Humanitarian Leadership: A Research Protocol to Evaluate the Effectiveness of a Leadership Training Program Aimed at Enhancing Leadership Skills for Humanitarians

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ABSTRACT

Leadership skills are essential to addressing today's humanitarian challenges. While leadership training programs abound in the private sector and within the military, the same is not true for the humanitarian field. International donors have recognized this gap and have recently invested in formal leadership training programs for aid workers. This paper presents a protocol to evaluate the effectiveness of the National NGO Program on Humanitarian Leadership, a leadership training course targeted to humanitarians working for national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) worldwide. The protocol establishes a model for evaluating the impact of NNPHL participants' ability to make decisions about complex challenges in a manner that is consistent with a core set of leadership competencies introduced in the course. The evaluation consists of scenario-based vignettes that the participants answer in order to assess their leadership competencies through a series of illustrative indicators. This paper also includes a discussion of the definition of leadership, both broadly and through the NNPHL course, and the study's strengths and limitations along with avenues for future research.

Keywords: Leadership, humanitarian, NGO, evaluation

1. Background

The humanitarian sector has undergone a series of reforms that have improved the accountability of the organizations providing aid services and have professionalized the staff working to deliver humanitarian assistance. The reforms have included system wide resolutions like the UN General Assembly Resolutions 41/81, and the adoption of technical standards like the Joint Standards Initiative and the Sphere Standards. To be sure, these reforms and technical standards have contributed to the improvement of the delivery of life saving aid around the world. Yet, many of today's humanitarian contexts, whether complex emergencies (as in Yemen, Nigeria, Syria) or major natural disasters (Haiti, Nepal, Philippines), cannot be addressed by technical approaches alone. Such multifaceted situations

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require humanitarians to navigate a complex political environment where their choices will not only determine whether or not they can access the populations they seek to serve, but also can have implications for their own security or that of their humanitarian colleagues.

In short, meeting humanitarian needs often not only requires humanitarians to adhere to a set of professional standards, but also to exhibit the kind of leadership needed to navigate difficult situations with critical consequences. On the one hand, we can readily identify situations that require leadership, such as negotiating access to populations in need of humanitarian assistance or working to change behaviors that contribute to human suffering. On the other hand, it is easy to attribute failed crisis responses to an absence of leadership (such as Gostin and Friedman, 2014, or Hook, 2012). The much harder task is to define what "leadership" means for the humanitarian sector. More difficult still, how can we train humanitarian workers to exercise leadership?

National NGO Program on Humanitarian Leadership

In an effort to provide humanitarian leadership training, the National NGO Program on Humanitarian Leadership (NNPHL) is a rigorous, innovative, blended learning leadership training program for humanitarian professionals. NNPHL was created by a consortium of organizations working in the humanitarian field – specifically Concern Worldwide U.S., International Medical Corps, and the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, with technical support from Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Participants for the NNPHL course are selected in a competitive application process that focuses on national staff of national NGOs. Since the program launched in 2016, NNPHL has received more than 3,750 applications and trained 125 humanitarian professionals from over 43 countries. The program, funded by the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), is designed to enhance the leadership capacity of national NGOs that work in the domain of humanitarian action through innovative pedagogies that combine a rigorous academic curriculum with practical experiential learning including mentorship and individual assignments. NNPHL aims to bridge a gap in the humanitarian sector, in which staff are responding in increasingly complex environments, but are often not trained in the type of leadership skills that are critical to responding in such situations.

The aim of this research protocol is to propose a model to evaluate the impact of NNPHL on the participants' ability to make decisions about complex challenges (adaptive challenges, described below) in a manner that is consistent with a core set of leadership competencies introduced in the course.

Structure of the NNPHL Course

NNPHL is a leadership development training program designed for exceptional mid-level career humanitarian professionals working for non-governmental or community-based organizations in humanitarian settings. The course is offered two times per year. The purpose of the program is to enable professionals to take on leadership responsibilities in a variety of roles within the humanitarian sector. The program consists of three parts: a one-week in-person didactic course, a three-month mentorship component, and an online learning and community of practice component.

