HUMANITARIAN ACADEMY · HUMANITAIRES JOBS

Humanitarian Mini MBA: leading a humanitarian organisation

Course handout · Week 1 : Humanitarian leadership and managing teams in crisis

A leadership programme of exactly 3 months (12 weeks, 144 hours): leadership, strategy, project cycle, MEAL, finance and donor budgets, compliance and fraud, resource mobilisation, supply chain, HR and safeguarding, risk and security, negotiation and advocacy, change and governance. Corrected numerical exercises, three demanding monthly exams with case studies, and a verifiable diploma from the Humanitarian Academy.

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Week 1 : Humanitarian leadership and managing teams in crisis

Objectives

- Distinguish management from leadership, and choose a leadership style suited to the team's maturity and the level of urgency.
- Build and run a multicultural team under pressure: roles, delegation, psychological safety, conflict management.
- Make sound decisions under uncertainty and account for them, without sacrificing the team's health.

Manager, leader, head of mission: what is really expected of you

In a humanitarian organisation, **management** means obtaining predictable results with limited resources: planning, organising, controlling, reporting. **Leadership** means giving direction when plans are no longer enough: giving meaning, mobilising people, arbitrating between values in tension. A project manager or head of mission needs both, but not in the same proportions at every phase of a crisis.

ALNAP studies on operational leadership (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011) showed that the managers their teams consider effective are not those with the best technical mastery, but those who combine four qualities: a **clear vision of priorities**, the **ability to decide** without complete information, **attention to people** and the **ability to work with other organisations**. Humanitarian leadership is therefore relational and collective first.

Dimension	Management	Leadership
Central question	How do we do it?	Why, and towards what?
Horizon	Work plan, annual budget	Mandate, strategy, long-term reputation
Tools	Planning, procedures, dashboards, controls	Vision, narrative, example, network, arbitration
Risk if missing	Disorder, waste, non-compliance	Demotivated team, loss of meaning, mission drift

High standard: a good humanitarian manager knows how to say what they will not do. Refusing an activity outside the mandate, funding that contradicts the principles, or an expansion into a new area without the means to keep staff safe is an act of leadership, not a lack of ambition.

Choosing your style: situational leadership and emergency context

The **situational leadership** model (Hersey and Blanchard) suggests adapting your style to each team member's level of competence and commitment on a given task, not to the person in general:

- **Directing** (S1): precise instructions and close control, for a motivated person who is new to the task.
- **Coaching** (S2): instructions and explanations, for a person who is progressing but losing heart.
- **Supporting** (S3): listening and shared decisions, for a competent but hesitant person.
- **Delegating** (S4): objectives and trust, for a competent and autonomous person.

The humanitarian context adds a second variable: the **level of urgency**. In the first 72 hours of a sudden-onset crisis, a directive style is often necessary and expected (who does what, where, before tonight). But staying directive after the acute phase exhausts the team and blocks initiative. Goleman's model (2000) helps name these shifts: the **coercive** style is useful in immediate danger, the **visionary** style during a change of strategy, the **coaching** style to develop the national staff who will take over, and the **democratic** style when the team holds information you do not have.

> Common mistake: confusing urgency with haste. Even in an acute phase, take ten minutes to share your analysis: a team that understands why it is acting makes fewer mistakes and makes better decisions when you are not there.

Building a high-performing team under pressure

Tuckman's model (forming, storming, norming, performing) describes the stages of a team. In humanitarian work, high staff turnover, especially among international staff in difficult contexts, means a team regularly returns to the storming phase. The manager's job is to shorten these phases through **rituals**: structured induction, written handover, a short weekly meeting, after-action review.

Amy Edmondson's research on **psychological safety** (and Google's Project Aristotle, 2015) shows that the first driver of team performance is the belief that one can report a mistake, ask a question or challenge a decision without being punished. In an NGO, it is also a condition for security and protection: a team that does not dare to pass on a rumour, an incident or a suspicion of abuse puts lives at risk.

- **Clarify roles** with a RACI matrix (who is Responsible, who is Accountable, who is Consulted, who is Informed) for each critical process: procurement, security, recruitment, donor reporting.
- **Delegate for real**: delegate a result, not a task; set the level of authority ("you decide and inform me" or "you propose and I decide").
- **Balance national and international staff**: national staff make up more than 90% of the humanitarian workforce; decision-making posts should progressively go to them, with an

explicit development plan.

Conflict, diversity and intercultural communication

Humanitarian teams bring together very different nationalities, statuses (national, international, local contract, consultant), generations and attitudes to hierarchy. **Erin Meyer's** dimensions (The Culture Map) are useful for decoding misunderstandings: explicit or implicit communication, direct or indirect criticism, decision by consensus or by the boss, trust based on the task or on the relationship.

