HUMANITARIAN ACADEMY · HUMANITAIRES JOBS

Humanitarian Mini MBA: leading a humanitarian organisation

Course handout · Week 9 : Strategic human resources, duty of care and safeguarding

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.

https://humanitairejobs.org/en/academy/mini-mba-humanitaire/semaine-9/

Free document from the Humanitarian Academy. It may be printed and shared freely for training purposes, without modification.

Week 9 : Strategic human resources, duty of care and safeguarding

Objectives

- Align people management with strategy: workforce planning, pay, development and succession, especially for national staff.
- Understand the employer's duty of care and its legal and practical consequences.
- Set up a robust safeguarding and PSEA system: prevention, safer recruitment, reporting, investigation and support.

HR as a strategic lever

Salaries often account for the largest share of an NGO's costs, and the quality of aid depends above all on people. An HR strategy answers four questions: **which skills will we need** in three years? **Where will we find them** (recruit, train, partner)? **How will we keep them** (pay, conditions, meaning, development)? **How will we prepare succession** for key posts?

Workforce planning starts from the funding scenarios. For each scenario, you calculate the staff needed, the gaps and the transition costs (recruitment, end-of-contract payments under local labour law). Contracts must be aligned with the length of funding while respecting the law: successive fixed-term contracts are regulated in many countries, and end-of-contract payments must be provisioned.

Pay rests on a salary scale based on job classification, a local market salary survey (often carried out jointly by NGOs), and a clear policy for adjusting to inflation. An opaque or inconsistent scale is one of the leading causes of labour disputes and departures.

> HR indicators for leadership: turnover rate by category, average time to recruit key posts, share of leadership posts held by national staff, vacancy rate, absenteeism, and well-being survey results.

Developing people and preparing succession

The **70-20-10** model reminds us that about 70% of learning comes from experience (assignments, projects with responsibility), 20% from relationships (mentoring, coaching, peers) and 10% from formal training. An effective development plan therefore combines demanding assignments, support and targeted training.

Performance management sets clear objectives, regular check-ins and an annual appraisal based on results and expected behaviours (a competency framework, for example the CHS Alliance core humanitarian competency framework). Performance problems are dealt with early, with a written improvement plan, support and deadlines, before any disciplinary procedure.

The **succession plan** identifies for each key post (country director, finance manager, security manager) at least one potential successor and their preparation plan. It is also a concrete lever for localisation: moving a leadership post from international to national staff requires two to three years of deliberate preparation, not a simple decision to replace.

The employer's duty of care

The **duty of care** is the employer's obligation to take all reasonable measures to protect staff against foreseeable risks, including on assignment. It covers security, physical and mental health, working and living conditions, insurance, evacuation and support after an incident. It applies to national staff as well as international staff, even if risks and means may differ.

The case of **Dennis v Norwegian Refugee Council** (Oslo District Court, 2015) was a landmark for the sector: an employee kidnapped during an attack at the Dadaab camp (Kenya) in 2012 obtained compensation, the court having found that the organisation had been grossly negligent in failing to act on known risks. The lessons: a known risk must be **analysed**, measures must be **actually applied**, and decisions must be **documented**.

In practice, the duty of care requires: up-to-date risk assessments shared with staff, a security briefing before any assignment, **clear information and informed consent** about the risks, suitable insurance (including for national staff), access to care and psychological support, rest periods, and incident management that takes care of the people affected.

> A frequent and dangerous inequality: evacuation, insurance or psychological support measures reserved for international staff. The organisation must be able to explain and defend every difference in treatment in light of the real risks.

Safeguarding and PSEA: the responsibility of leaders

Safeguarding means all the measures taken so that neither staff, nor programmes, nor partners cause harm to people, in particular sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) has set **six core principles** on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA), including: sexual exploitation and abuse constitute gross misconduct and are grounds for termination; sexual activity with children under 18 is prohibited regardless of the local age of consent; exchanging money, employment, goods or services for sex is prohibited, including assistance that is due; sexual relationships with beneficiaries are strongly discouraged because they are based on unequal power dynamics; any concern must be reported; managers must create and maintain an environment that prevents such abuse.

The system includes: a policy signed by all staff and partners, **safer recruitment** (reference checks with explicit questions about misconduct, participation in the **Misconduct Disclosure Scheme**, which allows member organisations to share information on proven misconduct), training, reporting mechanisms accessible to communities, and specialised investigation capacity.