The one-week didactic course is composed of four parts. The first is an introduction to and training on adaptive leadership, the second focuses on key thematic issues relevant to humanitarian action, and the third focuses on management essentials for humanitarian teams. The fourth component is a table-top simulation designed to test and practice the key concepts taught in each of the three content sections. A full course schedule is provided in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Example NNPHL course schedule.

NNPHL 5 TRAINING SCHEDULE — **March 2019, Dead Sea, Jordan**

NNPHL 5	ARRIVAL	DAY 1	DAY 2	DAY 3	DAY 4	DAY 5/ Departures	DEPARTURE
Daily Focus	Arrivals	Adaptive Leadership (AL)	Adaptive Leadership & Management	Humanitarian Content	Humanitarian Content	Humanitarian Crisis Simulation	Departures
Morning Session	Arrivals throughout the day	Adaptive Leadership	Adaptive Leadership	Leadership for Managers	Problem Solving	Humanitarian Crisis Simulation	Limited departures to airport
		Coffee/tea Break					
Late Morning Session		Adaptive Leadership	Adaptive Leadership	Gender, Leadership & Authority	Operational Planning, Decision-Making	Humanitarian Crisis Simulation	
		Lunch					
Afternoon		Adaptive Leadership	Leadership for Managers	Humanitarian Civil-Military Engagement	Stress and Resilience	·Simulation Debrief ·Action planning and Evaluations	
		Coffee/tea Break					
Late Afternoon Session		Adaptive Leadership ·Case Presentation	Leadership for Managers	Leadership Panel with regional humanitarians	Trauma-Informed Communication and Management	Departures to airport	
Closing sessions	Welcome & Introductions	AL Small Group Case presentations	Early Dinner	Networking	AL Small Group Case presentations		
Dinner	Dinner						
Evening Sessions	Welcome Dinner		Finding Your Voice		Optional Evening: Women & Leadership		

The key learning objectives of the program include the development of self-awareness, the ability to motivate and influence others, and the ability to exercise critical judgment. The associated competencies and indicators are discussed further below.

Participants are selected from among applicants who apply to the program, which is open to any eligible staff working for a non-governmental organization that works in humanitarian settings. The selection process is highly competitive with participants being selected among a large pool of applicants. The selection committee is comprised of two members from each of the three consortium partners that manage the course – Concern Worldwide U.S., International Medical Corps, and the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative.

Participants are selected in a multi-stage process that begins with their applying for the program online, once course registration is open. A team of two people from each of the three consortium institutions reviews the initial set of applications and screens out candidates that do not meet the application criteria (e.g. do not have a valid passport in hand and are not able to travel to the course; do not work in the humanitarian field). The three institutions then divide the pool of qualified candidates and reviews each application, screening for years of professional experience, diversity of professional roles in the humanitarian field, and the candidate's ability to articulate how they expect to apply the course to their own career and professional development. We also use the criteria of gender parity and geographic diversity to select a list of finalists. This typically narrows the field of final applicants to a range of between 60 to 90 applicants. The three consortium institutions again divide the final batch of candidates and schedule 20 to 30 minute online interviews with two people from each institution and the candidate. Each interview includes a set of structured questions that the candidate is asked to relate their experiences to. The finalists are weighted as a No, Maybe, Strong, or Very Strong. We aim to have a final accepted cohort of 30 participants for each offering of the course. We tend to accept 34 to 36 candidates and end up with between 28 and 32 participants in any given cohort.

2. Methods and Analysis

This protocol sets out a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of leadership training, particularly the training provided in the NNPHL course. It provides an assessment framework for evaluating whether leadership training changes how participants modify their decision making and choices in response to the training.

2.1 Research Sites

The research sites include the physical sites where the NNPHL course is to be offered, including Amman, (Jordan) and Nairobi (Kenya). Previous iterations of the program have been offered in Cambridge (Massachusetts), Nairobi (Kenya), Manila (Philippines), and Dublin (Ireland). An additional research site is the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative in Cambridge, Massachusetts in the USA, where a majority of the data analysis to evaluate the leadership training will take place.

