Duncan Green   March 5th, 2025

Leadership in a global aid meltdown – top tips from 25 people who know

Duncan Green passes on some sage advice from a group of aid leaders who are currently working with LSE to sharpen their influencing skills. This includes how leaders can manage uncertainty, and how humanitarianism should adapt to the bigger and deeper process of deglobalization and demultilateralization.

As part of our GELI course on influencing, I've been hosting conversations with a group of leaders from across the humanitarian sector – UN, Red Cross/Crescent, INGOs etc. Unsurprisingly, the most recent ones have been all about the impact of the global aid meltdown – the attempted destruction of USAID (swiftly followed by woodchippers being taken to the UK, France and other aid programmes). The conversations were sombre, thoughtful and worth passing on (while respecting the Chatham House Rule).

First, living with uncertainty: Being a leader is especially difficult when you have no idea what comes next. Yet you have no choice but to act ("We were hoping to hide under a rock but everyone (national and international) is looking to leaders – people are turning to us".) I learned a new acronym for our times: BANI: brittle, anxious, non-linear, and incomprehensible. Move over VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous).

In the fog of events, do you pretend to a certainty and direction you do not really feel? Or do you go to the other extreme and "tell people to prepare for the worst – expect that the UN is dying"? That is likely to demoralize anyone depending on the UN, but inauthentic calls to action won't wash either. Leadership in such circumstances is hard, but there was some good practical advice for how to carry yourself in the short term

- Jot down what you know, eg what percentage of revenue for different organizations or work programmes came from USAID. "Make the problem manageable".

• Focus on your spheres of control, and influence. Then watch the fog closely to see what new shapes emerge and respond.

• Talk more often to staff and partners. Several have moved from monthly to weekly all staff meetings, even if it's to say "we have no further info".

• "Don't blabber" "Take a pause before speaking" – staff and partners are already insecure and anxious, so try not to make it worse.

• One organization has introduced a "crazy ideas box", where staff vote for one suggestion each week that people can work on. For example, setting up a network where national staff that have been suspended due to the funding freeze can swap ideas on how to remain active.

• Where to find hope? Talk about resilience and values – many countries have been through traumatic moments in recent history, and come through, while the values that inform humanitarianism will survive the institutions, and inform whatever replaces them.

In the longer term, the challenge to the humanitarian system is profound. "Don't think of this as a 90 day freeze – the status quo ante is unlikely to return." Some observations:

The US has always been a key influencer for the spread and enforcement of humanitarian ethics. We have lost an important reference point. What does humanitarianism mean in a "might is right" world?

This is just a small part of a bigger and deeper process of deglobalization and demultilateralization. Contemporary humanitarianism has been formalized as a global project, with global (soft) law and global institutions like the UN. That is now looking very fragile. Resources and political capital are likely to switch to regional and local powers, eclipsing the UN and other global bodies such as the WTO. A new humanitarianism is likely to rise from the ashes, but what might it look like?

And a couple of thoughts from me (I'm allowed to waive Chatham House anonymity for that):

If short term policy wins are impossible, should we use the time to go back and identify and strengthen our core values, like guerrillas retreating to the mountains to forge a strong and shared identity and morale, ready for future battles?

According to the participants, one of the reasons why so many of the conversations around the cuts have focussed on aid sector jobs, or big numbers (X million will lose access to Y) is that the real effect on communities will take time. Maybe a case for dusting off research diaries as a way to follow the unfolding impact in real detail?

Hovering over all the conversations was the subject of trust. What smart leaders say and who they say it to depends on who is/is not trusted. The CEO pontificating about "we're all in this together" seldom convinces, because it's usually blatantly untrue. In a crisis, existing levels of trust erode, like

savings being drawn from a bank account built up during better times. Those who lose trust (and jobs) earliest are often the younger staff, the consultants and the partners, who are the first to be let go. That is bad for them, obviously, but also for the organizations that lose them, since they are most likely to bring in the new energy and ideas needed for the eventual rebuild. Not great news for localization either – organizations under threat of extinction are likely to prioritize their own income.

A crisis "exposes the fracture lines of organizations", revealing low trust environments. How to counter that? In one country, they have identified a "soul team", of 3 long serving, well respected women in junior posts with "a moral aura" who everyone turns to in a crisis. The leadership briefs and consults with them separately in order to "give peace of mind to the others". In another, they have identified "crisis buddies", who fulfil broadly the same function. These people "provide the subtitles to the organizational culture".

Fascinating stuff, and I'll try to bring you more insights and examples from our wonderful GELI participants in future posts.

About the author

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