Humanitarian HR Asia 2015

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
26-28 October 2015
Conference Report

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Conference Theme and Objectives

Theme:

Talent preparedness and humanitarian leadership in an evolving Asia.

Objectives:

- Explore and share ideas and experiences of talent preparedness in order to broaden our mindsets and options for preparing existing and emerging talents.
- Explore the uniqueness of humanitarian leadership in crisis and identify the characteristics and qualities that apply best in the Asian setting.
- Share current best practices, live learning, case studies and stories from within the humanitarian sector, as well as from other sectors.
- Network with other HR and humanitarian specialists from Asia with the intention to establish a strong Asia-based HR practitioners’ network.
- Share experience, challenge assumptions and inspire fresh thinking in the industry
- Gain operational ‘know-how’ and ‘how-to’ apply information and strategic approaches in the workplace.

Conference speakers:

- Dr Ahmad Faizal, President, MERCY Malaysia
- Sophie Perreard, Lecturer and Head of Teaching and Learning - Humanitarian Leadership Programme, Deakin University
- Sayeda Tahya Hossain, Chief People Officer, BRAC
- Nabeel Al-Azami, Head of HR/Global Talent Lead; Ritu Chadda, HR Manager; and Adnan Khan, Regional HR Manager – Asia, Islamic Relief Worldwide
- Michael Jenkins, Chief Executive, Roffey Park Institute
- Tarik Begic, Global Surge Manager, British Red Cross
- Rizal Kamaruzzaman, Executive Director, Tindakan Strategi
- Adi Walker, Principal Advisor, GIZ Pakistan and PhD Research Student, Oxford Brookes University
Day 1 – 26 October 2015

Welcome

The 2015 Humanitarian Human Resources (HHR) Asia conference saw over 50 HR and people management specialists from 13 countries including Australia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Japan, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Thailand, Turkey, United Kingdom, and United States, come together to discuss the challenges and solutions of talent preparedness and humanitarian leadership.

The 27th HHR conference was the first hosted by the CHS Alliance and the first held in Asia since 2007. The conference returned to the region because of a number of trends such as the growth of Asia as an economic powerhouse with highly skilled people – talent.

“In the past 10 years, 40% of the world’s disasters have happened in Asia. We’re all aware that although local staff are the first to respond in emergencies, the talent often isn’t getting the necessary support,” said Maduri Moutou (right), Senior People Capacity and Development Manager at the CHS Alliance.

Opening speakers

The three opening speakers then shared their perspectives on the conference theme.

Dr Ahmad Faizal Perdaus (left), President of Mercy Malaysia, highlighted a number of challenges and issues preventing humanitarian operations in Asia from being equipped with the right talent and right leadership. He began by saying that Asia Pacific is a heterogeneous not homogenous region; is one of the fastest growing regions economically and in terms of the sector; is experiencing increased social mobility; and has most of the world’s natural disasters and some of the worst impact of climate change.

Challenges:

- Increased demand for skilled workers and professionals
- Income disparity compared with other sectors
- Political interference
- Humanitarian funding is still largely emotionally driven
• Relatively low awareness of the humanitarian sector as a credible employer
• Varied availability of appropriate and suitable talent in the marketplace

Solutions:
• If big INGOs or UN agencies want to poach someone from another NGO they should pay a transfer fee like football clubs.
• Enhance staff retention while recognising that some staff movement and turnover is actually necessary.
• Balance the pull and push between being accountable and being too expensive.
• The moment new staff step into the sector, inform them that they have to be both a leader and a manager and start to prepare them for these roles.
• Integrate academic and humanitarian worlds in order to convince top students from the best universities to work in the humanitarian sector first. “In developed countries, the top people look for jobs in the humanitarian sector not just the corporate sector; maybe they are paid less but the trade-off is better job satisfaction.”

Sophie Perreard, Lecturer and Head of Teaching and Learning at the Humanitarian Leadership Programme, Deakin University, presented her research findings on what makes a good humanitarian leader from concept to reality. People want a leader who follows a process of consultation that engages them and makes them feel valued rather than someone who is strong, powerful or dominating. A good leader was identified as a likeable, open, strategic person, who can lead from the front as well as the back and empower his or her team.

“I was frustrated in the sector because I couldn’t see that we were preparing talent to take over from the current leaders and it was going outside the sector.”

Sophie also highlighted that when a leader needs to make unlikeable decisions, it’s important to involve people in the process and communicate with them along the way to ensure their support.

