



PAPER 10

Re-Invigorating Humanitarian Leadership Training

1 Introduction

The environment in which humanitarian workers find themselves today is more complex and diverse than ever. Conflicts are increasingly complicated; natural disasters are escalating in number and intensity, often in regions already struggling with socio-economic and political constraints; there is an increasing focus on localisation; and large numbers of people are being forced to move across borders.

So how do we ensure that our humanitarian leadership training stays relevant and useful in this increasingly complex world?

In 2011 Deakin University and Save the Children joined forces to design and deliver a Humanitarian Leadership Programme (HLP). Since its inception, the course has reached more than 350 students from over 55 countries and working for 50 different aid organisations including government, United Nations, non-government and community-based organisations.

It is a comprehensive eight-month course designed by a mixture of humanitarians, academics and leadership development specialists to transform the leadership offered by humanitarians and their organisations. This programme examines the leadership and strategy issues faced by managers in the humanitarian sector. Going beyond theoretical learning, the programme provides participants with the experiences and challenges that will help them develop their skill and confidence in offering leadership to others.

The HLP, now run by the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership (CfHL), culminates with a multi-day emergency simulation exercise that is designed to provide students with the opportunity to practice the skills and behaviours they have learned throughout the entire course.

2 Scenario-based learning

One of the methods for training humanitarians is through the use of scenario-based learning or simulation exercises that are used to amplify real experiences with guided ones, that 'immerse' the participant in an environment that replicates substantial aspects of the real world in a fully interactive fashion.

The use of such exercises have been utilised in training humanitarians for many years, but recently it has been acknowledged that the 'traditional' simulation contexts no longer adequately represent the world in which humanitarian leaders operate. Allowing participants to test decision-making and values can have a huge impact when applied in the real world, and as such the CfHL decided to 're-think' the primary scenario used in the HLP to ensure it continues to be a valuable learning tool.

As both a previous participant and a faculty member on the HLP, I have experienced this scenario-based learning from both sides. In both roles, the programme provided a platform for me to examine my own leadership strengths and weaknesses, and from personal experience I believe it is an incredibly valuable tool that enabled the practice of behaviours, attitudes and skills that I wanted to develop and utilise in my day-to-day job. And it works – **IF** the scenario adequately reflects that day-to-day world. The world that we create should represent, to the best of our ability, the world that we want people to be ready for.

2.1 The fictional country of “Lolesia”

The scenario that the HLP uses is of a fictional country called Lolesia. It was first developed in 2011 and drew heavily from the 2008 Cyclone Nargis response in Myanmar. However Myanmar in 2008 represented a very unique context and there are currently few modern comparators. This produced a “simulation world” that was once very relevant but is now ultimately backward-looking.

To look at how this scenario could evolve to ensure a realistic and relevant context for participants, past students and faculty members provided feedback on what was working and should stay the same, what was not working and needed to be changed, and what was missing. The objective was to build on the solid foundation of the original ‘Lolesia’ simulation and produce a simulation that was more progressive and representative of the humanitarian world as it might be, not what it has been, and put students through an exercise that seeks to push them to create the humanitarian organisations of the future.

2.2 What has changed?

The world in which humanitarians operate is constantly evolving and that needs to be reflected in the new scenario. The three changes that this simulation update focused on were changes in the context in which humanitarians work, how humanitarians operate, and leadership styles.

Firstly, recent years have seen significant changes in the context in which humanitarians work, most clearly that emergency responses, and the relationships that operate within them, are now much more complex. The original simulation prepared participants for a rapid onset disaster with an Asian flavour. Responding to natural disasters in South-East or South Asia is one of the more straightforward tasks that humanitarian agencies undertake. The initial mobilisation of funds and political will is relatively straightforward after a rapid onset natural disaster. This context does provide a good test of operational leadership in a fast moving and dynamic environment but an updated scenario needed to provide a platform for students to look beyond operational leadership and focus on strategic leadership. Furthermore, an updated scenario needed to reflect the complexity in the relationships that humanitarian agencies have with various stakeholders such as community, governments, businesses and local organisations.

The initial scenario was also designed before the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) where agencies and donors made commitments such as more cash programming, multi-year humanitarian grants and locally driven responses, and for a stronger role of regional organisations. The WHS also saw the creation of new platforms such as the Education Cannot Wait platform that, in part, commits to providing funding for education in humanitarian crises, and innovative financing mechanisms that draw on private investors and corporations. If such commitments made at this senior level are to be applied in humanitarian responses, they need to be introduced into leadership training and simulation exercises.

With such shifts in thinking throughout the sector arising from the WHS, and an increasing focus on how to be more innovative, transparent and accountable, humanitarian leaders need to be challenged with how to better tackle the changes in the context in which they work. Furthermore, students need to be encouraged to consider how the sector, and those affected by disasters and crises, expect emergency responses to be managed.

Secondly, there have been changes in how humanitarians operate which has resulted in, for example, more emphasis on local operations, cash programming and resilience.

Finally, there have been changes in leadership styles with leaders being increasingly challenged in different ways in more complex and varied circumstances.

