



## Discussion Summary: Leadership in action. Where next for effective leadership in humanitarian operations?

**13<sup>th</sup> June – 16<sup>th</sup> July 2011**

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Link to discussion online: <http://www.alnap.org/forum/post/109.aspx>

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### Original Post:

**John Mitchell**, Director, ALNAP,  
13<sup>th</sup> June 2011

Last week saw the launch of ALNAP's latest Study 'Leadership in Action: Leading Effectively in humanitarian operations'. Margie Buchanan-Smith, the report's lead author delivered this presentation which provides a useful overview of how the study was conceived, conducted and its key findings.

The study includes a number of recommendations for humanitarian agencies, individual leaders and the sector as a whole. Some of the most important proposals for the way forward are summarised here:

- 1) If leadership is to flourish beyond a few courageous individuals, the risk averse culture within humanitarian organisations has to change.
- 2) The model of effective leadership that emerges from this study is a model of leaders creating an effective team around them rather than the heroic individual leader.
- 3) There is an urgent need to invest more in national leadership and to recognise the leadership skills and potential of nationally recruited staff.
- 4) The humanitarian system should attempt to understand and address the constraints that women face to taking on leadership roles in the field.
- 5) Leadership development should be part of career development and start early rather than be a 'bolt-on' for more senior staff.
- 6) Humanitarian agencies should avoid a 'one size fits all' approach to leadership, which reduces the art of knowing what to do in specific contexts to a rigid list of skills.



As ALNAP sets out to engage humanitarian organisations and key sector stakeholders on these issues, I would encourage members of this Forum to discuss the findings, conclusions and the recommendations from the study.

**Has the study identified the correct features of what makes humanitarian leadership effective?**

**Do our recommendations offer the right solutions to improving leadership in the field?**

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**Responses were received, with many thanks, from:**

1. Alok Singh, Cross Boundary Leaders, UK
2. Claude Forthomme, Italy
3. Caroline Heider, WFP, Italy
4. Randolph Kent, Humanitarian Futures Programme, UK
5. Ian Shaw, University of York, UK
6. Andy Featherstone, Consultant , UK
7. Michèle Mercier, Human Touch, Switzerland
8. Michael Stone, Consultant
9. James Henry, Independent,
10. David Alexander, D J Alexander Ltd, UK
11. Claude de Ville de Goyet, Belgium
12. Margie Buchanan-Smith, UK
13. Peter Walker, Tufts University, USA
14. Chris Piper, TorqAid, Australia
15. Dawit Zawde, Africa Humanitarian Action, Ethiopia
16. Maurice Herson, Forced Migration Review, UK
17. Wendy Fenton, ODI, UK
18. Paul Knox-Clarke, ALNAP, UK
19. Mads Oyen, UNICEF, USA
20. Andrew E Bishop, DBishop Consulting, USA
21. Paul Harvey, Humanitarian Outcomes, USA
22. James Darcy, ODI, UK
23. Shashanka Saadi, CARE, International
24. Kerren Hedlund, Consultant, France
25. Josh Harris, ALNAP, UK
26. Nagar Verma, Sarista Foundation, India
27. Claire Messina, UN-OCHA, Switzerland



## Risk and Risk aversion in the humanitarian sector:

**Claude Forthomme** addressed the finding that the humanitarian system is risk adverse and is surprised that this can be caused by evaluation practices. “Evaluation is truly useful when it is focused on assessing impact and identifying the factors that ensure impact/success. It is meant to help operators better achieve their objectives. Evaluation that instils fear in operators is clearly not useful since it will make them ineffective - even running the risk of paralyzing operations.”

**Alok Singh** asked what sorts of M&E practices are supportive of leadership, learning and innovation, and what sorts of M&E practices get in the way?

**Caroline Heider** agrees that the risk aversion of the sector is surprising given the work that humanitarians do. She warns against blaming evaluation as the main barrier to becoming less risk averse. “It would be advisable to look for the factors that cause risk aversion and address those rather than try to “fix” a tool that aims to identify problems that need resolving.”

