three elements – individuals, group and structures/procedures – are necessary parts of leadership, and none appears to be sufficient in itself to explain effective leadership.

Because all three elements contribute to effective operational leadership, it follows that any attempt to improve leadership should move beyond the current focus on the individual to pay greater attention to the leadership team and to structures and procedures. The following recommendations provide a basis for a more comprehensive – and, we believe, effective – approach to improving operational leadership in humanitarian agencies. They are based on the findings of the research and in many cases mirror good practices that are already in place in the most effectively led offices.

8. Recommendations

We have outlined the main findings of the research below, along with tailored recommendations for agencies and country offices.



Currently, many agencies appear to assume that operational leadership is (almost) exclusively the function of the formal leader – normally the country director or representative – and that accountability rests with this individual. This places unrealistic expectations on the individual and obscures the importance of other elements of operational leadership.

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, recognising that a distinction can be made between delegated authority and accountability. In most cases authority should be delegated to a position as close to decisions as possible, but that the organisation retains a high degree of accountability for its performance in an emergency response. Agencies may consider using a responsibility assignment matrix (sometimes known as an RACI matrix) or something similar to assist in this exercise (see Annex 5).

Currently, much leadership development focuses on identifying individuals with leadership competencies and training them in leadership competencies.

With respect to training and staff development, **agencies** should:

- 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
- enhance training and development for other senior staff who participate in leadership teams (this development should include continued professional development in their areas of specialisation and exposure to a variety of disaster response operations in a variety of contexts)
- focus attention on training both leadership teams and individual leaders. Simulations and exercises may be particularly effective in developing group leadership capacity.

Leadership teams are more effective and, in particular, decisions are more effective when they include the views of experienced nationally recruited staff who understand the local context.

Agencies should ensure that they 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.

Leadership is more effective where decision-making is dispersed throughout the leadership team.


Agencies should clarify their attitude and expectations as to how decisions are made at the country level: broadly, who makes which types of decisions. They should also outline the basic minimum steps that they expect to be taken when making decisions (the decision-making process). An outline of a standard decision-making process is included in Annex 5.

Country offices should:

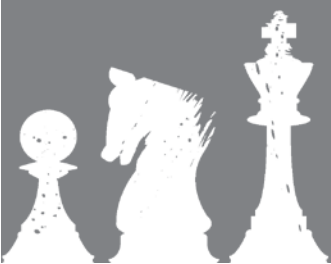
- clarify which types of decisions are ‘office wide’. These will often be those that affect the whole office: the opening or closing of programmes, or decisions that have a significant effect on funding or on the ability of the office to continue to operate in the country. They will also be those where there are substantial disagreements between different functional units in the office that cannot be resolved at a lower level
- for these ‘office-wide’ decisions, clarify the decision-making process and the respective roles of the formal leader and the senior staff in this process. In most cases the formal leader will have the ‘final say’, but the group will provide decision options and/or recommendations
- establish membership criteria for inclusion in the leadership group.



Leadership is more effective when the role and potential of the office in responding to the emergency is clear.

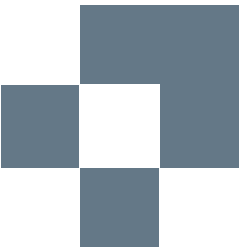


Agencies should continually clarify their role (globally) in emergency response, based on clearly identified areas of expertise.



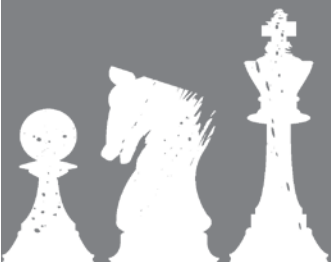
In **country offices** leadership teams should regularly (annually) identify the role that they can best play in emergency responses, based on the global orientation of the organisation and local capacities and needs.

Operational leadership is more effective where the decision-making authority, accountability, and resources controlled by each individual and group involved in the operation and their relative responsibilities are clear and agreed.



Agencies should establish generic templates for organisational structure at the country level, including the key functions to be performed and the units that will perform these functions.

Country offices should:

- ensure that the structure of the office allocates human resources according to operational requirements and provides each unit with clear responsibilities. These responsibilities should ideally not overlap, nor should there be any major ‘gaps’ (areas of work that are not the responsibility of any unit). This organisational structure can use the generic organisational template as a point of departure.
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- review this structure regularly to ensure that there is minimal duplication and that key functions are not ‘falling through the gaps’.
- ensure that staff understand that structures will change and are prepared for responsibilities to move over the course of an emergency response.


Delegation is a necessary and effective approach to making decisions in emergencies.

Agency-level generic templates should clearly identify the levels of delegated decision-making authority and resources. In most cases **HQ** should attempt to delegate as much authority (but not accountability) to the office as possible. The **country office** should attempt to delegate as much authority to field offices as possible. Control over resources should be delegated with decision-making authority.


In **country offices**, for decisions that are not ‘office wide’ (see above), but relate to these specific responsibilities, the leader/leadership team should clearly delegate authority. Ideally, this should be done so that decisions are made as close to the site of implementation as possible. Where authority is delegated the decision-maker should also have control of the resources needed to implement the decision.



Operational leadership is more effective when the organisation has flexible operating principles for working in commonly encountered operational situations.

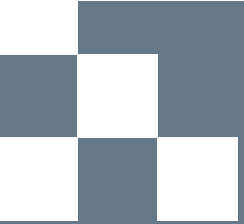


Agencies and **global clusters** should consider reviewing previous successful/unsuccessful responses in order to identify 'simple rules' for interventions.



Country offices, **clusters** and **humanitarian country teams** should consider reviewing previous successful/unsuccessful responses in the light of agency-wide/global guidance. These rules should be consistently reviewed. Outline steps for establishing simple rules are presented in Annex 6.

Operational leadership is more effective when the organisation has and uses clear procedures for determining the information set required for decision-making, and for collecting, analysing, and disseminating this information to existing and incoming team members.



Agencies, **global clusters** and **bodies concerned with assessments** (NATF, ACAPS) should continue efforts to establish generic minimum information sets required for decision-making in emergencies, and to ensure the uptake and adaption of these information sets. These information sets should:

- include questions on the local capacity for response
- clarify which information sets should be collected over time as part of ongoing monitoring exercises.

They should continue efforts to identify information technologies that can assist with the collection, analysis – and, critically – presentation of information. Particular attention should be paid to technologies that are easily learned and can present large amounts of information in an accessible manner.

Country offices and **clusters at the country level** should identify in advance key decisions that they expect they will need to make and the minimum information required to make them, using global guidance as a starting point.

They should also identify where and how this information can be accessed, and who will be responsible for its collection and analysis. In many cases information collection, analysis and dissemination will be most effectively conducted by clusters, inter-cluster coordination mechanisms and other inter-agency bodies. Baseline information should be collected before the onset of an emergency.

In addition, **country offices** and **clusters** should consider:

- the basic quality standards that will be used in information collection and analysis
- how best to use information technology to present information clearly.