Challenges:
• Talent development is very focused on expatriates or senior-level national staff.
• There’s a major gap in emergency responses at the senior level.
• Very few humanitarians are prepared for a leadership role and they have to learn on the job which isn’t always possible.
• Going from being a manager to a leader is difficult as it involves going from management to strategy and involves communicating a vision to a team.
Solutions:

- Adaptation in the system. “For me people make the system and we need to develop these people to adapt the system.”
- Develop leadership at all levels; although expensive this is an investment all organisations should make in the humanitarians who will one day be in charge of responses.
- Implement applied leadership learning with a coaching element rather than one-off training that is forgotten on returning the work. It’s important to link theory to practice over a period of time.
- Leaders need to develop self-awareness of their leadership style.
- Enhance the leadership capacity of people already in the organisation locally and regionally who already understand the cultural context.

Sayedah Tahya Hossain, Chief People Officer, BRAC, shared her perspective on how HR can manage a crisis better.

“We are not thinking about whether we are equipped enough to address our future needs. Now it’s time that we as HR think beforehand so whenever there are disasters, we can move faster and we’re not looking for experienced people during a crisis.”

Challenges:

- Moving from philanthropic to sustainable organisations.
- Being able to afford the best talent with humanitarian salaries.
- Leaders are inclined to focus on current operations rather than thinking about whether the organisation is equipped to address its future needs.
- Getting the right talent and specialised talent is becoming more difficult.

Solutions:

- Move to a performance-driven culture that includes performance reviews and managing redundancies.
- Ensure leaders have both technical skills and management competencies.
- Draw from a broader talent pool, not just those already in the sector.
- Convince organisational decision-makers that leadership and management training is required so the organisation can meet future expectations.
- Better branding to attract the right people – talent need to know what we do and how communities benefit in order bring them into the sector.
- Learn from experts during disasters in order to develop national staff and cut down on expenses in the future.
- Collect data to justify spending on salaries and marketing.
Participants then heard a compelling case study from Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW) on its initiatives to improve talent preparedness from Nabeel Al-Azami, Head of HR/Global Talent Lead; Ritu Chadda (left), HR Manager; and Adnan Khan, Regional HR Manager – Asia.

Adnan began by saying that HR’s most valuable contribution to an organisation is putting the right people in the right place at the right time. Finding individuals with the right values is important as someone with the wrong values can be dangerous or risky to an organisation.

Nabeel highlighted the importance of using spiritual capital to unleash the power of your people: “When you inspire people, give them a ‘why’ of work, it can be more powerful than another salary increase”.

Talent preparedness initiatives:

- Staff demonstrate in appraisals how they believe their work has exemplified IRW’s values.
- HR acts as a business partner to the executive team to ensure everyone in the organisation is briefed on what the organisation is doing and reflects its ethics.
- HR joins humanitarian training and field responses so they know what happens outside their department.
- Around one third of HR staff come from different sections so they have first-hand knowledge of different parts of the organisation and staff recognise their credibility.
- Using HR analytics to anticipate the future and address where HR is falling short.
- Devote extra time to top talent and ensure you know the one thing that will push them to leave or stay.
- A global skills mapping exercise enabled the organisation to manage its Nepal earthquake response at the regional level for the first time by tapping into existing talent in India and Bangladesh.
- Additional feedback for internals when they miss out on a job given to an external candidate. Managers are encouraged to give them a development plan so they will be appointed in the future.

The team also shared an initiative that tackled increased rates of attrition, turnover, grievance complaints and absence that came about following rapid organisational growth. An analysis of data demonstrated that managers were struggling to manage people despite their technical skills. The organisation implemented a leadership programme for managers that included role plays, one-on-one coaching and an exam that needed to be passed. The programme reduced grievance complaints by 69% and increased the occurrence of performance reviews from 30% to 90%.
Day 1 Resources

- Presentation: Dr Ahmad Faizal Perdaus, Mercy Malaysia, Humanitarian preparedness & leadership in Asia Pacific: NGO perspective
- Presentation: Sayeda Tahya Hossain, BRAC, LIVE from the field - how crisis are being managed
- Presentation: Talent management at Islamic Relief Worldwide
- Blog: Day 1 highlights unique challenges of talent preparedness and humanitarian leadership in an evolving Asia
- Video: What are the current HR challenges in an evolving Asia?
Day 2 – 27 October 2015

Overview

Conference Convenor Uma Narayanan began by summarising the HR challenges discussed during day one of the conference.

- A good manager might not be a good leader.
- An imbalance of talent and leadership opportunities between genders and international, local and national staff.
- Ineffective tools and systems.
- Cultural barriers.