**Ian Shaw** returned to the issue of evaluations, and the diverse purpose and cultures in which they are used. To be more effective this may need re-thinking.

**Andy Featherstone** referred to the launch event and the debate that emerged on shifting management practices in the sector. He suggests, “some of the dominant approaches (including results-based management and centralised planning and controls) whilst often enthusiastically adopted in the search for quantifiable certainties risks stifling the qualities of innovation, creativity and risk-taking that are so fundamental to talented leadership.”

**Margie Buchanan-Smith**, the lead author of the ALNAP Study on Leadership in Action, referred back to some of the specific case studies from the report. She noted, “What is common to all of these examples is ‘thinking out of the box’. And this is where risk-taking appears to run counter to the compliance culture, which, at its crudest, is all about box-ticking.”

**Peter Walker** and **Chris Piper** shared models that may help as ways of understanding different facets of risk analysis in aid agencies.



**Paul Knox Clarke** proposed a definition of risk, and asked the forum to discuss, “In the context of a humanitarian operation, a risk is an action with a higher than 'normal' chance of failure, or with the potential for very damaging failure. Humanitarian leaders generally take risks because, in addition to the potential for failure, the risk also has the potential for a much higher than 'normal' level of success. Unfortunately, in most cases there is very little information to allow the leader to balance the possibility of success with the possibility of failure.”

**Claude de Ville de Goyet**, in response to Paul’s definition, suggested that operational leaders are often willing to take risk, including personal, to improve delivery to beneficiaries, but agencies are dependent on fund raising and image, are overly sensitive to the potential criticism in case of attributable failure. “The role of the mass media in this regard is critical” particularly in its tendency to immediately assign blame for any perceived failure.

**Mads Owen** proposes that “small organisations are willing to operate with more risks, because the stakes are lower. The consequences of catastrophic reputational failure of a mom-and-pop NGO outfit are quite different from the massive crash of a UN agency that may perform core functions in sectors.” However for all organisations, she believes structured risk management structures need to be in place, which makes it easier for managers to approve riskier choices and leaders more confident to take them.

**James Darcy** introduced the findings from a study on ‘Aid risks in fragile and transitional contexts’ carried out for OECD International Network on Conflict and Fragility (INCAF). Findings from this research include, Risk management is not just about reducing risk exposure, but about getting this balance right. It should be seen as an enabling process, not simply a risk reduction process. And donor attitudes tend to permeate the whole system, and we found that the greatest fear was of receiving a bad audit. James calls for a more “honest discussion between controllers and programme makers - and between donors and implementing agencies - about the parameters within which aid can realistically be accounted for in a given context.”

## Organisational culture that fosters effective leadership

**Randolph Kent** urged readers of the study to consider the “organisational enabling environment that sustains leadership.” The growing challenges of delivering aid in the 21<sup>st</sup> century means “An organisation that can support effective leadership will at the same time have to be able to adapt easily to innovations and innovative practices.”



**Michael Stone** introduced some additional barriers to recruiting and retaining good leaders in humanitarian operations, “our field will rarely attract effective leaders when contracts are short, there is no certainty of their renewal, authority in the field is increasingly high-jacked by head offices, and line management looks like Spaghetti Junction on the M6 motorway.”

Michael argues that leadership cannot be taught through training courses but a good leader, above all, needs compassion, sociability, friendliness and a heart.

**David Alexander** warned that reliance on government funding in recent years has “fundamentally altered the character of our organisations.” He fears the humanitarian sector will follow the model of the British National Health Service (NHS), where “politicisation and bureaucratisation has all but extinguished the fundamental value of human compassion” on which it was founded.

David urges, “We should use this report as a wake-up call to NGO chief executives about the corrosive effects of political funding on our core values, and to encourage those who experience the day-to-day consequences of this to find their collective voice before it is too late.”

**Claude de Ville de Goyet** is also concerned that the funding and marketing agendas of agencies is damaging humanitarian leadership. His experiences in Haiti revealed, “Leadership means capacity to see beyond the immediate interest (visibility) of our institutions. It cannot be learned in courses and is increasingly less tolerated in the humanitarian field where loyalty to the agency/ organization is the first requirement.”

