

Section 4: Culture and people

Shifting Mindsets:
Creating a more flexible
humanitarian response

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The bibliography is available at alnap.org/help-library/shifting-mindsets-biblio.

How to use this report

Shifting Mindsets is formed of parts and sections which can be read independently.

Part I outlines a framework for thinking about flexibility for humanitarian organisations at the level of crisis response.

Part II is for readers who want to start making their own humanitarian responses more flexible. It outlines different 'starting points' based on the three distinct pillars that flexibility relies upon according to this study. Each section can be read independently, and in any order.

Turn to:

Section 3 on organisational systems to support flexibility

Section 4 on culture and people to support flexibility

Section 5 on funding to support flexibility

Key to design features



Audio companions

Section 4: Culture and people

We end up saying to people, you have to think for yourself. You have to use good judgement at the right points at all times, and you have to empower people around you. And people then kind of go away and think, well, we can do that individually, we know how to use good judgement individually, but our institutions don't actually incentivise this to use good judgement, and that's a real problem.

Workshop participant

Organisational culture and staffing are as important to flexibility as any anticipatory analytics system or adaptive management tool. Flexible systems will not lead to greater flexibility in humanitarian response unless individuals take advantage of these systems to apply learning and do things differently. This requires people who are authorised, empowered and comfortable with changing when a situation requires it and teams with the competencies needed to execute a range of actions. It also requires an organisational culture that rewards flexibility, gives staff the space to exercise good judgement, and recognises that changes to operations and programmes can be positive and necessary.

Organisational culture and its influence on staff aspirations and mindsets was raised repeatedly by key informants in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Kenya country studies, ALNAP workshop participants and in the broader adaptive management and flexibility literature. The view generally is that many large humanitarian organisations have engaged in internal change processes over the past decade that have resulted in cultures that prioritise standardisation and planning, and which move decision-making power and trust away from the field and towards centralised headquarter offices (HQs). The recent safeguarding scandal was discussed at the ALNAP workshop as an example of how the sector responds to errors in judgement through top-down, control-oriented structures. Such approaches can provide greater assurance but come at the cost of staff being able to make decisions in context.



Photo Credit: CESVI/Yofre Morales Tapia.

Flexible systems will not lead to greater flexibility in humanitarian response unless individuals take advantage of these systems to apply learning and do things differently.

While anticipatory and adaptive strategies can complement one another in relation to systems and funding, when it comes to organisational culture these two approaches can seem to pull in opposite directions. This is because adaptive strategies are grounded in the recognition that we cannot plan for the changes we will need to make in advance, but instead must remain open to changing based on unexpected dynamics or new understanding. In contrast, anticipatory strategies are grounded in the idea that anticipating a range of potential situations and responses to these situations will help organisations and teams shift more quickly when needed. Anticipatory strategies can easily be interpreted as planned approaches, which fits the increasingly control-oriented culture of many humanitarian organisations.

This is why it is so fundamental to understand that the aim of anticipatory strategies is to increase the range of response options available to an organisation while decreasing the amount of time it takes them to move from one option to another. Anticipatory strategies should not use rigid triggers or single action-plans but should instead offer a menu of actions along with guidance on how to analyse situational changes and select the most appropriate option. In short, the difference between anticipatory strategies and rigid contingency planning is that human agency is still required to make decisions in anticipatory strategies. It is this reliance on in-context thinking and decision-making that anticipatory strategies and adaptive strategies share.

4.1 Creating more flexible organisational culture and staff

Recruiting and supporting staff to engage in flexible humanitarian response can take time, and is difficult, primarily because this involves grappling with the more emotional and psychosocial elements of working in a modern humanitarian organisation. Because organisational culture and trust are influenced so strongly by individual personalities, this makes it difficult to replicate approaches across country teams (Goeldner Byrne, 2016). During the ALNAP workshop, five key themes were identified as areas on which organisations should focus when helping country teams to be more flexible.

