

LEADING THE WAY: Applied Humanitarian Leadership Learning in the Haiyan Response

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SUMMARY

- The Humanitarian Leadership Programme is a post-graduate course designed by humanitarians, academics, and leadership specialists.
- Going beyond theoretical learning, students learn through distance and online learning; residential workshops; small-group work; scenarios; individual coaching; psychometric assessment and 360° feedback.
- Typhoon Haiyan was an ideal setting to observe and research how students and graduates applied their learning to improve leadership in a response.
- The study confirmed that the structure and content of the course is relevant and effective in building self-awareness, self-confidence, resilience, reflective practice, strategic thinking and relationship skills.
- The study highlighted limitations in the scale, reach and accessibility of the programme. Reach is limited by budget and staffing, and its impact and access is further limited by English being the only language.
- In order to effect transformation of the sector through improved leadership, programmes such as this need to be delivered on a wider scale.
- Expanding the programme into other regions and languages will make it more accessible to a greater variety of humanitarian actors, and strengthen local capacity to lead responses to complex disasters.

This Policy Brief is based on research conducted over a 5-month period in the Philippines and Australia. Participants were students and graduates of the Humanitarian Leadership Programme who held leadership roles in the humanitarian response to Typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda that devastated central Philippines in November 2013.

30 students and graduates in leadership roles in the Typhoon Haiyan response

100% of them agreed the programme made them better leaders in the response

WHAT IS THE HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP PROGRAMME?

The Humanitarian Leadership Programme is a comprehensive eight month post-graduate course designed by an expert group of humanitarians, academics, and leadership development specialists to transform the effective and efficient delivery of humanitarian assistance.

The programme was developed in response to numerous studies and evaluations highlighting a crisis of leadership in the humanitarian sector. Launched in 2011, and refined and tested over the past four years, the course examines the leadership and strategic issues faced by managers in the humanitarian sector.

The course covers the principles and methodologies of humanitarian operations and explores the organisational processes and leadership practices that enable humanitarian teams to deliver in the most challenging contexts.

Going beyond theoretical learning, the course provides students with experience, support and challenges to help them develop their skill and confidence in offering leadership to others. Students learn and are assessed through distance and online learning; residential workshops; small-group work; scenario-based learning; individual coaching; psychometric assessment and 360 degree feedback.

PROGRAMME CONTENT & STRUCTURE

The Humanitarian Leadership Programme takes 8 months to complete, with two cloud-based units each followed by a residential intensive unit. The research identifies that a strong theoretical understanding, linked with supported practice contexts, enabled graduates to more successfully deal with the challenges they faced in the response.

The course brings together the best of practitioner experience and academic rigour, encouraging students to examine strategic challenges of delivering humanitarian assistance in constantly changing environments.

This focus on the big picture – including a practice of stepping back and taking a “balcony view” in live simulations – was highlighted as a critical factor in making the jump from operational management to strategic leadership in the Haiyan response.

Students practice giving and receiving feedback with coaches and peers, which combines with psychometric assessments and 360 degree feedback to grow self-awareness. Participants reported entering the Haiyan response with a different mind-set and found they were capable of exhibiting greater confidence in the way they led their teams.

UNIT	ACTIVITY	DELIVERY MODE
Unit One / AHL701	Diagnosing the Humanitarian System Distance / eLearning 10 hrs study per week x 13 weeks	Cloud-based
Unit Two / AHL702	Developing Humanitarian Leadership 7-day residential	Melbourne, Australia
Unit Three / AHL703	Delivering Humanitarian Operations Distance / eLearning 10 hrs study per week x 13 weeks	Cloud-based
Unit Four / AHL704	Demonstrating Strategic Leadership 8-day residential	Semarang, Indonesia

LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOURS

The course provides a framework of six interrelated leadership behaviours, namely: Communicating Vision and Strategic Purpose, Strategic Thinking, Managerial Courage, Deliver Results, Building High Performing Teams and Change and Transformation.

