

Buddha, Hercules, and others in Humanitarian Leadership

Note on the HERE-organised Round Table on Humanitarian Leadership, Geneva, 25 October 2019

This note provides a summary of the round table discussion on the topic of humanitarian leadership held among a selection of humanitarian practitioners, donor government representatives, and individual experts.¹

Leadership in the context of humanitarian coordination is often thought of in terms of structures and mechanisms, yet much relies on leadership behaviour. The purpose of the round table was to exchange ideas on leadership styles and experiences about leadership, and to identify leadership issues that deserve more attention. Martha Maznevski, HERE Trustee and Professor of Organisational Behaviour at the Ivey Business School in London, Ontario, Canada, presented on different leadership styles. She contrasted two different styles of leadership – Hercules and Buddha – and discussed how their combination is greater than their sum. This outsider’s perspective on behavioural styles of leadership fostered a critical discussion and self-reflection on leadership in the humanitarian context.

Summary of the discussion

Hercules Leadership

Classic Hercules leadership style provides clear direction regarding both actions and outcomes. A perfect example is management by SMART objectives. When the objectives are attained the leader – and everyone else involved – is rewarded. In the private sector the rewards are often explicitly fame and wealth. In the public sector the rewards may be more implicit, such as promotions, increased funding, or status and reputation. Good Hercules leaders are effective experts who provide direction and develop innovative solutions towards specific goals. Hercules leadership is centred around the leader, and Hercules leaders can be overly directive, autocratic and authoritarian, even ruthless. Hercules leaders provide their followers with certainty, they reduce ambiguity. Followers find a certain safety in not having to make decisions. This style can be good for executing and getting things done, yet it is often not inspiring or team-oriented. We tend to have a perception that Hercules leadership is bad, but in fact it is often effective and appreciated.

- How does this translate to the humanitarian context?

The participants noted that this style can be useful and even necessary when the stakes are high, in times of urgency and crisis. It was also recognised that the existing incentive system accommodates such a leadership style. However, in the context of humanitarian action with strong national government leadership and/or the need for consultation in view of collective action, Hercules leaders are likely to be challenged. Hercules leaders will also naturally compete with each other unless they can divide the territory, whether that territory is physical, or knowledge-, or relationship-based. This issue is often a recurrent problem among UN agencies as the UN is frequently competitive and often lacks coherence across the system. UN approaches are often supply-, not needs- driven, frequently leading to turf wars.

The emerging conclusion from this discussion is that the humanitarian context does not provide a platform for formal authority over the collective, which is why a narrow Hercules leader often struggles

¹ See Annex 2 for the list of participants.

without formal authority over the other players. When Hercules leadership is thwarted, a Hercules leader tends to try and “lead harder” by being even more of a Hercules. This inevitably leads to frantic actions with suboptimal results. It was further noted that the incentives for bringing coherence to a diverse global architecture to better lead at country level and set collective results, is very often contradictory in nature. A ‘classic/narrow’ Hercules leader does not know what to do with failure, and this can be seen in the humanitarian context too. If someone fails in the global context, do they take responsibility? Humanitarian leaders were noted to lack accountability. Too often, errors of judgement and mistakes are blamed on “the system” and repaired by structural reforms. Behaviour and structures should be given equal attention.

Buddha Leadership

Classic Buddha Leadership is often mistaken as a passive role, but Buddha is actively teaching, listening, and experiencing. Buddha leaders see potential, they take a step back. They are value-driven, they invite people into the leadership conversation and give people choices about their own roles. They are accommodating to change, transformative, trusting, and generous, and they work to harness collective intelligence and experience. Buddha is active in the informal aspects of leadership, whether in the private or non-private sector. Buddha leadership, though, tends to go unrecognised and undiscussed. It is follower-centred rather than leader-centred, so it is often not seen as “leadership”. Coaching, teaching, networking, generating and challenging ideas, gathering information, building relationships... these are all Buddha leadership activities and deserve more attention as true leadership behaviours.

- How does this translate to the humanitarian context?

The participants noted that a Buddha leader needs a network to be able to see potential, something which takes a lot of energy and time. In the context of a sudden onset crisis there is often less time to nurture the trust needed. However, in terms of relations with a national government there is a need for a more Buddha style leadership. The underpinning principles of Buddha leadership are highly value-driven, but it is important to know when to step up and be more Hercules so as to not be instrumentalised. The participants noted that when working with an assertive government a Buddha style leadership may not be effective.

Hercules-meets-Buddha leadership style

Leaders who are effective in complex, dynamic contexts combine Hercules and Buddha masterfully. They actively engage both styles at all times. Instead of being Hercules in some situations and Buddha in others, they are deliberately Hercules about some things in all situations, and deliberately Buddha about everything else in all situations. Effective leaders therefore start by identifying a few principles or things that they will always be Hercules about. These are non-negotiables: a set of values, an operational model, or a key set of operating procedures. These limited, core issues should be shared during a conversation and then never compromised. On all other matters the leader is actively Buddha: seeking greater consensus, developing options, empowering opinions and broader approaches. With these two “characters” working together, the leader provides the necessary clarity on things that are absolutely crucial, yet still gives space for empowerment, learning, and creativity.

- This combination in the humanitarian context

By combining both styles the leaders accept the complexity of the environment. They see that they cannot control all aspects, yet they make sure the important aspects are taken care of.

