HUMANITARIAN ACADEMY · HUMANITAIRES JOBS

Humanitarian Mini MBA: leading a humanitarian organisation

Course handout · Week 12 : Change management, governance and final project

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 12 : Change management, governance and final project

Objectives

- Lead a major organisational change (restructuring, localisation, digital transformation) while limiting resistance and loss of capacity.
- Understand NGO governance: role of the board, fiduciary responsibilities, accountability and leadership ethics.
- Bring the whole Mini MBA together in a complete and defensible strategic plan: the final project.

Leading change: models and realities

The **Kotter** model (1996) describes eight steps: create a sense of urgency, build a coalition, develop a vision, communicate it, remove obstacles, generate quick wins, consolidate, anchor the change in the culture. The **ADKAR** model (Prosci) works at the level of individuals: awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, reinforcement. The **change curve** inspired by Kübler-Ross reminds us that people go through denial, resistance, exploration and then commitment, and that productivity drops temporarily.

In the humanitarian sector, the most frequent changes are imposed from outside: **funding cuts** (many organisations had to cut their staff sharply in 2025), **localisation**, **grouping of functions** in regional hubs, **digital transformation** (integrated management systems, digital payments), mergers and alliances.

Recurring causes of failure: a change announced without explaining the "why", token consultation, underestimating transition costs (severance, loss of skills, temporary drop in performance), and no support for the people who stay, often exhausted and demotivated after a restructuring ("survivor syndrome").

> A leadership rule: in a restructuring, communicate early what you know, say clearly what you do not yet know and when you will know it, and treat the people who leave with visible respect. Those who stay judge the organisation by it.

Responsible innovation and digital transformation

Humanitarian innovation is not technology for its own sake, but the search for **better ways to meet needs**. The guide by ALNAP and the Humanitarian Innovation Fund proposes a cycle: identify a real problem, design solutions with the people concerned, test on a small scale, measure, then scale up or abandon. Most innovations fail at scale-up for lack of funding, ownership or systems.

Examples of high-impact transformations: **digital cash transfers** (speed, less cash handling, but risks for data protection and digital exclusion), **anticipatory action** based on weather

forecasts (funding triggered before the peak of the crisis), **integrated management systems** (finance, procurement, HR) that reduce errors and fraud, and **artificial intelligence tools** for data analysis and translation, with strong requirements for confidentiality and human verification.

Leadership questions before any digital project: what problem does it solve? Who benefits and who could be excluded? What data is collected, where is it stored, who has access? What is the total cost over five years (licences, maintenance, training)? What is the plan if the provider disappears?

Governance: the role of the board

The **board** (or committee, depending on the legal form) is the guardian of the mission and of sound management. Its main responsibilities: set the mission and strategy, appoint, support, evaluate and if necessary replace the executive director, approve the budget and accounts, define risk appetite and oversee major risks, ensure legal and ethical compliance, and report to stakeholders.

Board members have **fiduciary duties**: a duty of **care** (be informed, take part, ask the difficult questions), a duty of **loyalty** (act in the organisation's interest, declare and manage conflicts of interest), a duty of **obedience** to the mission and the statutes. A board member who does not read the accounts or never questions management is failing in their duties.

Separation of roles is essential: the board **governs** (the what and the why, oversight), management **manages** (the how). A board that manages day to day weakens management; management that bypasses the board weakens accountability. Specialised committees (audit and risk, finance, safeguarding, remuneration) allow in-depth review.

Good practice: a diversity of skills (finance, law, operations, lived experience of crises), representation of the countries of operation, limited terms of office, regular evaluation of the board itself, and a direct line from the board to internal audit and the safeguarding lead.

Leadership ethics and accountability

Humanitarian leaders take decisions in which legitimate values clash: access versus neutrality, speed versus accountability, the organisation's survival versus faithfulness to the mission. The **humanitarian principles** (humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence) and the 1994 **Code of Conduct** provide a framework, but do not remove the dilemmas.

An ethical decision method in five questions: 1) What are the facts, and what do we not know? 2) Who will be affected, especially among the most vulnerable? 3) Which principles, legal obligations and commitments are at stake? 4) Which options, including creative ones, and what are their consequences? 5) Could the decision be explained publicly to the affected people, to staff and to donors? This last test, the **transparency** test, is often the most revealing.

Leaders' accountability runs through concrete mechanisms: annual objectives that include security, safeguarding and accountability to affected people; 360-degree appraisal; publication of annual reports and audited accounts; and responses to independent evaluations. **Power** within humanitarian organisations, notably between headquarters and the field, between

international and national staff, and between international NGOs and local partners, is a leadership subject in its own right.