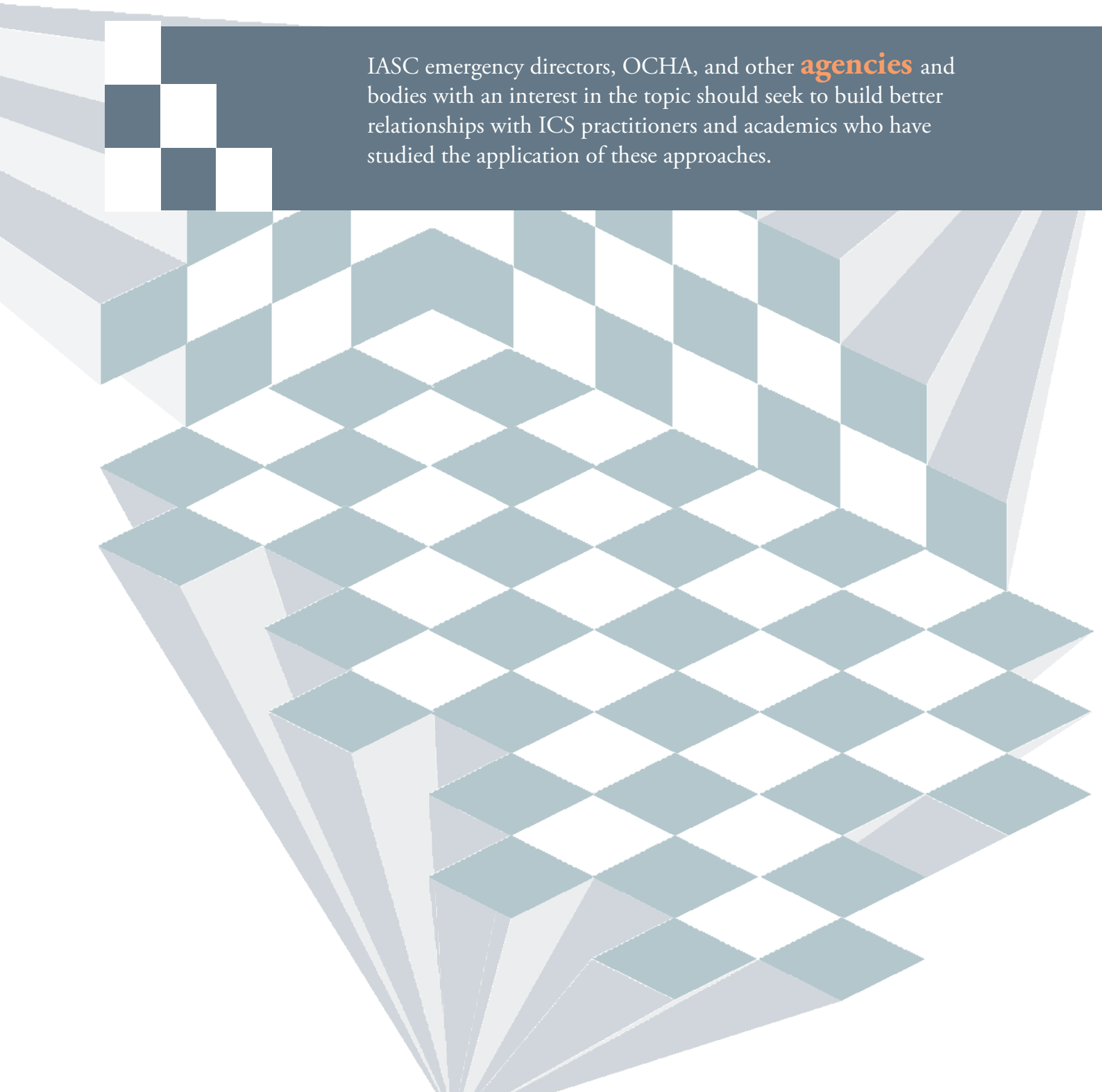
They should establish monitoring systems to collect basic information on the emergency as it unfolds and on the effects of operations on the emergency to allow continuing situational awareness and to gauge the effects and applicability of simple rules.

Country offices should clarify who in the office is expected to have the ‘big picture’ and ensure that this individual or group receives regular information updates.

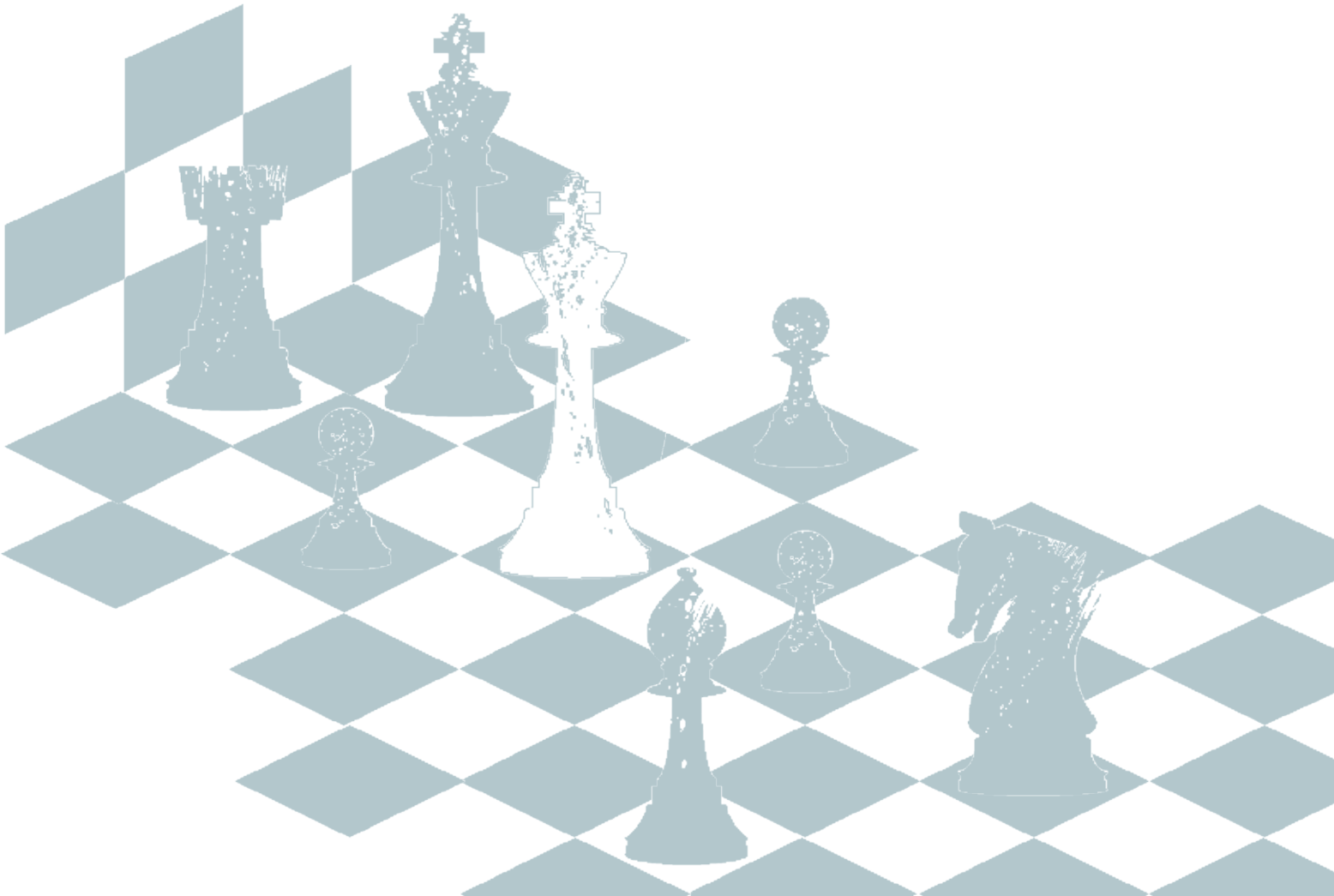
They should ensure that they have effective induction and debriefing mechanisms in place.



The approach taken to leadership by many other emergency response actors (especially civil defence actors) differs markedly from that used in the international humanitarian system. We may have much to learn from the experiences of these actors, and particularly from experiences of implementing ICS models.



IASC emergency directors, OCHA, and other **agencies** and bodies with an interest in the topic should seek to build better relationships with ICS practitioners and academics who have studied the application of these approaches.



Annexes



Annex 1: Method and constraints

1.1 Establishing clarity around definitions

At the outset of this research it was important to establish a clear, consistent and generally agreed definition for the subject of study. Lack of precision around terms such as ‘humanitarian’ and ‘leadership’ could lead to invalid comparisons being made during the research, while different understandings of the terms could potentially lead to the research findings being applied in contexts where they are not relevant. On the other hand, a clear definition allowed cases (country offices) to be selected that fell within the scope of the study. It also provided a clear scope and focus to questionnaire and semi-structured interview questions.

The definition of ‘leadership’ was adopted from previous ALNAP work on the topic (see section 1, above). This work had been extensively presented and discussed with a broad range of humanitarian practitioners and had not met any significant disagreement.

The term ‘operational leadership’ was defined as *leadership (as per the above definition) that was consistently involved with decisions about the design or implementation of a specific humanitarian response*. This definition excluded ‘one-off’ decisions made on technical issues by HQ units (because they were not consistently involved, although may become involved on specific technical elements of programme design, for example). It also excluded decisions around the generation of organisational policy and strategy, because these were not decisions about specific responses. In most cases operational decisions were made at the country level or ‘below’, although in some cases the strategy and implementation of responses were directly controlled from ‘country desks’ in the organisation’s HQ.

The term ‘humanitarian’ in this *context was concerned specifically with humanitarian response activities* (broadly speaking, activities undertaken to address excess mortality, disease morbidity, or malnutrition, or immediate and significant threats to the livelihood or well-being of a large population). The definition of ‘humanitarian’ for the purposes of this research generally excluded preparedness, recovery or developmental activities (although some teams were also involved in these activities, this was not the focus of the study).

1.2 The research question

At the literature review stage the research question (based on previous ALNAP work) was ‘To what degree are models of collaborative leadership relevant in humanitarian response, and under what circumstances is collaborative leadership successful?’ On conclusion of the literature review, this question was reassessed. The literature review had provided information on collaborative leadership, but had also suggested that a variety of other factors may be equally or more important in contributing to effective operational leadership and

that these factors should also be considered. As a result, the research question was broadened to: ‘What are the factors that are most important in contributing to effective operational humanitarian leadership and what concrete steps can international humanitarian organisations take to improve the effectiveness of their operational leadership?’