Building trust. The ability to trust country-level and field-level staff to make decisions without being micro-managed by HQ came up repeatedly as a core characteristic of programmes that were able to make necessary and timely changes. There is a wide body of literature on the effects of trust in the workplace. It shows that low trust has a negative impact on performance (Brown et al., 2015) and that staff focus more on protecting personal interests than achieving collective goals (Edmondson, 2002).

Trust tends to be a feature of interpersonal relationships, which means that if staff leave an organisation, trust may need to be rebuilt. For humanitarian agencies facing high staff turnover, this is a significant challenge. Instead, it may be more useful for organisations to think about creating conditions that foster trust within country teams and between country-level and HQ staff. The work of social psychologist Amy Edmondson, which focuses on creating conditions for ‘psychological safety’, has been used by Google to take a more intentional approach to building high performing teams and has since been adapted by Mercy Corps to support stronger, more flexible country teams ([Box 12](#)).

Getting people to think critically and locally. Field staff who have participated in adaptive programming approaches often describe the experience as one of ‘thinking for ourselves’. Anticipatory programming approaches, such as those used in early action, also rely on staff capabilities to interpret situational monitoring data and select the most appropriate actions from a menu of options at the outset of a response (IFRC, 2014). For changes to happen at the right time, humanitarian staff need to be capable of thinking critically. They must be able to spot situational changes that may affect programme success or notice when key assumptions in the programme logic are not being supported. Critical thinking is a nebulous concept that is difficult to unpack in clear, tangible terms. Generally, though, it can be understood as the ability to make decisions with little to no guidance (RedR, 2019), and involves identifying and comparing different potential explanations for the same phenomenon (Rudolph et al., 2009).

Local and national organisations can thrive in this area, given their ability to understand contextual factors and quickly develop locally appropriate solutions to implementation challenges. These strengths are also critical for dealing with the complexity of urban settings. For example, at the ALNAP workshop, RedR UK presented their new competency

framework for staff working in urban humanitarian response settings, which includes suggested criteria for critical thinking and working adaptively and flexibly (RedR UK, 2019).

Skilled yet holistic. Workshop participants discussed a shift away from specialist staff and towards generalists in connection to a move towards more adaptive programming, which enables individual members of staff to be more flexible to work across multiple departments or sectors. Others felt that this could be achieved through greater collaboration and hand over with other agencies, such as MSF's informal partnership with a leading WASH sector NGO, to whom they hand over WASH programming responsibilities when they arise in the communities in which MSF is operating. Others find that, although they rely on specialist skill sets to assure quality in their programming, they are also trying to encourage multi-sectoral planning and response design so that interventions are not divided by silos.

Highly technical problems require people who really, really get that. Generalists just won't have the technical knowledge. So, it's perhaps about thinking of not just programming as one organisation's programming, but how to find ways to better coordinate, so that it's not that if they encounter something where a shift might be needed, they have to do all the shifting themselves – instead, it's more about saying to someone else, okay, you guys come in.

Workshop participant

Decisions on team composition, and the best balance between technical expertise and generalist critical-thinking skills, should be informed by empirical evidence specific to the humanitarian sector. At the moment there are no studies that can meaningfully answer these questions. Given that organisations seemed to have very different experiences with hiring for specialist skills and how this impacted their flexibility, this is an area that should be examined in more detail.

Set expectations and incentives for change. Flexible country teams work under the expectation that plans will change, and that change is part of good humanitarian action. These expectations can be set by explicit rules about change and improvement, through a system of rewards or, more simply, by creating meaningful spaces for reflection that are supported by the opportunity to make real changes in a response. Face-to-face dialogue to establish shared expectations about change is critical for staff who may feel threatened or uncomfortable. This kind of dialogue has also been viewed as important for improving working relationships between programme staff and logistics, procurement and supply chain staff, and increasing the latter's responsiveness to requests for change from programme staff.

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4.2 Anticipatory strategies: surge

Human resourcing for flexibility can have two very different areas of focus depending on the kind of change they are designed to address. For expected changes, such as the onset of a new crisis, anticipatory approaches focus on speed – that is, managing the location of skillsets to enable fast and appropriate emergency response. For unexpected changes or new learning about a programme, there is a greater focus on creating the mindsets and skillsets necessary for adaptive learning.