During the selection process, the consortium institutions make an effort to get a broad global geographic representation of participants. In practice, most participants come from countries that are in the region where we hold the course. For example, when the course was held in Jordan in March of 2019, participants were from Afghanistan, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, Syria, Turkey, and Yemen.

2.2 Evaluating Leadership Competencies

There are three core leadership competencies taught in the NNPHL course – self-awareness (or the ability to observe from the balcony and place oneself in the context), motivating and influencing others (the capacity to interpret what is happening and to identify what key stakeholders have to lose or gain from change), and critical judgment (the resulting intervention or decision). The competencies used in the course are derived from the Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies' (CBHA) Core Competency Framework for "Demonstrating Leadership." These competencies were mapped against Adaptive Leadership principles to come up with the final set of competencies used in the course.

In consultation with other sources and with the feedback of the training team for NNPHL, illustrative indicators were decided upon for each competency. These illustrative indicators serve the purpose of identifying specific, observable behaviors that correspond to each competency.

The leadership competencies being assessed under the three main domains, and illustrative indicators for each, are defined in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Leadership competencies and illustrative indicators.

Domain 1: Self-awareness	
Competencies	*Illustrative indicators*
Demonstrates understanding of one's abilities, experience, and limitations and how they complement those of others to support team effectiveness (CBHA, 2012)	– Understands how one's strengths and limitations fit into a broader team skill-set – Uses one's strengths to contribute to a response – Reflects on oneself and is aware of one's influence on others (Galer, et al, 2005) – Recognizes how one's personal position, gender, and beliefs might impact one's work – Recognizes one's response to a stressful

	situation, and manages one's emotions effectively (Galer, et al, 2005)
Seeks and reflects on feedback to improve performance (CBHA, 2012)	– Welcomes criticism and considers it (CBHA, 2012) – Recognizes when one's actions have not met expectations and works on shortcomings (Galer, et al, 2005) – Takes responsibility for one's actions and rectifies the situation when mistakes are made (CBHA, 2012) – Elicits feedback from others
Domain 2: Motivation and Influence	
Competencies:	*Illustrative indicators:*
Promotes collaborative work across boundaries (Connors and Perreard, 2014)	– Identifies other actors working within a shared response – Shows willingness to listen to others and understand other perspectives – Seeks out local actors and sees them as key stakeholders – Gets factions to interact so that a richer diagnosis of the problem and/or a set of possible solutions emerges (Heifetz, et al, 2009a) – Involves others in the decision-making process and/or encourages others to make independent decisions – Forms teams and manages team interactions
Empowers others to embrace change	– Recognizes that change involves loss and seeks to mitigate losses with identification of expected gains from change – Connects self and team to a sense of purpose – Mobilizes others to generate solutions by sharing information (Heifetz, et al, 2009a) – Builds an atmosphere of trust where all perspectives are considered, and inquiry and creativity are fostered – Is able to articulate a strategic vision
Domain 3: Critical judgment	
Competencies:	*Illustrative indicators:*
Assesses available information to make recommendations and decisions	– Looks beyond a narrow focus to see the bigger picture; "steps onto the balcony" to observe the context – Distinguishes between different types of

	challenges (technical or adaptive) – Analyzes complex environments in terms of potential friction points, sources of tensions, and operational issues to increase operational effectiveness and efficiency – Understands the potential for consequences of various decisions and selects the best option to balance best outcomes with potential consequences
Shows a willingness to act decisively and quickly, including during times of adversity or stress	– Assesses risks and follows a decision-making process under pressure – Takes ownership over decisions – Recognizes the impact of stress and traumatic exposure and takes steps to mitigate stress for self and other team members – Takes calculated risks to improve performance (CBHA, 2012) – Employs risk management or mitigation strategies in complex operating environments

2.4 The Evaluation Tool: Vignettes

This research protocol lays out a method for evaluating the impact of leadership training on participants' decision making against a set of leadership competencies. The evaluation tool includes three short vignettes to capture the three core competency domains described in Table 1. Specifically, one vignette each focuses on self-awareness, critical judgment, and motivating and influencing others. The vignettes are open-ended questions each in the form of a written paragraph.