1.3 Establishing hypotheses related to operational humanitarian leadership

On the basis of the literature review (the methodology for the literature review can be found as Annex A of ‘Who’s in charge here?’ available at www.alnap.org/resource/8640) we identified a series of hypotheses related to the research question. These hypotheses were as follows:

1. Ideas of operational leadership in the humanitarian sector are culturally constructed. As a result the idea of what constitutes and what contributes to ‘good’ operational leadership will differ from one person to another, but individuals with similar cultural backgrounds will hold similar models of ‘good leadership’.
2. The process of operational leadership is more effective when:
 - decision-making and accountability do not rest exclusively with one individual, but are dispersed throughout a team
 - the decision-making authority, accountability, and resources controlled by each individual and group involved in the operation, as well as their relative responsibilities, are clear and agreed
 - the organisation has flexible operating principles for working in commonly encountered operational situations
 - the organisation has and uses clear procedures for determining the information set required for decision-making and for collecting, analysing, and disseminating this information to existing and incoming team members.
3. Each of the factors listed above is as important to an effective leadership process as the skills and abilities of the individual ‘leader’.

1.4 Testing the hypotheses

We tested the hypotheses using a two-step process. In the first step we used a questionnaire sent to a purposive sample of country offices. The questionnaire aimed to identify whether the factors outlined – and a variety of other factors – correlated with effective leadership. It also aimed to obtain a ranking of the various factors in order of importance of their contribution to effective leadership. Finally, by disaggregating the results of questions related to favoured leadership type by gender and age of respondent, the questionnaire aimed to test whether individuals of similar cultural backgrounds and of the same gender held similar models of ‘good leadership’.

The second step was a series of semi-structured interviews with members of leadership groups in some of the country offices selected to participate in the questionnaire. These interviews aimed to gain more information on the nature of the correlations that had been identified by the analysis of questionnaire results, i.e. whether the correlation was the result of a factor contributing to effectiveness, or was a consequence of effectiveness or another factor. The interviews also aimed to identify additional factors that contribute to leadership effectiveness and to find out more about how country offices had put these elements in place.

1.5 Establishing the sample

The research used a purposive sample of country offices. We aimed to ensure that the sample as closely reflected the ‘total population’ (i.e. all country offices of all agencies engaged in humanitarian response work) as possible.

To this end we decided to choose countries for the study in a way that was roughly proportional to the distribution of global humanitarian expenditure based on two main criteria – geographical location (by region) and the nature of the emergency in question (natural disaster or human-made emergency).

For expenditure breakdowns, we used figures from the 2012 *State of the humanitarian system* report (ALNAP, 2012: 37) showing total funding by disaster type between 2006 and 2011. This showed 78.67% (\$39,594 billion) was spent on complex emergencies and 21.32% (\$10,733 billion) on natural disasters.

The data for regional spending gave the following picture:

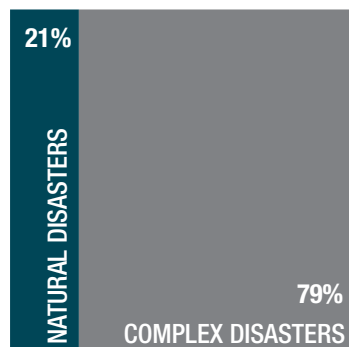
- Africa: \$27,005 million (55.07%)
- Asia and the Pacific: \$11,224 million (22.88%)
- Middle East/North Africa: \$5,943 million (12.11%)
- Latin America and the Caribbean: \$4,382 million (8.93%)
- South/Central/East Europe and the Caucasus: \$483 million (0.98%).

The data also showed that spending is not equally spread across all countries, but that a small number of countries receive a large proportion of the spend. The 2012 *GHA report* (GHA, 2012) shows that the top 20 country recipients of humanitarian aid from 2001 to 2010 received 74.6% of the humanitarian spend in this period. As a result we attempted to select the sample so as to reflect the importance of these countries in terms of humanitarian expenditure.

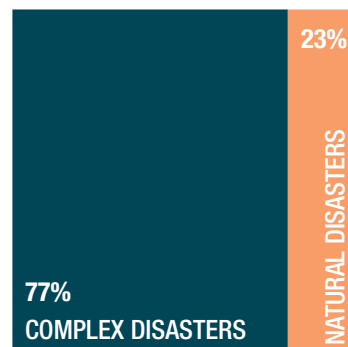
Taking these criteria into account (type of emergency, region, and size and duration of the emergency, as reflected by expenditure) we established the following list of countries as broadly reflecting the whole population: Afghanistan, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Indonesia, Mali, Myanmar, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, the Philippines, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Yemen and Zimbabwe.

The charts below shows the degree to which the country sample reflects humanitarian expenditure according to the three criteria.

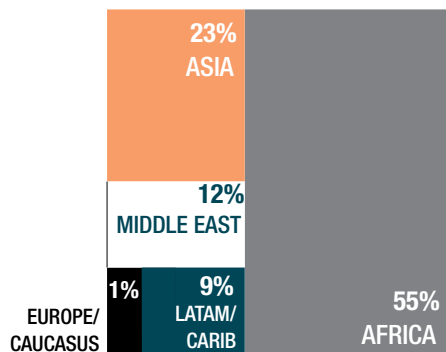
TOTAL HUMANITARIAN SPEND, 2006-2010



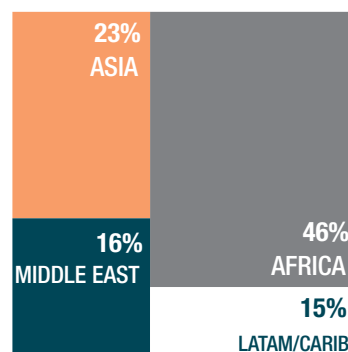
SELECTED COUNTRIES BY % OF HUMANITARIAN SPEND



TOTAL HUMANITARIAN SPEND BY REGION, 2006-2010

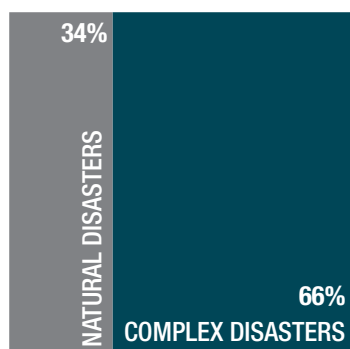


SELECTED COUNTRIES BY REGION

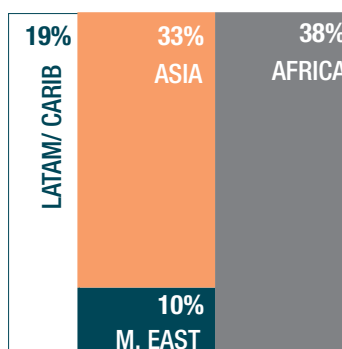


We had aimed to include two offices from each country, but in the event participation from the various countries was uneven. Similarly, the number of respondents differed from one country office to another so that the final sample of respondents reflected the selection criteria less well than the original sample of countries:

PARTICIPANTS BY % OF TOTAL HUMANITARIAN SPEND



PARTICIPANTS BY REGION



Interviews were also conducted according to a purposive sample. Here, because we were looking to establish the nature of correlations between certain factors and effective leadership, we chose country offices where scores for leadership were high and where there were particularly high scores for the factors of interest, and also offices where scores for leadership were lower, but there were high scores for the factors of interest. For each country office we requested interviews with the head of office (the country director or representative) and one other questionnaire respondent who was chosen at random.

1.6 Analysis of questionnaire results

The agency survey was sent to the 208 individuals who were identified as being members of the senior management/leadership teams of the country offices in the sample. We received 168 responses, of which 160 were complete enough to be used in the analysis (a response rate of 77%). Descriptive information about respondents (country of origin, gender, leadership status, organisational affiliation) was collected to allow responses to be disaggregated along these lines.

The questionnaire was developed with the aims of:

- establishing descriptive statistics related to the leadership group in the sample
- establishing whether there was any statistically significant relationship between gender/region of origin and responses related to preferred leadership style
- allowing respondents to rank certain factors that were hypothesised to contribute to leadership and establishing whether there was a consistent pattern in the way that factors had been ranked

- establishing whether there was a statistically significant correlation between the presence of certain factors in the office and effective leadership.

By asking respondents to consciously rank factors that contributed to success and separately attempting to establish correlation between factors and success, the questionnaire also aimed to establish the degree to which subjective respondent assessment aligned with the more objective correlations.

However, it should be noted that the correlations were not entirely objective, because they were based on a self-assessment: the teams were judging their own effectiveness (see Annex 1, sec. 1.8 'Constraints', below).

The questionnaire is available as Annex B. It was made available in English, French and Spanish, with each country office choosing which language it wished to use.