When facing a conflict, the **Thomas-Kilmann** model distinguishes five attitudes: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, accommodating. None is good in itself. Collaboration takes time and suits important, lasting issues; compromise suits the sharing of resources; avoidance can be wise when the stakes are minor or emotions are running too high.

A five-step mediation method, applicable between two colleagues:

1. Separate interviews: listen to the facts, the feelings, the needs.
2. Check that the situation does not fall under a formal procedure (harassment, abuse, fraud): if it does, no mediation; refer it to the reporting mechanism.
3. Joint meeting with rules: each person speaks without interruption; describe behaviours, not people.
4. Look for options and write a simple agreement: who does what, from when.
5. Follow-up meeting after two or three weeks.

Deciding under uncertainty and taking care of the team

The **Cynefin** framework (Snowden and Boone, 2007) helps choose how to decide. In a **simple** (clear) domain (a standard distribution), you apply the procedure. In a **complicated** domain (sizing a water network), you consult experts. In a **complex** domain (how a conflict evolves, acceptance by a community), you test on a small scale, observe and adjust. In **chaos** (an attack, an explosive epidemic), you act first to stabilise, then analyse.

For important decisions, a one-page decision note protects both the organisation and the decision-maker: context, options (at least three, including "do nothing"), criteria, risks, decision, conditions for review. It then allows an honest **after-action review**: the quality of the decision is judged against the information available at the time, not only against its outcome.

Finally, a humanitarian leader is responsible for the team's health. The Antares Foundation and CDC study (Lopes Cardozo et al., 2012) found that about one humanitarian worker in five showed symptoms of depression after their mission, and that team and organisational support clearly reduced that risk. The measures that really protect are well known: rest and leave actually taken (R&R), a realistic workload, peer support, access to confidential psychological support, recognition, and a manager who sets the example by respecting their own limits.

> Benchmark: if your team works more than 60 hours a week for more than four weeks, it is no longer an emergency phase; it is a staffing problem to raise with senior management

and donors.

Exercise: leadership diagnosis of a field base

Situation. You arrive as base manager in an area where the organisation has been working for 18 months. The team has 26 people: 3 international, 23 national. In six months, two base managers have come and gone, three security incidents were not reported in time, the burn rate of the main grant is 41% at mid-term, and two national supervisors have stopped speaking to each other after a dispute over recruitment.

Task (2 pages). 1) Classify the problems using Cynefin (simple, complicated, complex, chaos) and justify. 2) For each of the five key team members (experienced deputy logistician, new MEAL officer, the two supervisors in conflict, a very autonomous base accountant), state the appropriate situational style. 3) Propose your 30-day plan: three team rituals, a RACI matrix for incident reporting, and the mediation approach between the supervisors.

Answer key. The failure to report incidents is first a problem of psychological safety and role clarity (complex), not only a missing procedure. Budget underspending is a complicated problem: line-by-line analysis with finance and the project manager. The conflict between the supervisors must be checked first: if it involves suspicions of favouritism in recruitment, it falls under a formal procedure, not mediation.

Key takeaways

- Management produces predictable results; leadership gives direction when plans are no longer enough.
- Style is chosen per task and per person (Hersey and Blanchard), and according to the phase of the crisis.
- Psychological safety is a performance factor and a condition for security and protection.
- Before any mediation, check that the conflict does not fall under a formal procedure (abuse, harassment, fraud).
- Decide according to the Cynefin domain, document the decision, and protect the team's health as a result in its own right.

Quiz

1. A very experienced national logistician is handling an international tender under a new donor's rules for the first time. According to situational leadership, for this specific task the most appropriate style is:
   A. Delegating, because she is experienced
   B. Coaching: explain the rules and follow closely, because her competence on this task is low even though her commitment is high
   C. Supporting through listening only
   D. Changing nothing in her job description

2. A team rarely reports its mistakes and incidents arrive late. The most effective long-term lever is:
   A. Systematically sanctioning late reporting
   B. Adding another form
   C. Building psychological safety: thank people for reporting, analyse without looking for a culprit, lead by example
   D. Centralising all decisions with the base manager

3. Two supervisors are in conflict; one accuses the other of hiring members of his family. What is the right approach?
   A. Organise a mediation so they make peace
   B. Refer it to the formal reporting procedure (potential conflict of interest) and not treat it as a simple relationship conflict
   C. Transfer one of them immediately
   D. Let time settle the dispute

4. How acceptance of your organisation evolves among communities in a newly accessible area belongs, in the Cynefin framework, to the domain that is:
   A. Simple: apply the procedure
   B. Complicated: ask an expert
   C. Complex: test on a small scale, observe and adjust
   D. Chaotic: act without analysing

5. Which statement about the decision note is correct?
   A. It is only useful if the decision succeeds
   B. It allows the quality of a decision to be judged against the information available when it was made, and must include the "do nothing" option
   C. It replaces consulting the team
   D. It only concerns financial decisions

Quiz answers : 1. B · 2. C · 3. B · 4. C · 5. B