Each of the vignettes poses an adaptive challenge in the humanitarian field where the process of resolution requires the application of the core competencies. They are adaptive in the sense that the problems are not clear-cut, and technical approaches alone will not be adequate to resolve them. Rather, learning is required to define or accurately observe the problems and interpret the observations that then allow for an intervention to resolve the problem. Accordingly, there is no "right" or "wrong" answer to each vignette. However, each vignette is written so that the response could elicit any number of the above illustrative indicators for each competency. Examples of the vignettes are provided in Table 2 below.[1]

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[1] The participants are provided with the following directions for the vignettes: Evaluate the following scenarios. What leadership qualities or actions are present in each scenario? Suggest one additional leadership action. (2-3 sentence response each).

Table 2. Scenario-based questionnaire vignettes.

Domain Area	Example Vignette
Motivating and influencing others	You are the acting director of a health response within a refugee camp. A junior staff member on your team has specialized knowledge in psychosocial health interventions and has expressed a desire to write a proposal for a new project in this area. You express enthusiasm and encourage the junior officer to move forward with this new project. While writing the proposal, the project officer begins to hear complaints from other NGOs working in the refugee camp who do not believe this type of intervention is a priority and would like funding to focus on more "fundamental health issues."
Critical judgement	You are currently Child Protection Lead for your NGO, working in an Internally displaced person (IDP) camp in a country with ongoing armed conflict. Fighting has escalated in a neighboring community, and the Protection Cluster Lead urgently asks if any NGOs can send a team to assess the vulnerabilities of a newly-displaced population. The situation is highly volatile, and you have received some reports that children are being trafficked in large numbers, while others deny that this is going on. Before offering to send a team, you start to think about the potential impact on your current child protection activities in the IDP camp, as well as the potential security concerns for your staff.
Self-awareness	You are a male head of mission. You just received news from a friend that a few of your female staff members are feeling unsafe in their current work environment. Initially, you feel upset that no one came to you with this information, as you believe that you have worked hard to keep communication open and build trust with your staff. You wonder if your position of authority has made it harder for people to come to you in this situation. You reach out to a trusted female colleague for feedback, who confirms that this is the case, and points out warning signs that you also missed.

2.5 Data Collection and Analysis Methods

Participants are presented with the series of three vignettes using an online form in the KoboToolBox, which is a free, open-source software composed of a suite of tools for data collection. The vignettes will be completed remotely online by the participants from their different locations of residence worldwide.

The participants are asked to provide what actions they would propose to address the problems presented in the vignettes in a two to three sentence response. The study team will train the data analysis coders on the competency indicators before coding the participants' responses to the vignettes.

Each of the responses to the vignettes is coded according to the actions taken to assess how the responses align with the leadership training course core competencies, as well as the implementation of "adaptive" rather than "technical" thinking. Each of the core competencies has a series of words or themes we identify as being a positive element for evaluation. Inter-coder reliability will be determined by having different coders assess the same responses. Coders will only begin coding once they have demonstrated an 80% minimum coding accuracy.

While the vignette approach does not allow for actual observation of the stated behavioral indicators, they were written to replicate true-to-life scenarios in which participants could describe taking a course of action in response, thus indicating the learning of the behaviors. Leadership course participants respond to the vignettes both before exposure to the training and again three months post-training. The change in responses to the same vignettes before and after the training are attributed to the training experience.

In addition to the vignettes, the participants will also complete self-report questions asking about their competencies that will be tracked both before and after their participation in the course.

The evaluation framework is designed to measure whether a specific leadership training methodology (the adaptive leadership approach with core humanitarian competencies) results in a change in the decisions course participants make about how to approach a series of complex scenarios. However, this evaluation framework does not provide a means of assessing the link between leadership competencies and outcomes of leadership decision making.