As with other aspects of humanitarian organisation design, human resource functions have largely developed around the objective of maximising speed in the face of geographic uncertainty. Humanitarian HR systems aim to move people with the appropriate skillsets to crisis locations, wherever they may be, in the shortest time possible. As it is expensive to retain staff when they are not working, many agencies seek to create ‘surge’ capacities.

Generally, when it comes to surge capacity, humanitarian actors opt for one of the three approaches (Austin and O’Neil, 2015):

- the ‘step-aside’ approach, whereby surge teams are deployed to manage the response when existing programmes are unable to cope with the demand
- the ‘no regrets’ approach, which involves deploying international surge capacity even if the worst-case scenario does not materialise
- the localised approach, which prioritises investment in building the emergency response capacities of national staff and partners.

Much work on surge capacity has been done since 2014 by the Transforming the Surge Capacity Project. This project brought together 11 Start Network agencies to understand and pilot new approaches to localised surge systems, collaborative approaches, and good practice in this type of activities. Findings from a learning review conducted at the end of the project suggest that localising surge capacities enables a quicker response in situations of crisis, while collective approaches built through joint rosters, shared services, coordination and preparedness mechanisms enable more effective surge responses (Austin and O’Neil, 2015). The Transforming the Surge Capacity Project has also established Go Team Asia, a roster to test a regional approach to surge (Start Network, 2017).

HumanSurge is a new online platform that links up humanitarian organisations with humanitarian professionals available for surge deployment on short notice. The platform features over 200 recruiters and more than 12,000 registered professionals. Since its launch in 2016, HumanSurge has been used by organisations such as CARE International, Action Against Hunger, Concern Worldwide, Mercy Corps, Norwegian Refugee Council, People in Need, Save the Children, among others (HumanSurge, 2018).

For multi-mandate organisations, training national staff members who lead the organisation’s development work can be an effective way to build a wider range of skillsets in staff and reduce the need for bringing

in international surge teams. However, people with experience in such programmes note that these approaches also need a ‘no regrets’ strategy, in case a disaster does not occur in the country, as well as significant investment to ensure national development programme staff will have the confidence for rapid response.

An organisation’s adaptive capacities will be more resilient if it focuses on cultivating and embedding the skillsets needed for problem-solving, critical thinking and iterative decision-making.

4.3 Adaptive strategies: creating the right mindsets and culture

We have to move away from being the heroic deliverers of life-saving assistance, to being humble facilitators. And that is one of the big challenges I think we face.

Workshop participant

The adaptive capabilities of organisations rely on the adaptive capabilities of their staff. And these link closely to competencies like critical thinking, openness to learn, willingness and ability to make informed decisions quickly with minimal or no supervision, creative problem-solving, and an ability to consider different explanations for what is happening in the environment around them (Rudolph, et al., 2009; Mistry et al., 2011; Allana and Sparkman, 2014; Mercy Corps, 2015; Maclay, 2016; Mercy Corps and IRC, 2016).

A key question is: can these skills and competencies be built in individuals or are they innate? Is staffing for adaptive programming more a matter of capacity building or a matter of recruitment?

The same questions have occupied the attention of senior executives in some of the largest companies in the world today, particularly in the IT sector. Google, for example, has invested significant sums in the science behind adaptive, innovative teams to understand how to recruit, incentivise and manage individuals to think and solve problems creatively (Edmondson, 2017).

Experience from adaptive programming approaches in the humanitarian sector suggests that good recruitment can be important, but that an organisation’s adaptive capacities will be more resilient if it focuses on cultivating and embedding the skillsets needed for problem-solving, critical thinking and iterative decision-making.