To establish the relationship between gender/regional origin and responses related to leadership style respondents were asked (question 25) to agree with one of three statements about leadership. A Fisher's exact test was conducted on the results. Due to the fact that there were few individuals in many of the cultural background categories, this variable was simplified so that each individual was classified as either of 'Anglo-Saxon origin' or 'other origin'. Individuals were classified as the former if they identified themselves as North American, Northern European, Western European, Australian or from New Zealand. In addition, responses to question 24 (ranking factors by order of importance in contributing to effective leadership) were also analysed using profile plots of mean responses, and also using a series of Fisher's exact test.

Fisher's exact test was employed for the analyses because these questions did not use a Likert scale. In using this test a p-value of less than 0.05 was deemed statistically significant and implied that the responses to the pair of questions were at least partially dependent on one another.

To establish whether there was a consistent pattern in the way that contributors ranked factors contributing to effective leadership (question 24), a Spearman's rank correlation test was run between the ranking assigned to each pair of statements.

To establish whether there was a statistically significant correlation between the presence of certain factors in the office and effective leadership, we needed to establish whether responses to questions 4, 5 and 6 (which related to the three elements of leadership) were collectively related to the responses given to other questions. Because responders tended to give similar scores to questions 4, 5 and 6, a combined score for these was derived. This combined score was calculated as follows:

1. For those who gave the same score to questions 4, 5 and 6, this became their combined score.
2. For those who gave the same score to any two of questions 4, 5 and 6, this value became their combined score. The anomalous score was one unit above or below the other scores in most cases, but no more than two units.

3. For those whose scores for questions 4, 5 and 6 consisted of three consecutive integers (in any order), the mid-value became their combined score.

All individuals could be classified into one of these groups, with the majority (95%) falling into the first two categories.

Spearman's rho correlation coefficient was used to quantify the correlation between responses to pairs of Likert-scaled questions, including the combined score for questions 4, 5 and 6. This method was chosen because it was suitable for data on an ordinal scale, as was the case here. Spearman's rho yields a correlation coefficient anywhere between -1 and 1, with -1 denoting perfect negative correlation between the responses to a pair of questions, 0 denoting no correlation, and 1 denoting perfect positive correlation.

In addition to quantifying the correlation between responses, pairs of questions were also tested to see whether the responses were independent of each other. A p-value of less than 0.05 generated from this test was considered statistically significant. In this case the responses to the pair of questions were deemed to be at least partially dependent on each other.

The analysis of questionnaire results is given in Annex 3.

1.7 Analysis of interview results

Two rounds of interviews were conducted. In the first round a generic questionnaire was used to guide semi-structured interviews (see Annex 4). The second round concentrated on specific issues that had not been adequately addressed in the first round. In addition, a small number of interviews and conversations were conducted with emergency management specialists from outside the humanitarian sector.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed (in all but three cases: in one case the interviewee did not wish to be recorded, while in two others recording equipment did not work and interviewers instead took notes by hand). Statements from the transcripts were then put together by theme to establish areas of commonality and difference among the interviewees.

1.8 Constraints

Although we attempted to ensure that all country offices fell within the scope of the research (as outlined in the definition of operational humanitarian leadership), one country office (representing five results, or 3% of the total) focused on development rather than humanitarian activities. In addition, at the time of the research some offices were more focused on reconstruction than on response activities. Similarly, while it was fairly easy to clarify during interviews that questions referred to leadership during the response phase, this may not have been clear to all respondents when they were completing the questionnaire. As a result, the responses may not refer exclusively to leadership during a humanitarian response.

With respect to sampling, the main constraints have been outlined above. Because participation at the country level was voluntary (agencies supported participation, but each individual office ‘opted in’), it was not possible to have two offices per sample country. This made the sample less reflective of the system than originally planned. Overall, while we hope that the sample allows findings and recommendations to be translated more generally, the purposive nature of the sample means that results are only strictly valid for the sample of 34 offices considered here.

Similarly, in designing the sample, we did not take account of the relative expenditure of different organisational types (UN, Red Cross, international NGO, national NGO). So while offices from UN organisations, Red Cross/Red Crescent societies, and international and national NGOs were all represented, they may not be represented in a way that reflects their relative size (in terms of expenditure) in the system.

More broadly, the denominator of expenditure was used as a proxy of relative contribution to organised humanitarian response. We used expenditure because the information was available and easily accessible. Readers may feel, however, that alternative indicators may be more appropriate.

In completing the questionnaire the phrasing of one question (question 24) was ambiguous (it was not clear that ‘1’ related to the most important factor and ‘7’ the least important factor) and this may have affected the results, amplifying the lack of a consistent pattern across all responses.

Analysis of ‘Regional/cultural background’ and the correlation of region of origin with certain responses (particularly the attempt to contrast ‘Anglo-Saxon’ and ‘non-Anglo-Saxon’) may have been affected by the relatively low numbers of responses from North America and the failure of the question to disaggregate people of a UK background from other Northern or Western Europeans.

Problems associated with the ranking question (question 24) and the fact that the statistical tests showed correlation but could not demonstrate contribution meant that it was not possible on the basis of the questionnaire to say whether certain factors were more or less important than others in creating effective leadership. In particular, it was not possible to make a clear statement on the relative importance of individual leadership skills in relation to other factors contributing to effective leadership.

Finally, the questionnaire relied on participants’ self-scoring the degree to which ‘their’ emergency operations were successful, and the degree to which they were effective in establishing a vision and strategy and in implementing the strategy. While this approach is undoubtedly less accurate than using external (and potentially more objective) observers to score the results, we deemed the latter option impractical, given resource and time constraints. We further noted that self-scoring of team effectiveness has been broadly demonstrated to be valid when compared with external scoring in other contexts (Hermida et al., 2011; Weller et al., 2013).

Annex 2: The questionnaire

The English version of the questionnaire is given below – response options are given in brackets.

1. Gender (male/female).
2. Where would you say you are from – in terms of nationality/background? (list of options)
3. How long have you worked in this office in a management/leadership role? (list of options)
4. How effective is your office in creating a common vision for your organisation's humanitarian operations in the country? (Likert scale)
5. How effective is your office in creating a strategy and prioritising actions in order to achieve this vision? (Likert scale)
6. How effective is your office in implementing plans for humanitarian operations in the country? (Likert scale)
7. Overall, how effective are your organisation's humanitarian operations in the country? (Likert scale)
8. The role and main functions of our organisation in addressing the humanitarian crisis in this country are agreed by everyone in the office. (Likert scale)
9. The role and main functions of each manager and department in our office are clear and respected by everyone in the office. (Likert scale)
10. The individual with overall responsibility for humanitarian operations in this office displays effective leadership skills. (Likert scale)
11. The individual with overall responsibility for humanitarian operations in this office receives adequate support from other managers. (Likert scale)
12. In your office, is there a group that has a formal management or leadership role (a management team, or similar) that works on emergency/humanitarian issues? (yes/no)
13. The role and functions of the formal management team (where one exists) are clear and agreed by everyone in the office.
14. There are clear criteria for being a member of this management/decision-making group (where one exists) and these criteria are respected.

15. In the office, we are clear on the information that we require for effective humanitarian programming in our country. (Likert scale)
16. We follow agreed procedures for collecting and analysing the information that we need. (Likert scale)
17. In the office, we have clear, simple procedures for commonly encountered operational situations (assessment, logistics, security, distributions, etc.). (Likert scale)
18. In the office, we follow a clear and agreed process for making decisions. (Likert scale)
19. In general, important decisions are made by: (list of options)
20. In the office, most important decisions are of high quality. (Likert scale)
21. In the office, most important decisions are made quickly. (Likert scale)
22. There is generally a high degree of trust between managers in the office (as individuals). (Likert scale)
23. Where disagreements or conflict occur between managers in the office, they are generally resolved effectively. (Likert scale)
24. The factors which are most important in helping us to create a vision; plan a response; and implement the response are (please rank from 1 to 7):
 - a. The abilities of the leader (country director or similar)
 - b. Clarity around who does what (roles and responsibilities)
 - c. Having clear, simple operating procedures
 - d. Knowing what information we need, and having as much of this information as possible
 - e. Having a clear process for making decisions
 - f. Relationships between managers
 - g. Having a sense of shared accountability between managers
25. Which of the following statements about leadership do you most agree with? (list of options)

Annex 3: Questionnaire results

Text and analysis by Dr Elinor Mair Jones of the University of Reading.

The data comprise a total of 160 completed questionnaires. Of these, however, 33 individuals did not respond to the entire survey. Most questions have some degree of ‘missingness’, with the exception of questions 3 through 7.

3.1 Describing the responders

Tables 1 and 2 describe the breakdown of responders in terms of gender and nationality or background.

Around 60% of responders are men, with a good proportion reporting their nationality as East African, Northern or Western European, or South-East Asian.