The final project: your strategic plan

The final project of the Mini MBA is the synthesis of the twelve weeks. You write the **three-year strategic plan** of an organisation (yours, or the fictitious organisation "Solidarité Sahel Action" described below), in 12 to 15 pages, with the following structure:

1. **Diagnosis** (week 2): PESTEL, stakeholders, SWOT and TOWS, core problem.
2. **Theory of change** and measurable strategic objectives (weeks 2 and 4).
3. **Programme portfolio**: what is strengthened, stopped, handed over; logframe of the flagship programme (week 3).
4. **MEAL and accountability system** (week 4).
5. **Financial model**: three-year budget, real indirect cost rate and coverage, reserves target, cash flow plan (week 5).
6. **Internal control and compliance**: three priorities (week 6).
7. **Resource mobilisation**: portfolio target, weighted pipeline (week 7).
8. **Supply chain**: procurement strategy and framework agreements (week 8).
9. **People**: staffing, succession, duty of care, safeguarding (week 9).
10. **Risks**: register of the ten major risks and risk appetite (week 10).
11. **Advocacy and partnerships** (week 11).
12. **Change roadmap and governance** (week 12).

The "Solidarité Sahel Action" case. A national NGO founded in 2009, with an annual budget of USD 6.8 M, 310 employees, 5 regions. Sectors: food security (38% of the budget), nutrition (22%), water and sanitation (17%), protection (9%), education (8%), shelter (6%). Main donor: 51% of resources, with an announced 30% cut. Real indirect costs: 12% of direct costs; average rate recovered: 6.5%. Free reserves: 0.8 months of expenditure. Two regions have become very hard to access; an audit found 4.1% ineligible costs last year, mainly for procurement procedures. National staff hold 2 of the 7 leadership posts; the organisation has no dedicated safeguarding lead.

> Quality criteria expected for the diploma: clear and justified choices (not a list of intentions), figures consistent from one section to another, risks faced squarely, and constant attention to affected people and staff. Keep this plan: it is a centrepiece of your professional portfolio.

Exercise: the first calculations of the final project

Using the "Solidarité Sahel Action" case: 1) Estimate the annual shortfall in indirect cost coverage, assuming direct costs are USD 6.8 M / 1.12 and the rate recovered is 6.5% of direct costs. 2) Calculate the new budget if the main donor cuts by 30% and nothing else changes. 3) Propose a three-year reserves target and the annual amount of unrestricted funds needed to reach it. 4) Identify the three most urgent decisions and justify their order.

Indicative answer key. 1) Direct costs ≈ 6.8 / 1.12 ≈ USD 6.07 M; real indirect costs ≈ 0.73 M; recovered ≈ 6.07 × 6.5% ≈ 0.39 M; shortfall ≈ USD 0.34 M per year. 2) Main donor: 51% × 6.8 ≈ 3.47 M; 30% cut ≈ 1.04 M; new budget ≈ USD 5.76 M. 3) With monthly expenditure of about USD 0.48 M (5.76 / 12), a 3-month target represents about 1.44 M; current reserves are worth about 0.8 × 0.57 (current monthly expenditure) ≈ 0.45 M; about 0.33 M per year must therefore be generated for three years, on top of closing the coverage shortfall, which means reducing the portfolio and negotiating costs better. 4) A defensible order: secure procurement compliance (ineligible costs destroy own funds), reduce sector dispersion and adjust staffing to the new budget responsibly, then launch diversification and the negotiation of indirect costs; appoint a safeguarding lead without waiting, because it is a protection obligation and a funding condition.

Key takeaways

- Kotter (8 steps), ADKAR (individual level); anticipate the temporary drop in performance and support those who stay.
- Innovate: start from a real problem, test small, measure, scale up or abandon.
- The board governs, management manages; fiduciary duties of care, loyalty and obedience to the mission.
- Transparency test: could the decision be explained publicly to the affected people?
- The final project links the twelve weeks in a costed, consistent and defensible strategic plan.

Quiz

1. In the ADKAR model, a team trained on the new financial system that keeps using its old spreadsheets because nobody checks mainly lacks:
   A. Awareness
   B. Knowledge
   C. Reinforcement
   D. Initial desire

2. A board member sits on an NGO's board and runs the company that supplies most of its fuel. They must:
   A. Necessarily resign from the company
   B. Declare this conflict of interest and not take part in decisions concerning this supplier, and the board must check that purchases follow a competitive procedure
   C. Do nothing, if prices are low
   D. Take the purchasing decision themselves to guarantee quality

3. Which responsibility belongs to the board and not to management?
   A. Choosing kit suppliers
   B. Recruiting drivers
   C. Defining the organisation's risk appetite and evaluating the executive director
   D. Planning distributions

4. An NGO has monthly expenditure of USD 400,000 and USD 600,000 of free reserves. It aims for 3 months of reserves in 3 years, with constant expenditure. How much must it set aside on average per year?
   A. USD 200,000
   B. USD 400,000
   C. USD 600,000
   D. USD 1,200,000

5. After a restructuring that succeeded on paper, the productivity of those who stay drops and several managers leave. The most likely cause is:
   A. Pay that is too high
   B. Survivor syndrome: loss of trust, overload and lack of support after the departures
   C. Too much communication
   D. The quality of the new organisation chart

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