The research findings reinforce the relevance of the framework, and of each of the six leadership behaviours within. Research participants described how they consciously worked to communicate clearly with field teams to build cohesion and common objectives amidst the turmoil of a humanitarian crisis, noting the responsibility of a leader to provide “a purpose and direction to channel their energies”.

Many students and graduates spoke of applying strategic thinking in their day-to-day work in the Haiyan context. One participant described “setting up frameworks for all staff to be able to input into this thinking... setting the parameters for discussion, communicating where we need to be in a certain amount of time and then delegating that to the respective deputies and field managers”.

Communicating Vision
& Strategic Purpose
Strategic Thinking
Managerial Courage
Deliver Results
Building High Performing
Teams
Change &
Transformation

“I look back at these behaviours [and] I think when you get back to doing it for real you recognise just how poignant these all are. There is nothing on that list that you don’t have to demonstrate.”

PARTNERSHIP & COLLABORATION

A partnership approach has supported the programme's planning, development and delivery from the very early stages. The key design premise of the programme was that it would be 'by practitioners, for practitioners' supported by academic rigour provided by the partner university.

The involvement of a broad range of sector partners provides credence for the course beyond one agency or group of agencies and ensures its relevance across the entire humanitarian sector.

A key success of the programme, highlighted by research participants, is that the buy-in from a broad range of stakeholders has resulted in bringing together of a wide range of students and faculty members from across countries and organisations, with various fields and levels of expertise.

This mimics the reality of a humanitarian response where, for example, participants noted their heightened skills in building high performing teams helped support them to set-up new offices with new team members – national and international – some of whom had no experience with specific organisations or even in the humanitarian sector.

The research identified the need to increase reach, scale and accessibility of the programme. It highlighted the opportunity to expand the programme in conjunction with other educational institutions, humanitarian organisations and private sector partners, adapting it for delivery in different contexts and local languages. This has since been explored with partners from the University of Indonesia, the University of Nairobi and Action Contre la Faim.

PROGRAMME PARTNERS



CONCLUSION

Over the last five years there has been an increasing focus on the strengths and limitations of leadership practice in the humanitarian sector.

Typhoon Haiyan provided an ideal setting to observe how students and graduates of the Humanitarian Leadership Programme applied their learning to improve the leadership in a response.

The findings show the programme has resulted in graduates feeling increased confidence in their leadership capability. The study also reinforced the relevance of the leadership behaviour framework used in the programme.

Informants identified the importance of effective relationship building to engage team members more fully in the response. This is critical in the humanitarian sector, where the focus is primarily on the team rather than the individual.

Graduates and students spoke of their clearer understanding of effective leadership in a humanitarian response. The impact of having confident, aware and reflective leaders will also be felt in the day-to-day working of humanitarian organisations.

Further research should go beyond measuring the perceptions of individuals to assess the programme's impact on humanitarian organisations and, once sufficient scale has been achieved, on the humanitarian system.

This study highlighted that in order to effect the transformation of the sector through improved leadership, programmes such as this need to be delivered on a wider scale. Discussions are already underway to expand the delivery of the course through partnerships with other educational institutions around the world delivering in local languages.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted through field and desk-based semi-structured interviews, online questionnaires and 360 degrees assessment.

A total of 31 people participated in the research: 26 semi-structured interviews were held with students and graduates, and 5 others in positions dealing directly with them.

In January 2014, two months after Typhoon Haiyan made landfall in the Philippines, the research team travelled to Manila and Estancia to interview national and international humanitarian actors.

Remaining interviews with current or graduate students were conducted remotely, following the same methodology. All informants had been involved in the Haiyan response in the 1st or 2nd phase.

The researchers then sent an online questionnaire to the same students and graduates who were interviewed, and conducted a 360° assessment to analyse the leadership skills the key informants demonstrated during their deployment.

Internal reports and open source data on the Haiyan response were reviewed to complement analysis of the impact of the course on the leadership behaviours of the students and graduates.

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