TABLE 1. BREAKDOWN OF RESPONDERS BY GENDER

Male	Female
95	64
59.75%	40.25%

TABLE 2. BREAKDOWN OF RESPONDERS BY NATIONALITY/BACKGROUND

Nationality/background	Count	Percentage
Central Africa	2	1.27
East Africa	23	14.56
North Africa	2	1.27
Southern Africa	8	5.06
West Africa	5	3.16
Caribbean	5	3.16
Central America	0	0
North America	12	7.59
South America	10	6.33
Central Asia	7	4.43
East Asia	6	3.80
South-East Asia	17	10.76
South Asia	7	4.43
West Asia	3	1.90
Eastern Europe	2	1.27

Northern Europe	17	10.76
Southern Europe	4	2.53
Western Europe	23	14.56
Australia and New Zealand	5	3.16
Melanesia	0	0

Responders were from 13 distinct agencies, although 75% were from five agencies. The breakdown is in Table 3.

TABLE 3. BREAKDOWN OF RESPONDERS BY AGENCY

Agency	Count	Percentage
UNICEF	24	15.01
Oxfam	18	11.26
CARE	6	3.75
CoAR	3	1.88
DRC	10	6.25
German Red Cross	2	1.25
GOAL	16	10.00
Karina	4	2.50
Medair	9	5.63
Netherlands Red Cross	5	3.13
Swiss Red Cross	4	2.50
WFP	25	15.63
World Vision	34	21.25

Table 4 shows the breakdown of the leadership status of the responder where this was known.

TABLE 4. BREAKDOWN OF RESPONDERS BY LEADERSHIP ROLE

Responder is a leader	Count	Percentage
No	121	81.76
Yes	27	18.24

3.2 Responses to questions about leadership effectiveness

All responders answered questions 4, 5 and 6. For all three questions most responders gave a score of 3, 4 or 5.

Strong positive correlation was detected between responses to questions 4 and 5, with a Spearman's rho correlation coefficient of 0.82. There is very strong evidence to suggest that responses to questions 4 and 5 are not independent of each other ($p < 0.0001$).

Positive correlation was also detected between questions 4 and 6, and again between questions 5 and 6, with a Spearman's rho correlation coefficient of 0.53 and 0.60, respectively. Note that the correlation is not as strong as that observed between questions 4 and 5. Again, there is strong evidence that responses to questions 4 and 6 are not independent of each other ($p < 0.0001$), and similarly for questions 5 and 6 (again, $p < 0.0001$).

To simplify later analyses, responses to questions 4, 5 and 6 were combined to give an overall score. The approach used gave a result expressed as a whole number, which allowed this combined score to be used in further tests. Table 5 shows that a large proportion of responders gave the same score to at least two questions and all responses fitted into one of the four categories given in the table.

The derived 'combined score' is given also given in Table 5 (x denotes a score; we do not consider which question prompts which response here).

TABLE 5. RESPONSE PATTERN FOR QUESTIONS 4, 5 AND 6

Response type	x, x, x	x, x, x±1	x, x, x±2	x-1, x, x+1
Count	60	80	12	8
Percentage	37.5	50	7.5	5
Derived score	x	x	x	x

For those who gave the same score to two of the three questions, the breakdown is given in Table 6.

TABLE 6. ANALYSIS OF SCORES WHEN TWO QUESTIONS WERE SCORED THE SAME

Score type	Question 4 scored differently		Question 5 scored differently		Question 6 scored differently	
	Lower	Higher	Lower	Higher	Lower	Higher
x, x, x±1	24 (30%)		11 (14%)		45 (56%)	
	11 (14%)	13 (16%)	7 (9%)	4 (5%)	17 (21%)	28 (35%)
	0 (0%)	1 (8.3%)	1 (8.3%)	0 (0%)	5 (41.7%)	5 (41.7%)
x, x, x±2	1 (8.3%)		1 (8.3%)		10 (83.3%)	
	0 (0%)	1 (8.3%)	1 (8.3%)	0 (0%)	5 (41.7%)	5 (41.7%)
	0 (0%)	1 (8.3%)	1 (8.3%)	0 (0%)	5 (41.7%)	5 (41.7%)

When the same score is given to two out of the three questions, it is slightly more probable that the response to question 6 differs. However, with a small sample as we have here, it is not possible to see whether responses to question 6 differ systematically from the responses to questions 4 and 5.

3.3 Do questions related to ‘success factors’ correlate with the combined score for leadership effectiveness?

Spearman’s rho correlation coefficient was used to detect correlation between pairs of responses to questions. Table 7 gives the Spearman rho correlation coefficient for each question listed with the combined score for questions 4, 5 and 6. The table has been ordered so that questions with the highest correlation are displayed first (because question 10 is of particular interest it is highlighted in bold in the table). Whether responses to a particular question are independent of the combined score for questions 4, 5 and 6 is assessed using the p-value in the table.

TABLE 7 SPEARMAN RANK CORRELATION BETWEEN THE COMBINED SCORE FOR QUESTIONS 4, 5 AND 6 AND THE LISTED QUESTIONS

Question	Topic	Spearman rank correlation	p-value
11	The individual with overall responsibility receives support.	0.62	<0.0001
9	The role and main functions of each manager and department in our office in responding to the humanitarian situation are clear and respected by everyone in the office.	0.60	<0.0001
15	In the office, we are clear on the information that we require for effective humanitarian programming in our country.	0.57	<0.0001
8	The role and main functions of our organisation in addressing the humanitarian crisis in this country are agreed by everyone in the office.	0.56	<0.0001
10	The individual with overall responsibility for humanitarian operations in this office displays effective leadership skills.	0.56	<0.0001
23	Where disagreements or conflict occur between managers in the office, they are generally resolved effectively.	0.54	<0.0001
16	We follow agreed procedures for collecting and analysing the information that we need for effective humanitarian programming.	0.51	<0.0001
17	In the office, we have clear, simple procedures for commonly encountered operational situations related to emergency/humanitarian response (assessment, logistics, security, distributions, etc.).	0.50	<0.0001
18	In the office, we follow a clear and agreed process for making decisions related to emergency/humanitarian operations.	0.48	<0.0001
13	The role and functions of this management team are clear and agreed by everyone in the office.	0.47	<0.0001
14	There are clear criteria for being a member of this management/decision-making group, and these criteria are respected.	0.47	<0.0001
22	There is generally a high degree of trust between managers in the office (as individuals).	0.47	<0.0001
12	In your office, is there a group that has a formal management or leadership role (a management team, or similar) that works on emergency/humanitarian issues?	0.23	0.005

Responses to all the questions in Table 7 were found to be dependent on the combined score for questions 4, 5 and 6. The correlation between each question and the combined score for questions 4, 5 and 6 was found to be positive, and with the exception of question 12, this correlation was fairly pronounced.

3.4 The role of the leader

Responders were asked to rank seven factors in order of the importance of their contribution to effective leadership. The statements are given below.

24a	The abilities of the leader
24b	Clarity around who does what
24c	Having clear, simple operating procedures
24d	Knowing what information we need
24e	Having a clear process for making decisions
24f	Relationship between managers
24g	Having a sense of shared accountability between managers

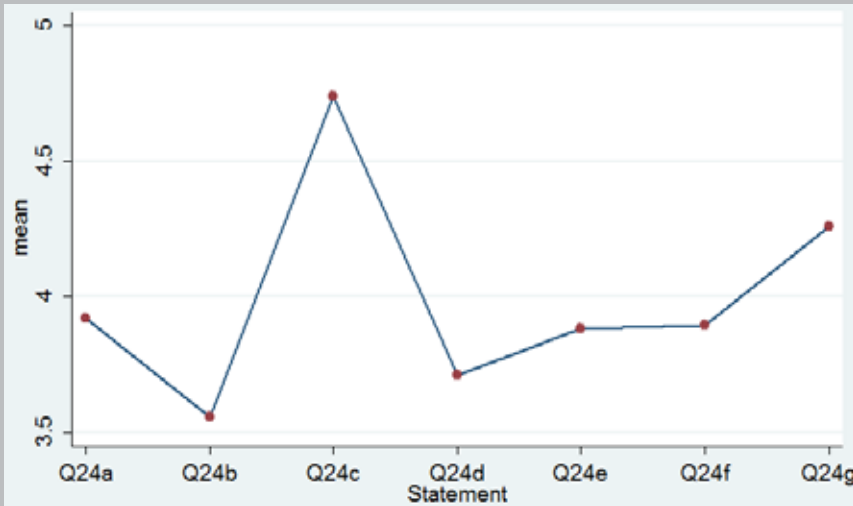
The frequency of each ranking for each statement is given in Table 8, where the modal rank is highlighted in bold for each statement. A ranking of 1 is assumed to be the statement of most importance to the responder. However, it is not clear whether all responders adhered to this, and so the results should be interpreted with care.