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In the aid sector, Mercy Corps has invested significantly in this area, applying practices and frameworks developed by Google and other companies for creating highly functioning, adaptive teams (Mercy Corps, 2015; Maclay, 2016; Mercy Corps and IRC, 2016; Proud, 2017; Mercy Corps, 2019). Its approach to adaptive programming and management has explicitly emphasised the need for appropriate human resource management to support flexibility, and the organisation seeks to create ‘respected, empowered and accountable team(s), equipped with the skills of critical thinking, analysis and creativity’ as essential to adaptive management (Mercy Corps, 2015).

To recruit individuals with these skills, Mercy Corps hiring processes prioritise candidates from diverse professional backgrounds and value critical-thinking skills over technical capacity, which, for many of the sectors Mercy Corps’ works in, can be developed on the job (ibid.). (This cannot be applied to all types of humanitarian programming: some sectors – e.g. health, psychosocial care – will require prior technical knowledge.)

Mercy Corps had seen some success with highly adaptive and innovative teams but wanted to see these practices engrained more fully in the organisation, rather than being subject to ‘getting lucky’ with strong individual managers. From this emerged the Mercy Corps People With Possibility programme (Box 12). Initial feedback on the programme has been positive, and the organisation’s work provides some good lessons for how thinking about organisational culture and team building can help achieve greater flexibility in humanitarian response.



Photo credit: ACF/oPt.

Box 12: Creating a culture for adaptiveness through stronger teams: Mercy Corps' People With Possibility programme

A practice of continuous learning cannot be achieved solely by recruiting the right people; it also requires the right environment within teams. Mercy Corps was keen to embed this culture throughout the organisation and began to identify characteristics around which to design a training and capacity-building programme for middle managers.

But it became clear that taking managers out of their teams to train them might not be the best approach. As Emma Proud, Director of Organisational Agility for Mercy Corps described, it would be like taking two cups of water out of a bathtub, heating it up, and then putting it back in again: the heat would immediately dissipate. Managers might struggle to bring teams along with them on a more adaptive management approach. And so Mercy Corps decided to develop a team-based training for managers and their staff – the People with Possibility programme.

People with Possibility (PwP) is a six-week training that draws on neuroscience, organisational design and systems thinking to offer a set of best practices for building innovative and adaptive teams. The programme begins with an in-person kick-off meeting attended by the manager, their team and Mercy Corps headquarters staff. Modules consist of a package of short videos and discussion exercises, around the following themes:

1. Your Brain & You
2. Your Brain & Others
3. Promote Wellbeing
4. Have Candid Conversations
5. Decision-making & Ownership
6. Adaptive management

Each week, the manager leads their team in an hour-long discussion with prompts on each of the themes. Over the six weeks, teams are encouraged to discuss how they react to stress and to change, how they communicate changes with one another and how they take decisions in the team. They are also asked to reflect on the value of adaptation.

PwP aims to change the working culture of teams by focusing on the psychological aspects that can shape team dynamics and communication, which in turn impact motivation and individual performance.

The end of the programme focuses more directly on practices to support adaptive learning and programming. Examples of the questions used in Week 6 include:

- When have you taken time to reflect? Personally? As a team?
- What is different when you have had the chance to reflect and adapt? What gets in the way?
- How might we get better at carving out time for reflection?
- What would be the impact of taking smaller decisions more often?

The training was developed iteratively over 12 months and has been piloted in Mercy Corps headquarter offices and its Jordan and Myanmar country offices. In Jordan, key informants discussed how the training had helped address long-term problems in the flexibility of their team. They found that it helped address the reasons why changes to programmes or requests for faster procurement times were taking place, and how different departments – logistics, finance, programming – could communicate and work with each other more effectively to act on new learning. Examples of projects where significant changes had been made to improve programming were presented and discussed as a team, as an example of good practice.

Initial internal feedback on PwP has been extremely positive. To sustain its benefits, teams need to be resourced adequately to engage in routine reflection in their day to day work, outside of the modules. It was also noted that one hour for the modules may not be sufficient to address some of the more sensitive issues that may arise in the discussions.



Listen to Emma Proud, Director of Organisational Agility, talking about Mercy Corps' People with Possibility programme.

Related ALNAP publications

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- [Adapting According to Plan: Early action and adaptive drought response in Kenya](#)
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