This new world represents both opportunities and risks and leadership training needs to prepare participants to understand and analyse these risks, and show that it is not just about risk avoidance but maximising opportunities in order to implement more effective and efficient humanitarian responses.

2.3 What does this mean?

Identifying these changes was the first step in ensuring the scenario evolves as does the real world environment in which humanitarian leaders operate.

Scenario training is always going to be slightly unrealistic; for example, time is compressed and situations and characters are a compilation from a variety of settings. However, it is important to ensure the scenario is realistic and relevant *enough* to enable participants to practice in a way that then allows them to utilise what they have learned in real life.

Looking at the current contexts in which humanitarians work, most practitioners operate in complex crises (be it conflict, slow-onset or protracted), yet the scenario training focused on responding to a sudden onset disaster. As such, it was important to widen the scope of the fictional country Lolesia and the disaster that befalls it. This did not mean changing the sudden onset emergency trigger in the simulation, but providing a context that also dealt with situations of complexity such as ongoing conflict in part of the country or cross-border movement.

Feedback from students and faculty also promoted a shift to focus on behaviours rather than technical skill sets, which meant introducing targeted interventions that focus on specific leadership behaviours and linking simulation injects to specific learning objectives. Some of the students felt that when participants came from a less programmatic background they had fewer opportunities to exhibit leadership behaviours. Therefore, the new scenario largely moves away from such activities as rewarding proposal writing through the allocation of funding, and towards providing opportunities for students to develop, practice and show behaviours and attitudes. For example, task-based activities were reduced and more decision-based activities that require risk analysis, critical analysis and making decisions based on values and ethics were added.

Feedback also highlighted the need to create more opportunities for students to highlight their understanding of their NGO mission, strategy and vision. Rather than just showing that they can write good proposals or get registration with a difficult government, more situations were added to push students to articulate their NGO's mission and vision within their strategic goals, and showcase the conversion of policy, such as their INGO's mandate, into strategy.

Finally, it was important to create tensions and provide participants with the opportunity to manage those tensions – for example, through the introduction of a field team new tensions have been introduced into the scenario between what HQ wanted and what the field team wanted, with the participants sitting in the “capital” having to manage both sets of relationships and expectations.

In these complex contexts, we also wanted the students to think about how they would react when confronted with ethical dilemmas. With geopolitics increasingly impacting on humanitarian delivery and communities, donors, governments and the public demanding more and more transparency and accountability, providing the space to have difficult conversations about ethical dilemmas and reflecting individual and organisational values and principles is increasingly important. Being confronted with organisational dilemmas such as the real-life situation of whether agencies would accept funding from Saudi Arabia in Yemen or personal dilemmas such as whether to move forward with an activity at the field level because you know it will save lives, even if your HQ is telling you to wait because of bureaucratic processes. In a simulated environment the presentation of such dilemmas allows the students to think about both their organisational and personal values and principals and the impact that has on their own style of leadership, organisational reputation and humanitarian delivery.

This also meant that students needed to see the impact of their decisions. As such, the scenario was updated to reflect a situation where a single decision may have multiple consequences and real-time repercussions.

One of the biggest pieces of feedback from staff and students was that there needed to be more variety in the number of stakeholders, and how the students and their NGOs in the scenario interacted with them. In an effort to move from less transactional relationships; to foster collaboration with and challenge assumptions about different groups of stakeholders; and encourage the students to focus on relationships, we looked to the WHS and Core Humanitarian Standards (CHS).

Bringing in elements of the Grand Bargain and the focus on localisation, we have increased engagement with local stakeholders, and encouraged students to look at the potential benefits of local partners who are active rather than passive participants in the response. We also needed to bring in elements of trust – making relationships with actors such as regional bodies, the UN, donors and HQ less confrontational and more about working together and seeing them as an equal partner. Traditionally in the simulation, the government was very

obstructionist but looking at relationships with many governments in current crises situations such as the Philippines, Jordan and Lebanon, the scenario seeks to move from this view of State avoidance and towards one of constructive State engagement.

Finally, the new scenario seeks to shift from a focus on operational effectiveness to putting the emphasis more on strategic approaches, and encouraging the students to think about how humanitarians can work as efficiently as possible but in a much more dynamic environment. Looking to the future of the humanitarianism, it is vital that the scenario provides a space for students to think about how to perform traditional activities in different ways, or experimenting with completely new activities that have the potential to revolutionise the sector. And this is ultimately where we are trying to take the HLP – away from writing proposals quickly and doing the same thing but faster and better, to looking at completely new ways of thinking.

3 Today, tomorrow and the future

In the sector we often ask whether the humanitarian system fit for purpose. Does the humanitarian system have the capacity and vision to respond effectively to the crises of today, tomorrow, and deep into the future?

If we can adequately reflect the changes discussed in this paper – context, how we operate and how we lead – into an updated emergency simulation, we are one step closer in providing the leaders of the humanitarian sector with the knowledge, skills and behaviours needed to go back to their organisation and create change. We need to ensure that we are not presenting a simulation that embeds and endorses yesterday's thinking about what a certain type of NGO could be and do, but rather offer one that pushes humanitarians to think critically about their organisation and how to change the way it operates so it is more fit for the future.