TABLE 8 FREQUENCY OF RANKING FOR EACH STATEMENT

		Rank						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
24a	The abilities of the leader	14	20	29	29	18	14	18
24b	Clarity around who does what	16	25	32	29	19	15	6
24c	Having clear, simple operating procedures	13	20	12	11	17	28	41
24d	Knowing what information we need, and having as much of this information as possible	23	21	23	25	20	17	13
24e	Having a clear process for making decisions	35	12	13	19	22	20	21
24f	Relationships between managers	27	20	20	15	17	20	23
24g	Having a sense of shared accountability between managers	13	24	16	14	29	27	19

Figure 1 shows the mean rank for each question. On average, statement 24c is given a higher-ranked score than the other statements, while statement 24b is given the lowest-ranked score.

FIGURE 1. DISTRIBUTION AND MEAN RANKING OF EACH STATEMENT



Source: Analysis of ALNAP leadership data in Stata.

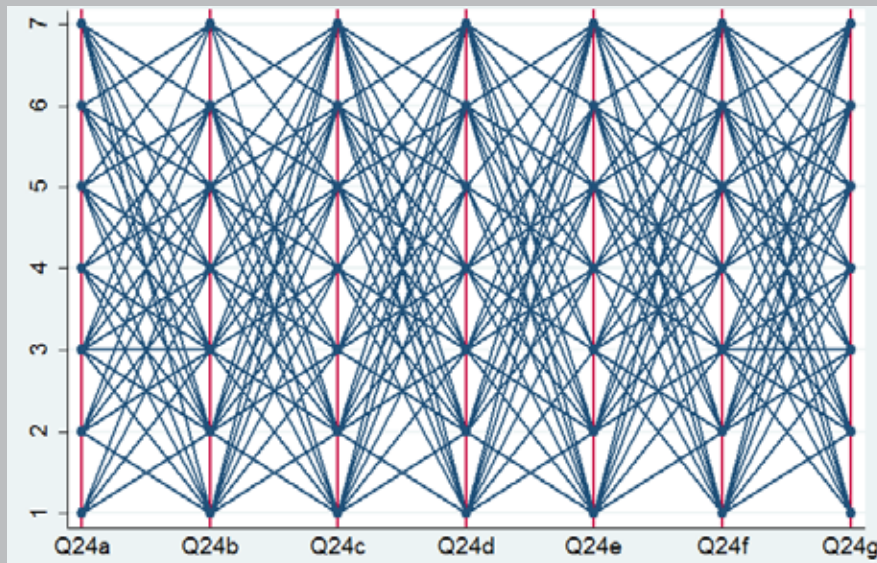
The Spearman rho correlation coefficient between the rankings assigned to each pair of statements is given in Table 9. Moderate correlations of at least 0.4 are highlighted in bold. On the whole, correlations are fairly weak, suggesting that there is no strong pattern in how responders rank the statements.

TABLE 9 SPEARMAN’S RHO CORRELATIONS BETWEEN PAIRS OF RANKINGS

	Q24a	Q24b	Q24c	Q24d	Q24e	Q24f	Q24g
Q24a	1.00						
Q24b	0.01	1.00					
Q24c	-0.27	-0.23	1.00				
Q24d	0.07	-0.06	-0.53	1.00			
Q24e	-0.43	-0.06	0.01	-0.21	1.00		
Q24f	0.01	-0.18	-0.31	0.11	-0.31	1.00	
Q24g	-0.22	-0.25	0.26	-0.31	-0.15	-0.34	1.00

Figure 2 shows the pattern of ranking for each responder. There appears to be no discernible pattern in how the statements were ranked. Because a total of 142 individuals completed this question, it may be difficult to detect weak trends in Figure 3. When we plotted individual profiles for two organisations, no discernible pattern can be detected here either. A similar conclusion was reached for all other agencies.

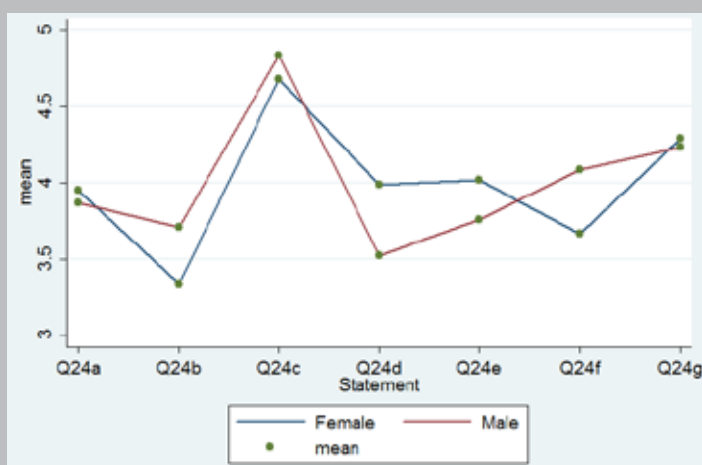
FIGURE 2. PARALLEL COORDINATE PLOT DEMONSTRATING THE LINKS BETWEEN THE RANKINGS OF EACH STATEMENT



Source: Analysis of ALNAP leadership data in Stata.

There was also interest in whether men and women ranked the statements differently. A profile plot of mean ranks for each statement, split by gender of the responder, shows no obvious difference in their responses; see Figure 3. In addition, a series of Fisher's exact test on the ranking of each statement by gender of respondent showed no significant difference in the ranking given to each statement (all p-values >0.05; results not shown).

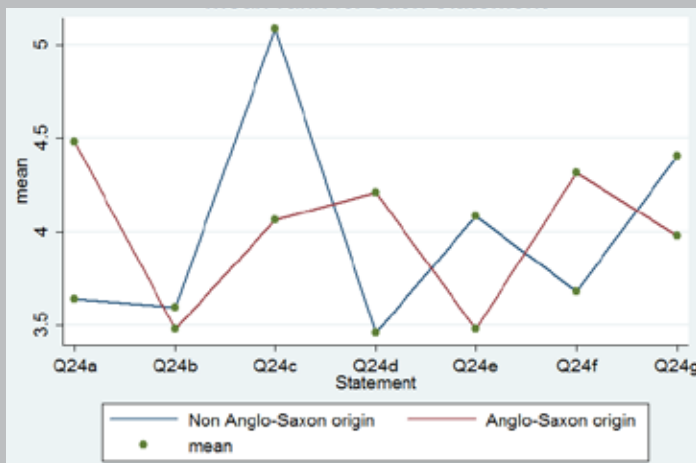
FIGURE 3. MEAN RANK FOR EACH STATEMENT BY GENDER



Source: Analysis of ALNAP leadership data in Stata.

The respondents' ranking of the statements in question 24 were also compared for those of Anglo-Saxon origin and those of non-Anglo-Saxon origin. A profile plot of mean ranks for each statement, split by cultural background of the responders, shows some differences in their ranking scores; see Figure 4. However, a series of Fisher's exact test on the ranking of each statement by cultural background of respondent showed no significant difference in the ranking given to each statement (all p-values >0.05). However, two were borderline significant. These were statements 24a ($p=0.064$) and 24c ($p=0.053$), suggesting that there may be some difference in how statement 24a and 24c were ranked by those of Anglo-Saxon origin and those not of Anglo-Saxon origin. The lack of statistical significance may be attributable to the fact that the number of responders of Anglo-Saxon origin was relatively low (around half the number of non-Anglo-Saxon responders).

FIGURE 4. MEAN RANK FOR EACH STATEMENT BY CULTURAL BACKGROUND



Source: Analysis of ALNAP leadership data in Stata.

3.5 Is there a relationship between the effective fulfilment of leadership functions and effective emergency response?

This was assessed by comparing the combined score for questions 4, 5 and 6 (effective fulfilment of leadership functions) and the score given for question 7 (effective emergency response). A scatter plot of responses shows a fairly strong positive correlation between the two measures.

The Spearman's rho correlation coefficient is 0.62, and there is strong evidence that the score given for question 7 and the combined score for questions 4, 5 and 6 are dependent on each other ($p<0.0001$).

3.6 Is there a relationship between the length of time people have been in the team and the effective fulfilment of leadership functions?

This was assessed by comparing the combined score for questions 4, 5 and 6 (effective fulfilment of leadership functions) and the score given for question 3 (length of service).

No discernible pattern was evident in the responses between the mean combined score for questions 4, 5 and 6 in a team and question 3 ($p=0.196$). The correlation was therefore very low (a Spearman's rho correlation coefficient of 0.10).

3.7 Is there a relation between the length of time people have been in the team and quality of relationships in the team?

No discernible pattern was evident in the responses between the mean score for questions 22 or 23 in a team and question 3 ($p=0.72$ and 0.80 , respectively). The correlation was therefore very low, with a Spearman's rho of around zero for both pairs of variables.

3.8 Does the nature of the decision-making process correlate with the speed or quality of decisions?

Responders' views on who makes important decisions are given in Table 10. A large proportion of responders believed that the leader made decisions after consultation with other managers. In no agency did all responders answer the question in the same manner.