**James Henry** has found that agencies are not sufficiently willing to invest in the HR and co-ordination needed to overcome many of these challenges. “It is the capacity of the Headquarters to select the right person for the right task, at the right time, and then to empower, enable, support and encourage their development that is so often lacking.”

**Wendy Fenton** challenged humanitarian agencies to rethink their recruitment, leadership training and competency frameworks. “While these tools can help people who already are leaders (or who have the leadership qualities identified) to become more self aware and to develop their skills further, they can't transform people without these qualities into leaders.



**Andrew Bishop** reflected on a career spent working with humanitarian organisations. His observations include that organisational (and donor) culture is a major determinant of attitudes to risk and that culture will be determined by the organisation's history and the personalities of its leaders over many years. Andrew remains optimistic about the sector's potential... "Good organizations will continue to get better and bad organizations can turn themselves around. But to be successful, all organizations must be honest with themselves and not "hide" behind their humanitarian title."

## The individuals and characteristics that make good leaders:

**Michèle Mercier** cross referenced to another ALNAP Forum concerning the kind of academic background expected to be found among those leaders and calls for diversity in those that reach the top.

**Dawit Zawde** supports the study's recommendation to invest more in national leadership. In his experience with an African NGO, "...by the time we have groomed our managers to have the capacity to take on the most complex humanitarian emergencies; they have already jumped ship to another better-endowed international organization." He also urges greater support for national NGOs, as national leaders without effective structures behind them cannot be effective.

**Maurice Henson** shared his own assessment of the personal qualities that make an effective leader, including "a mixture of determination (as opposed maybe to personal aspiration), intellectual engagement, political nous, experience and empathy (often a proxy for the ability to inspire others)." He suspects that many organisations find it hard to measure these qualities (apart from experience) and so they are not given sufficient credit in the selection of leaders.

**Paul Harvey** pointed out that humanitarian agencies struggle to retain older staff, because of the nature of the profession. This means a great deal of acquired knowledge and leadership potential is lost. He suggests some solutions to this problem, including investing in national staff who are more likely to remain in-country for their whole career.



## Collective leadership vs. individual leadership

**Karen Hedlund** shared her experiences of working in what she describes as, “a complete failure of collective humanitarian leadership in Northern Sudan.” Karen’s observations include examples of some ‘heroic individuals she sees in that context, but many of those people, “have turned their backs on the UN and international NGOs, because the systems in place and the people who have allowed themselves to become managed by those systems, leave absolutely no room for innovative, fast, effective action. These organizations and their staff spend much too much time “calculating the risks”.

**Paul Knox-Clarke** draws parallels between Karen’s observations and the findings of the ALNAP Study, most strikingly, “the idea that leadership (establishing a clear vision and objectives for a response; building consensus; collectively realising the vision) might not be something that leaders do - it might, in many emergency operations, be something that emerges from the team, and which is then represented by the leader”

**Claire Messina** further developed this theme, “Recognising that we need to move from a culture of competition, towards a culture of collaboration, this model of collective leadership is the only way to achieve the collective results that we claim to be so attached to.” She explains that in her role within the OCHA Humanitarian Leadership Strengthening Unit, “we are pushing a number of initiatives that aim to make all agencies, UN and otherwise, who take part in humanitarian operations, take ownership of the delivery of collective results and not leave it up to an individual.”

## Suggested areas for further study and thought

**Claude Forthomme** challenged us to consider, “how do you institutionalize the ALNAP's study findings?”

**James Henry** proposed some directions for further research, including similar studies at the organisational and systemic levels. He would also like to see past evaluations studied in the context of constraints and opportunities for leadership to see where lessons have or have not been learnt. Finally he highlights that change cannot take place in isolated initiatives and so co-ordination is crucial.

**Shashanka Saadi** suggests that current models of humanitarian leadership overlook the importance of developing leadership among disaster affected communities themselves. As this is where the longer term resilience and rebuilding will need to happen.