Opening speaker: Michael Jenkins, Chief Executive, Roffey Park Institute

Michael (below right) shared his perspectives on talent preparedness including the need to be strategic and create engagement and buy-in from staff.

“When it comes to being strategic we often think about the future but we should also think about the present and the past. We shouldn’t be so dismissive of things that didn’t work in the past because situations change.”

Tips for talent preparedness:

- Improve working relationships because these are what cause people to move from one organisation to another.
- Encourage conversations on a one-to-one basis.
- Provide people with experiences to be ready for their next role rather than formal leadership development training.
- Think about talent in terms of time horizons and have different strategies for short, mid and long-term.
- Focus more attention on the affects of stress in the workplace.
- Screen for compassion in interviews to gage the emotional intelligence of candidates.

Different leadership styles are also needed for different generations. Gen Y are looking for leaders they can trust who are driven and coach them, while Gen Z want leaders who are honest, listen, good at communicating and mentor them.
The conference then split into two streams focusing on talent preparedness and humanitarian leadership.

**Talent preparedness**

Michael Jenkins, Roffey Park Institute: Is talent preparedness at the heart of a humanitarian organisation’s success?

>“Organisations need to empower HR but not leave everything to HR. HR are the custodians of a talent preparedness plan rather than being solely relied on. Shared accountability for talent preparedness is important.”

Roffey Park research highlights that 63% of employees are more motivated by meaningful and interesting work than autonomy and freedom at work (58%), good leadership (53%), enjoyment of job (48%) and financial perks and rewards (48%). Successful talent preparedness thus requires first motivating and engaging staff.

Challenges:

- Staff resilience levels are at low levels so we need to raise awareness around resilience and ensure staff are taking their leave.
- Good leaders often don’t make good managers.

Solutions:

- Communicating internally what an organisation is doing as well as its culture is very important.
- Continually test employability rather than having a one-year assessment. Introduce development action plans for talent preparedness so managers can follow up with employees on what they have achieved and what they want to achieve.
- Manage expectations at the point of hire.
Rizal Kamaruzzaman, Executive Director, Tindakan
Strategi: Talent management vs people management: Remain or Evolve? This is a constant HR headache!

Rizal emphasised the importance of focusing on people management for all staff rather than talent management of only a top percentage who have been earmarked as having potential. People prioritise engagement, empowerment and environment so it’s also important to look at workplace happiness indexes.

Solutions

- Ensure everyone in an organisation understands global trends.
- Make sure employees are happy and give them engaging and enjoyable work.
- Remember to prepare your own talent. “Are you ensuring that you are preparing yourself to become the CEO of your organisation?” he said.
- Create an environment where staff can challenge leaders to create a trust in leadership.

Tarik Begic, Global Surge Manager, British Red Cross, Mobilising Resources During Emergencies: How to ensure a functional surge capacity in your organisation?

“*If you cannot provide sufficient capacity to a tool you are using, then it’s better not to use it.*”

Tarik shared British Red Cross’ approach to ensuring resources can be mobilised in an emergency and gave examples of the Ebola and Nepal earthquake responses.

Tips for preparing surge capacity:

- Ensure the types of people on rosters reflect the organisation’s needs.
- Data collection and analysis. Quantify both needs and outputs to ensure you are using the right tools and approaches and have an evidence-based proposition for them.
- Audit your team’s equipment and determine gaps from previous experiences. The wrong equipment adversely affects staff satisfaction and retention.
- Take time to decide what is the most appropriate emergency response for your organisation; it might be staying out if your organisation isn’t experienced in dealing with that type of crisis.
- Look at what other organisations have failed to do as lessons learned often aren’t being used.
- Each team and department should have two operating modes – business as usual and emergency. Ensure you have pre-vetted people ready to be hired in case of an emergency.
Humanitarian leadership

Adi Walker (right), Principal Advisor, GIZ, and PhD research student, Oxford Brookes University: Characteristics and competences for effective leadership in the aid sector in Asia: what are they, and is something still missing?

Adi presented his doctoral research findings on the characteristics and competences needed for effective humanitarian leadership.

He has found that the characteristics of versatility and intuition are lacking in leadership materials on the sector. He also suggested professionalism needs to be redefined to include diversity.

Adi Walker: Nature vs Nurture, or Nature and Nature: and who decides?

“We need blended leadership training that mixes on and off the job experiences. It’s also important to individualise training to the strategic needs of the organisation and the individual themselves.”