TABLE 10. BREAKDOWN OF RESPONSES AS TO WHO MAKES IMPORTANT DECISIONS

Response	Count	Percentage
A majority of the management team/group	12	7.84
Consensus among management team	16	10.46
Individual managers, acting on delegated authority of the leader	12	7.84
Leader acting alone	2	1.31
Leader after consultation with other managers	105	68.63
Made outside the country	4	2.61
Other	2	1.31

Because there were too few examples of leaders acting alone, it was not possible to test the hypothesis that group decisions (which we had previously categorised as including those based on consultation) were better or faster than individual decisions.

Instead, because a large proportion of responders answered in the same way, we combine categories in order to test the hypothesis of interest. The categories are combined thus the statement in the third bulleted point is taken on its own:

- ‘Leader acting alone’, with ‘Leader after consultation with other managers’
- ‘A majority of the management team/group’, with ‘Consensus among management team’
- ‘Individual managers, acting on delegated authority of the leader’.

The remaining two categories were discarded because they had a small number of responses.

A Fisher’s exact test on the resulting contingency table of how important decisions are made by quality of decisions (question 20) gave a p-value of 0.58, from which we conclude that there is no evidence that different styles in making decisions affected the score given to quality of decision.

A further Fisher’s exact test on the resulting contingency table of how important decisions are made, by speed of decisions (question 21) gave a p-value of 0.37, from which we conclude that there is no evidence that different styles of making decisions affected the score given to speed of decision.

3.9 Is there a relationship between gender and preferred leadership style?

The breakdown of preferred leadership style, assessed by question 25, by gender is given in Table 11. To assess whether gender impacts preferred leadership style, a Fisher’s exact test was conducted. This gave a p-value of 0.63, from which we conclude that there is no evidence to suggest that different leadership styles are preferred by men and women.

TABLE 11. BREAKDOWN OF RESPONSES TO QUESTION 25 ON PREFERRED LEADERSHIP STYLE BY GENDER

	Decisions made by team	Rely on trained subordinates	Single strong leader	Total
Female	34	24	3	61
Male	52	27	6	85
Total	86	51	9	146

3.10 Is there a relationship between cultural background and preferred leadership style?

The breakdown of preferred leadership style by cultural background, assessed by question 25, is given in Table 12. Note that due to the fact that there were few individuals in many of the cultural background categories (see Table 2), this variable has been simplified so that each individual is classified as either of ‘Anglo-Saxon origin’ or ‘other origin’. Individuals were classified as the former if they identified themselves as North American, Northern European, Western European, Australian or from New Zealand.

To assess whether being of Anglo-Saxon origin impacts preferred leadership style, a Fisher’s exact test was conducted. This gave a p-value of 0.75, from which we conclude that there is no evidence to suggest that those of Anglo-Saxon origin are different from the other responders in terms of their leadership style preference.

TABLE 12. PREFERRED LEADERSHIP STYLE BY CULTURAL BACKGROUND

	Decisions made by team	Rely on trained subordinates	Single strong leader	Total
Anglo-Saxon origin	55	32	7	94
Other origin	32	19	2	53
Total	87	51	9	147

3.11 Do agencies respond differently?

There were a good number of responders from three agencies. In order to study whether agencies tend to respond to selected questions differently, we compare responses to selected questions from agency A, agency B and agency C.

For each question listed below a Fisher’s exact test was conducted to assess whether scoring was on average different for at least one agency. The results are given in Table 13.

TABLE 13. FISHER’S EXACT TEST FOR WHETHER DIFFERENT AGENCIES ANSWER SELECTED QUESTIONS DIFFERENTLY

Question	p-value
Combined 4, 5, 6	0.052
8	0.433
9	0.214
10	0.259
16	0.232
18	0.817
22	0.008

Of the selected questions there was some evidence to suggest that the combined score for questions 4, 5 and 6 (leadership effectiveness) differed among these three agencies, as did their responses to question 22 (trust). There were no significant differences, however, in the questions related to roles, procedures or individual leadership ability.

3.12 Do leaders respond differently?

To assess whether leaders and non-leaders respond differently, we conducted a Fisher's exact test for each question/group of questions listed in Table 14.

TABLE 14. FISHER'S EXACT TEST FOR RESPONSES OF LEADERS VERSUS NON-LEADERS

Question	p-value
Combined 4, 5, 6	0.658
8	0.628
9	0.628
10	0.751
16	0.465
18	0.456
22	0.431

There is no evidence to suggest that leaders responded differently to these questions compared with those who are not leaders. However, the lack of statistical significance may be due to the low numbers of completed questionnaires from known leaders.

Annex 4: List of interviewees

The following individuals were interviewed or took part in discussions to provide information used in this report:

- Ismawanti Arif (Karina)
- Suha Bashren (Oxfam)
- Anders Bech Tharsgaard (DRC)
- Edouard Beigbeder (UNICEF)
- Arnold Howitt (Harvard University)
- Laura Hukom (World Vision)
- Phyllis Jepkorir (GOAL)
- Claude Jibidar (WFP)
- Sikander Khan (UNICEF)
- Bruno Maestracci (EU Emergency Management Project, ASEAN)
- Aribowo Nugroho (Karina)
- Simon Nzioka (DRC)
- Gerard Rebello (WFP)
- Karen Robinson (World Vision)
- Kai Roehm (WFP)
- Paul Ruegg (Swiss Red Cross)
- Dom Scalpelli (WFP)
- Jean Shaw Smith (GOAL)
- Sheema Sen Gupta (UNICEF)
- Tjahjono Soerjodibroto (World Vision)
- Chrystian Solofo Dimby (UNICEF)
- Edith Wilkinson (Cranfield University)
- Peter Martelli, Emery Roe and other members of the CCRM group (University of California, Berkley)

Annex 5: RACI matrix

One of the recommendations of this report is that organisations and country teams should clarify the respective roles of different organisational units and leadership team members, and in particular the roles of units/unit heads in making decisions.

One way of doing this is by using an RACI matrix. RACI stands for *r*esponsible, *a*ccountable, *c*onsulted, *i*nformed. The matrix identifies which of these roles each person/unit plays in making a specific type of decision.

On the basis of work with operational teams we propose a slightly revised matrix with the following decision-related roles:

Decides (D): makes final decision; fully accountable for that decision

Recommends (R): collects information and proposes options

Consulted (C): provides information; has ‘right’ to input to decision-making process

Informed (I): has right to be informed of decision

Performs (P): carries out decisions

However, there is no hard-and-fast rule and organisations may wish to consider amending the matrix presented here.

An example of a decision matrix using these five categories is given below:

	John, HQ desk	Tsering, country director	Ana, programmes	Blessing, logistics	Tom, finance and admin.
Initiate new programme (over \$100,000)	D	R	C	C	I
Hire new staff (national hire)	I	D	R (if programme) I (otherwise)	R (if logistics) I (otherwise)	C, P
Change location/nature of programme	I	C	D	C	I

The discussion in which the leadership team develops the matrix can be as useful as the matrix itself. However, some teams find it helpful to display the matrix to make it easy to refer back to it in future conversations.

Annex 6: Outline steps for establishing simple rules

The following proposed steps will help to outline the ‘simple rules’ (always do/never do) for emergency responses.

1. Identify frequently occurring events in the life of the office (such as population displacement, flooding, urban violence) or areas of work (transport, assessment, monitoring) for which guidance is not available or existing guidance is not helpful.
2. For each event consider interventions that have been successful and unsuccessful.
3. From these examples, identify the simple rules that tend to lead to success. Rules will generally relate to:
 - when to start activities
 - when to stop activities
 - how to prioritise resources (by activity, location or population type)
 - basic quality standards to be applied to activities.
4. The aim of these rules is to create boundaries (things that people should always do or never do) within which staff are free to improvise and adapt to the situation.
5. Clearly identify the circumstances under which any given set of rules is relevant. Before implementing the rules ensure that the relevant circumstances apply.
6. During an emergency response test that the simple rules are working and adapt them if required.