The **survivor-centred approach** guides every response: safety, confidentiality, respect for the person's choices, non-discrimination, and referral to services (health, psychosocial support, legal aid) even if the person does not want an investigation.

Organisational culture, well-being and diversity

Culture shows in what leaders **tolerate**. A director who protects a high-performing but abusive staff member destroys years of policies with a single decision. Sector inquiries (for example the report of the independent commission set up by Oxfam on sexual misconduct, accountability and culture change, published in 2019) showed that abuse thrives where hierarchy is strong, speaking up is hard and reporting mechanisms are unreliable.

Well-being is managed with structural measures rather than slogans: realistic workload, sufficient staffing, leave actually taken, confidential psychosocial support, peer support, and training managers to spot signs of burnout (the Maslach model describes three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation or cynicism, and a sense of inefficacy).

Diversity, equity and inclusion concern gender, nationality, disability, age and background. Useful indicators: breakdown by gender and status at the different levels of responsibility, pay gaps for equal posts, accessibility of workplaces, and inclusion survey results. Women remain under-represented in country leadership posts in many organisations: concrete measures (mentoring, working conditions compatible with family life, transparent selection criteria) have more effect than statements.

Exercise: HR plan in a downturn scenario and a safeguarding alert

Part 1. Your mission has 140 employees. The most likely funding scenario implies a 25% cut in the payroll in six months. Local law requires severance of one month's salary per year of service for economic redundancies and one month's notice. Describe your approach in six steps, from analysis to communication, and say which selection criteria are objective, lawful and non-discriminatory.

Part 2. A member of a distribution committee tells you that a supervisor is allegedly asking women for "favours" in exchange for putting them on the lists. This supervisor is one of the best performers in the team. Describe your actions within 48 hours.

Answer key. Part 1: analyse the scenarios and the posts, consult staff representatives as required by law, explore alternatives (natural end of contracts, recruitment freeze, voluntary reduction of working time), apply objective and published criteria (skills required by the posts kept, documented results, then length of service as required by law), provision the severance payments, support the people affected. Part 2: do not investigate yourself or confront the supervisor; pass the information immediately and confidentially to the PSEA focal point or the investigation unit; protective measures (remove the supervisor from any contact with the lists and the beneficiaries during the investigation, without prejudging); guarantee access to services for the people affected; notify the donor according to the contract clauses. The supervisor's performance is irrelevant.

Key takeaways

- HR strategy: future skills, sources, retention, succession; a transparent, market-based salary scale.
- 70-20-10: experience and support develop people more than training alone.
- Duty of care: risks analysed, measures applied, decisions documented (Dennis v NRC, 2015).
- The IASC's six principles on PSEA; safer recruitment and the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme; survivor-centred approach.
- Culture is measured by what leaders tolerate.

Quiz

1. Under the IASC principles, a sexual relationship between a staff member and a 17-year-old, in a country where the age of consent is 16, is:
   A. Allowed by local law
   B. Prohibited: any sexual activity with a person under 18 is prohibited, whatever the local legal age
   C. Tolerated if consensual
   D. A private matter

2. The main lesson of Dennis v NRC (2015) for humanitarian employers is:
   A. Dangerous areas must be avoided
   B. A known risk must be analysed, measures actually applied and decisions documented, otherwise the organisation can be held liable
   C. Only international staff are protected
   D. Insurance is enough

3. When checking references for a post in contact with beneficiaries, it is essential to:
   A. Rely only on the references provided by the candidate
   B. Ask explicitly about misconduct and ongoing investigations, and use information-sharing schemes such as the Misconduct Disclosure Scheme
   C. Check only diplomas
   D. Avoid questions about conduct to respect privacy

4. A survivor of abuse does not want an investigation to be opened. In a survivor-centred approach, the organisation:
   A. Opens a public investigation anyway
   B. Closes the file without doing anything
   C. Respects her choice as far as possible, guarantees her access to services, and meets its internal reporting obligations while protecting her identity
   D. Asks the alleged perpetrator's manager to settle the matter

5. In the 70-20-10 model, mentoring a future country director falls mainly under:
   A. 70%: experience
   B. 20%: relationships and support
   C. 10%: formal training
   D. None of these categories

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