It was noted that Hercules-meets-Buddha leadership in the humanitarian sector is hindered by barriers to clarifying/agreeing on the few Herculean principles. Attention to leadership in the humanitarian

sector has overlooked (or ignored) that the incentive system is usually dysfunctional for collective results. Leaders are rewarded almost exclusively for what they do for their own institution/organisation, and do not get rewarded for what they do for the collective.

Participants also agreed that there is a very fine line between cooperation and competition in the humanitarian world. Organisations compete for funds yet try to work together in the field. The different agencies often do not agree on priorities because every organisation has its own, and common/shared priorities and strategies are often so general that they become meaningless. More honesty is needed about the tensions that exist between competing incentives and expectations within a limited funding context; everything cannot be done. However, if humanitarian actors were to set their mind to a few principles and operational procedures which all should stand by, could agreement be reached? Are these conversations taking place? One participant noted that the interests of donor governments (as politically motivated actors), for example, very often clash with humanitarian principles.

Further thoughts on leadership in the humanitarian context – What should we do?

It was noted that there is a need to distinguish between leadership on behalf of the collective and leadership within one institution - these two aspects provide for different dynamics at both local and global levels. More holistic approaches to crises can be fostered when HC/RCs are better connected regionally. In a system structured around top-down hierarchy, attention needs to be given to local NGOs having access to senior leaders. Likewise, there is a need to strengthen diversity in (senior) leadership positions.

Another issue that was brought up was the relation between leadership and risk-taking, for example in terms of widening humanitarian space. Are there incentives for, and is there room for robust advocacy, standing up for humanitarian principles? What degree of institutional back-up has been provided? As risk-aversity has increased, strong voices in the humanitarian community have become fewer. It appears that all agencies have become risk-averse as the stakes are too high not to be. There is a need for additional reflection on this issue.

The relevance of the systems currently in place is being tested. The system as we know it was designed to be governed by countries, yet traditional power balances have changed significantly. There is a need for modernisation to fit the current political arena. Overall, political power has shifted, the majority of humanitarian crises are now protracted, and many new technologies have emerged that may not only simplify some aspects in coordination and response, but also obscure things as solutions cannot be only technical. There has been a practice of building structures and mechanisms to account for increased complexity in the field. This, however, has often made the humanitarian system more rigid and fostered an inability to change. The humanitarian system needs to learn from the emerging future more than from the past. For this to happen, self-reflection is needed.

HERE's reflections on the outcome of the round table discussion

The round table on leadership was organised in view of a two-fold objective: 1) participants were expected to take away issues that would be relevant/helpful for their thinking and work from the perspective of their own institutions or organisations; 2) the meeting was expected to highlight topics or angles that would benefit from further collective attention. While it is up to the participants to assess if the discussions at the meeting were helpful to them on an individual level, initial feedback indicates that this event brought forward a different type of discussion than usual within humanitarian circles. The round table required participants to look at leadership in an honest and broad, collective context without having to promote their institutional perspectives or interests. As shown above, it also became

clear during the event that the discussion on leadership in the humanitarian sector is far from over. In a changing global context, humanitarian leaders need to manage adjustments within their own organisations while they foster increased exchange and accountability to collective results.

In light of this, options or steps for follow-up from HERE's side include:

1. Dissemination of this note to participants and possible follow up conversations with agencies and institutions;
2. Integration of the reflections and issues raised in this note in HERE's research agenda, as well as in relevant policy discussions on collective performance, such as those on the Grand Bargain.
3. Consideration of a further conversation on leadership looking specifically at collective humanitarian priority-setting, as part of a major event that HERE is planning to organise in the second half of 2020.

Concept Note for the Meeting

Buddha, Hercules, and others in Humanitarian Leadership

HERE Round Table on Humanitarian Leadership Geneva, Friday, 25 October 2019, 09:00 -12:00

Since the 2005 reform process which had the strengthening of the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) position as one of the main pillars, the theme of leadership has been high on the humanitarian agenda. The sector has also seen various initiatives in this area, such as the humanitarian leadership academy and various inter-agency training programmes. HERE's most recent research findings have confirmed how leadership plays an essential role in shaping humanitarian responses. In research on how NGOs understand their mission in protracted crises where there are multiple needs, it has been found that the role of the CEO or Country Director makes a major difference in the way in which organisations define their priorities. A review of UNHCR's leadership and coordination role in refugee settings reveals that leadership style is a significant factor in carrying out this role effectively.

Another angle of leadership in the humanitarian sector is the action of raising one's voice in upholding the rights of crisis-affected people. Such advocacy may raise tensions with governments and other stakeholders, which implies taking risk. Organisations may jeopardise their access or funding. While there has always been a tension between speaking out on violations and risk for their programmes, the question could be asked whether there is a trend to remain silent. The number of humanitarian leaders willing to speak out does not seem to have risen in recent years.

To discuss these leadership matters in more detail, HERE is holding a half-day roundtable event on Friday morning, 25 October 2019. Participants will include senior representatives from (donor) governments; a number of UN agencies, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and international NGOs; some independent consultants, and members of the HERE Board. The purpose of the round table is to exchange lessons and experiences on leadership, in particular leadership styles, and to understand what aspects of leadership need to be given further attention in the humanitarian sector.

The meeting is expected to discuss questions such as: • How is leadership to be defined? • How do different leadership styles impact organisational outcomes? • How to reconcile individual and institutional approaches to leadership?