2.6 Recruitment of Participants

Two cohorts of training participants will be assessed and compared to a control group. Control group participants are to be chosen from applicants to the training program that were qualified to be accepted to the program but were unable to take the course. Control group participants will be asked to respond to the same set of vignettes and will be evaluated against the same set of leadership competencies at the same interval period as actual course participants. Differences between the scores of participants in the control group may be attributed to non-course, workplace learning that may occur over the time period between their pre-test and post-test.

Including this analysis from the control group helps account for natural change over time that might have been seen among course participants, even if they had not taken the leadership course. The difference between the mean score of the control group and course participants' group helps to define the impact of the training course on participant's leadership decision making.

2.7 Ethics

Participation in the study is entirely voluntary. Both participants that take the course and those that were qualified to take the course but did not (control group) will be presented with a consent form that states that participation is voluntary. Participants will be alerted to the purpose of the study, that compensation in the process is not offered, and the expected benefits of the study for humanitarian professionals. All data collected in the evaluation will be collected and stored on password-protected laptops.

2.8 Risks and Benefits

The most significant ethical consideration for any leadership education or training program is the creation of expectations that participation will lead to immediate changes in the lives of participants or an expectation that they will be able to resolve challenges or successfully resolve dilemmas they were dealing with prior to participation in the program. There is also the potential that participants in the evaluation will interpret the evaluation as an assessment of their own suitability for leadership rather than an assessment of the impact of the training program on their absorption of key competencies into their analysis of adaptive problems.

The primary expected benefit of the evaluation is the public availability or a program evaluation tool and methodological approach to evaluating whether competencies introduced in educational programs lead to use of those competencies in approaching complex, adaptive problems. Many leadership program evaluation methods rely on self-assessments or group assessments of individuals' abilities to exhibit leadership qualities. This research design offers a different method of evaluating participants' analysis of adaptive problems prior to and after course participation, thus providing a measure of participants' incorporation of the course's core competencies into their own leadership abilities.

3. Discussion

3.1 Defining Leadership

Humanitarians have only recently explored what leadership means for the sector. As yet, there is no commonly accepted, shared definition outlining the activities, skills, or competencies of leadership for the sector. This is likely due to the complexity of both the task of leadership itself, and that of the situations and needs within the humanitarian sector. The result is divergent – and sometimes nonexistent - approaches to leadership. In the field of leadership research, different approaches to leadership have been developed and studied, including the trait approach, the behavior approach, or the relational approach (see Northouse, 2010). While these approaches have been widely discussed within the context of other sectors, little systematic research has been done to examine how humanitarian leadership fits within these different paradigms.

Among the work that has been done on leadership in the sector, two illustrative definitions of leadership come from ALNAP (Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action) and CBHA. ALNAP defines "operational humanitarian leadership" as "providing a clear vision and objectives for the humanitarian response; building a consensus that brings aid workers together around that vision and objectives; and finding ways of collectively realizing the vision for the benefit of the affected population, often in challenging and hostile environments" (Clarke, 2013). The CBHA Core Humanitarian Competencies Guide defines leadership as follows: "seeing the overall goal within the changing context and taking responsibility to motivate others to work towards it, independent of one's role, function, or seniority" (Emmens and Swords, 2010). This definition holds that leaders are: self-aware; able to motivate and influence others; and able to exercise critical judgment.

3.2 NNPHL's Definition of Leadership

The NNPHL understands leadership as a process that can be exercised by an individual or group of individuals that are stakeholders in or owners of a problem. After consulting the above definitions and other existing literature on humanitarian leadership, we developed our core leadership curriculum on the basis of the CBHA definition of leadership and its

associated competency framework. Our leadership curriculum also draws on adaptive leadership theory, which was developed at the Harvard Kennedy School and was identified by NNPHL partners as a relevant training approach for the humanitarian sector. Adaptive leadership is defined as "the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive" (Heifetz, et al, 2009b). Adaptive leadership theory also distinguishes importantly between the roles of authority and leadership, and thus the CBHA definition in which leadership is exercised "independent of one's role, function, or seniority" fits well with the teaching in our program.