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Endnotes

1. The abbreviations and acronyms used in this report are all widely familiar to the humanitarian community so only the abbreviated versions are given in the text, while the full versions are given here.
2. Consensus has a bad name in humanitarian circles – it is often seen as a slow way of reaching lowest common denominator decisions. We argue that this criticism comes largely from a misapprehension of what consensus is – and a confusion between consensus and unanimous consent. The latter is ‘the logically perfect but least attainable kind of decision ... where everyone truly agrees on the course of action’ (Schein, 1988: 74). Consensus, on the other hand, is better understood as a situation where everyone feels that they had a fair chance to influence the decision and nobody opposes it strongly enough to block it (Schein, 2006).
3. In writing this report we reviewed a number of policy documents related to humanitarian leadership (often, but not always, in the context of the humanitarian country team, because this is an area that has engendered much policy interest as a result of the Transformative Agenda). A small number suggested that operational humanitarian leadership might best be thought of as a function of the organisation and the team, and not just of the individual (ALNAP, 2012; Messina, 2013). However, the majority tended to conflate the idea of leadership with the skills and abilities of the individual leader. Other elements that might make a significant contribution to effective leadership were either ignored or, in many cases, were mentioned but were very much secondary to discussions of individual leadership skills (Ashdown & Mountain, 2011; Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011; DFID, 2011; Featherstone, 2010; Hochschild, 2010; Humanitarian Futures Programme, 2009; Street, 2009). We also reviewed a number of evaluations chosen randomly from a list produced by a search of the ALNAP HELP database using the search term ‘leadership’. We considered the first ten produced by the search that related to operational leadership (rather than leadership of global organisations, ‘thought leadership’, leadership of global clusters and so on). In each case where the term ‘leadership’ was used we attempted to identify whether the author referred to a single individual, on the one hand, or to a group of people or a broader organisational approach, on the other. In seven of these evaluations ‘leadership’ appeared to refer only to a single ‘leader’. In one it was not clear who ‘the leadership’ was – whether it was an individual or a group. In the final two the term referred both to individual leaders and leadership groups, with the author of one stating: ‘note the difference between the quality of individual leaders and the quality of overall leadership A key conclusion of the evaluation is that circumstances, structure and organizational culture can combine into sub-optimal leadership despite the presence of good leaders’ (Ternstrom et al., 2008: 34). This review would suggest, however, that this very interesting finding does not yet seem to have been generally accepted.
4. In this paper we suggest that the training of individuals in leadership roles is a necessary, but not sufficient, element of developing leadership capacity and that – of the options available – it is perhaps not the single most effective approach. As noted above, some agencies, such as UNICEF, UNHCR, WFP and WVI, are increasingly combining individual skills development with team and organisational development in a comprehensive attempt to improve emergency response leadership. However, where humanitarian policy documents discuss the development of improved leadership they still tend to focus primarily on the selection and training of individuals (Ashdown and Mountain, 2011; DFID, 2011; Featherstone, 2010; Street, 2009). Probably for reasons of logistics and organisation, most training appears to be designed to ‘refine and improve individual skills [and] strengthen behaviours’ (CBHA, n.d.: 1; emphasis added): of five prestigious humanitarian leadership training schemes, only one appears to train and provide participants with feedback as a team (PHAP, n.d.; RedR, n.d.; Save the Children, n.d.; University of California, San Francisco, n.d.). It is hard to avoid Featherstone’s (2012: 9) conclusion with respect to training and development of humanitarian country teams (HCTs): ‘it’s puzzling that greater investment hasn’t been made to support HCTs as a team rather than focusing efforts on individual members’.
5. We defined a ‘member’ of a leadership team as a person who was either a member of a formal leadership or management group in the office, or – where no formal group existed – was closely involved in important decisions related to emergency response.

6. All figures rounded to nearest whole number.
7. Interestingly, the mean score for agency staff responses to the question 'how well do you think the sector performed in ... meeting objectives?' in the ALNAP State of the humanitarian system was somewhat lower, at 2.3/4 (ALNAP, 2012).
8. In The state of the humanitarian system the mean rating (by aid practitioners) for 'quality of aid' was 2.3/4 (ALNAP, 2012). For purposes of comparison this can be thought of as a mean of 57%, whereas the results of the present questionnaire would give a mean of 71%. In ALNAP (2012) 42.2% thought that the quality of aid was 'good' or 'excellent', 38% of aid recipients were satisfied with the quality of aid received and 32% partially satisfied. Unfortunately, the different rating scales used make comparison difficult.
9. Again, this was essentially a subjective self-assessment of leadership performance. For more on the validity of measuring leadership effectiveness in this way, see Annex 1: Method and constraints, '8. Constraints'.
10. In The state of the humanitarian system the mean rating for quality of leadership of 'agency heads' was 2.7/4, a fairly similar score (ALNAP, 2012).
11. The Spearman's rho correlation coefficient is 0.62 and there is strong evidence that the score given for the question Overall, how effective are your organisation's humanitarian operations in the country and the combined score for questions 4, 5 and 6 – How effective is your office in creating a common vision for your organisation's humanitarian operations in the country?; How effective is your office in creating a strategy and prioritising actions in order to achieve this vision?; How effective is your office in implementing plans for humanitarian operations in the country?) are dependent on one another ($p < 0.0001$).
12. Question 25.
13. For the purposes of disaggregating questionnaire results, we generalised 'Anglo-Saxons' to be respondents who recorded their national/cultural background as being from North America, Australia and New Zealand, and Northern and Western Europe.
14. A series of Fisher's exact test on the ranking of each statement by cultural background of respondent showed no significant difference in the ranking given to each statement (all p -values > 0.05). However, two were borderline significant. These were statements 24a, related to individual leadership ($p = 0.064$), and 24c, related to operating procedures ($p = 0.053$).
15. A Fisher's exact test was conducted to assess whether scoring was, on average, different for at least one agency. For the combined results of questions 4, 5 and 6 (leadership) the p -value was 0.052. For the question on trust (question 22) the p -value was 0.008.
16. A process not dissimilar from that used in incident command, where the operational leader (incident commander) delegates planning (information collection and analysis and planning for the next cycle of operations), operations (management of the current cycle of operations), and finance and administration to different groups, all of whom develop recommendations in their own area (see Howitt and Leonard, 2009).

17. Emery Roe, personal communication, April 2014.
18. Both the statement ‘The role and functions of this management team are clear and agreed by everyone in the office’ and the statement ‘There are clear criteria for being a member of this management/ decision-making group, and these criteria are respected’ demonstrated a Spearman rank correlation of 0.47 with the combined score for questions 4, 5 and 6.
19. The statement ‘Where disagreements or conflict occur between managers in the office, they are generally resolved effectively’ demonstrated a correlation of 0.54 with the combined score for questions 4, 5 and 6.
20. The statement ‘There is generally a high degree of trust between managers in the office (as individuals)’ demonstrated a Spearman rank correlation of 0.47 with the combined score for questions 4, 5 and 6.
21. Steve Goudswaard, personal communication, 20 May 2014.
22. Arnold Howitt, personal communication, May 2014.
23. The Spearman rank correlation between the statement ‘The role and main functions of each manager and department in our office in responding to the humanitarian situation are clear and respected by everyone in the office’ and the statements related to leadership effectiveness was 0.60. This was the second-strongest correlation after team support to the leader.
24. Arnold Howitt, personal communication, May 2014.
25. Each agency uses slightly different criteria. For the UN the level of emergency is determined by scale, urgency, complexity, capacity to respond and reputational risk.
26. The same logic would apply to delegating from HQ to a country office: delegation to the country (rather than in the country) was not considered in this research. It is, however, an important topic in its own right.
27. A Spearman rank correlation of 0.50 between responses to this question and to the combined responses to questions 4, 5 and 6 in the questionnaire (on vision, strategy and implementation), with a p-value of <0.0001.
28. Another interesting example – from outside the humanitarian sphere – of procedures being used to cement trust in a situation where team members do not know each other is the ‘Dallas organisation’, where proceduralisation contributes to the creation of ‘swift trust’ (Meyerson et al., 1996).
29. Eisenhardt and Sull (2001) have suggested that there are five basic types of rule: (1) boundary rules (determining whether or not to become involved in a situation); (2) ‘how to’ rules (how to address the situation); (3) priority rules (how to determine priorities and resource allocation); (4) timing rules (how to rank priorities); and (5) exit rules (how to know when to stop an activity). Not all types of rule are needed in all cases.
30. For example: ‘Our response is to the people we’ve worked with for a very long time ... so we’ll follow people of x [when they are displaced] We’ll follow them to where they are.’
31. For example: ‘There’s a couple of rules: ... Go more for the inclusion error than the exclusion error. Don’t segregate populations – they are all under shock. Then as you refine the programme, you can go into the dynamics.’

32. The Spearman rank correlation between the question 'In the office, we are clear on the information that we require for effective humanitarian programming in our country' and the combined responses to questions 4, 5 and 6 on leadership was 0.57, with a p-value of <0.0001. The correlation between the statement 'We follow agreed procedures for collecting and analysing the information that we need for effective humanitarian programming' and the combined responses to questions 4, 5 and 6 was 0.51, with a p-value of <0.0001.

33. Needs assessment and analysis, implementation and monitoring, and operational review and evaluation.

34. They are planning and direction, collection, processing and exploitation, analysis and production, dissemination and integration, and feedback (ISO, 2011).

35. The correlation between the statement 'The individual with overall responsibility for humanitarian operations in this office displays effective leadership skills' and the combined responses for questions 4, 5 and 6 was 0.56 (Spearman rank correlation), with a p-value of <0.0001. Four other questions correlated as strongly or more strongly.

36. This was discussed by some interviewees as 'leading by example', and in some cases interviewees suggested that rather than reflecting elements that were already present, the leader was demonstrating personal attributes that were absent from the team. However, in many cases the leader appeared to be emphasising and speeding up existing attributes.



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