Complex challenges are not unique to the humanitarian sector. However, while corporations and militaries pour billions of dollars into leadership training, the same is not true for the humanitarian sector. Comparatively few resources have been devoted to understanding the leadership needs of the humanitarian sector or providing leadership training or education. This could speak to the preference donors give "to support the strengthening of technical skills associated with their issue of interest (e.g., health, education, agriculture) rather than strengthening management and leadership skills more broadly" (Jayawickrama, 2011, 15).

This raises certain assumptions and questions. A core assumption is that leadership can be taught and learned. Yet, the field of research on leadership development – that is, the expansion of the capacity of individuals to be effective in leadership roles – is relatively immature (Day and Dragoni, 2015). An obvious research question is, does leadership training result in improved leadership decisions?

3.3 Evaluating Leadership Development

The measurement of leadership development is an inherently complex task. First, leadership development is longitudinal in nature, therefore measurement must occur over time. In practice, this means that long periods of time may elapse between leadership trainings or interventions and subsequent measurement. Second, measuring leadership development often relies on self-assessment, which is subjective and often biased. To address these shortcomings, many evaluations of leadership training take the form of assessment of competencies through 360-degree feedback, or multisource feedback from peers, subordinates, and supervisors in addition to the participant; discrepancies between self and other evaluations provide valuable feedback (Day and Dragoni, 2015; Solansky, 2010). Use of mentors or coaches to enhance leadership ability has been measured by Solansky and is another possible source of capturing multi-source feedback (Solansky, 2010).

Other evaluation approaches incorporate performance against a set of indicators. A number of scales have been developed and validated to measure a set of leadership indicators, such as the widely-used Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ) developed at Ohio State University. Hadley and colleagues utilize a C-Lead scale to measure the effectiveness of leaders in public health and safety crisis. This scale specifically measures information assessment and decision making, two core leadership behaviors identified for leaders in public health and safety crises (Hadley, et al, 2011). However, no leadership scale has been developed specifically for the humanitarian sector.

We depart from these approaches by offering a framework to assess what impact leadership training has on participants' decision making based on their approach to resolving dilemmas introduced in a series of vignettes.

3.4 Strengths and Limitations

One of the strengths of this study is the access to participants through the NNPHL course. Specifically, including the course participants in this study elicits responses from a diverse

group of participants who work in a number of different humanitarian settings worldwide. With such an eclectic group of participants, the study will be able to understand the impact of the leadership training on a variety of humanitarian workers.

Another strength of this study is its longitudinal element. In addition to asking the participants to respond to the vignettes before participation in the NNPHL course, they will also be asked to do so three months after completing the course. This will allow the study to determine the impact the training has had on the participants' leadership skills and decision-making abilities after having the opportunity to practice what they learned within their own organizations.

A limitation of this study is determining the specific impact of the NNPHL training on the participants' leadership abilities. Specifically, it will be difficult for the evaluation to isolate the impact of the training program compared to the impact of other factors that could influence the participants' decision making, such as new colleagues or a new work environment.

Another limitation of this study is the size of the control group. Overall the size of the control group, meaning those who were accepted to the NNPHL course but could not participate in it, will be much smaller than those in the intervention group, meaning those who participated in the NNPHL course. A larger control group to compare the intervention group against would broaden the findings of the study.

3.5 Future Research

An area of future research on evaluating the impact of humanitarian leadership training could focus on the impact of such leadership training on participants from international organizations. Since the NNPHL course is limited to participants who are national staff at either national NGOs or international NGOs, further research that includes international staff as well could provide valuable information about the impact of leadership training on participants with different roles within their respective institutions.

Another area of future research could explore the impact of leadership training in the humanitarian sector compared to other sectors like the private sector. Such research could compare and contrast the impact of leadership training in different fields and provide lessons learned that could be transferrable to leadership trainings in a diversity of sectors.

Declarations

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