Adi’s second workshop examined the relationship of nature and nurture to leadership. Workshop participants found that the most important leadership skill was self-awareness.

Challenges:

• Difficulties for national staff getting leadership roles.
• Training is usually evaluated by an individual’s supervisor rather than donors or beneficiaries.

Solutions:

• Individualise training to the strategic needs of the organisation and individuals themselves.
• HR needs to make a plan for employees six months before the end of their contract in order to link talent preparedness and leadership.
Nabeel Al-Azami, Head of HR/Global Talent
Lead, Islamic Relief Worldwide: Leadership & Ethics: Balancing Integrity & Influence.

The workshop examined whether the world is in a crisis of ethical leadership. Important leadership qualities discussed were: integrity, vision, spiritual intelligence, competence, courage, decisive, wise, gentle and appreciative, fair and just, servant leadership, and patience. Nabeel also emphasised that trust is an essential leadership quality. He suggested that HR should act as the conscience of the organisation and report to the organisation’s values rather than the CEO. “Always ask yourself: if this decision goes public, can I stand behind it?” he said.

Day 2 Resources

- Presentation: Michael Jenkins, Roffey Park Institute, Humanitarian talent preparedness in Asia Pacific
- Presentation: Michael Jenkins, Roffey Park Institute, Is talent preparedness at the heart of a humanitarian organisation’s success?
- Presentation: Rizal Kamaruzzaman, Tinda Strategic, Talent management vs people management: Remain or Evolve? This is a constant HR headache!
- Presentation: Tarik Begic, British Red Cross, Mobilising Resources During Emergencies: How to ensure a functional surge capacity in your organisation?
- Presentation: Adi Walker, GIZ/Oxford Brookes University, Characteristics and competences for effective leadership in the aid sector in Asia: what are they, and is something still missing?
- Presentation: Nabeel Al-Azami’s presentation, Leadership and Ethics: Balancing integrity and influence
- Blog: Case studies on improving talent preparedness and humanitarian leadership in Asia shared during HHR Asia Day 2 and 3
The final day of HHR Asia kicked off with an interactive yoga session from Vijayandran S. to demonstrate the importance of taking time for yourself at work. Simple activities such as deep breathing, stretching to open the chest, and holding heated palms against eyelids, can be done at the desk to relieve stress.

Case study: BRAC

“It was good that we coordinated this with the programme directors. Not only HR can do something like this, you need the leaders there too.”

Sayedah Tahya Hossain (right) shared a case study on talent management: changing BRAC’s paradigm.

Changes at BRAC:

- Detailed plan to evaluate where all the talent gaps are across organisation.
- Performance management system relates to SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-bound) system and evaluates all staff against the organisation’s four values.
- Organisation-wide salary structure and rating system.
- Incorporated the learning department into HR. Twenty-eight learning centres now facilitate programmes rather than being skills-based.
- Technical and leadership competency programmes including a leadership academy.
- E-learning platforms with some compulsory aspects and exams to be hired or promoted.
• Create career paths with performance milestones for those identified as talent.
• Changed from HR working at the direction of programmes as an operational support function to working in partnership with programmes as a business partner.
• Five-year HR roadmap covering how HR will meet the organisation’s strategy.
• Clear communication with those working on emergencies of how long they are expected to be in the role and what they will be doing.

**Action points and lessons learned**

The conference concluded with participants brainstorming action points and sharing lessons learned that they plan to take back to their organisations.

**Karen Drapok (right), Country Programmes Support Manager, CARE Australia, Papua New Guinea:** “One of the things I will take away is focusing on leadership and management and the difference between them. We’re proud of having a lot of people progress internally within our country office but the soft skills of managing people weren't something they had.”

**Shirley Frundt, Global HR Coordinator, the International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease:** “Something that struck me about this conference is that HR needs to be more strategic, be business partners, and invest in branding. Initially I was surprised because this is the type of vocabulary you find in the private sector but we need to be accountable to our donors and make the humanitarian sector an employer of choice”.

**Takehiro Hozumi, Programme Manager, Association for Aid and Relief, Japan:** “What we have to appeal to the general public is our values. Leaders must be, more than anything, aware of what the values are in the organisation.”

The conference closed with the **Country Director of Islamic Relief Malaysia, Zairulshahfuddin Zainal Abidin**, reminding participants to continue to add value to people wherever they are and whatever role they are in: “Please give and don’t expect anything in return. The most powerful knowledge in training is applied knowledge”.

**Day 3 Resources**

Presentation: [Sayedah Tahya Hossain, BRAC, Talent management: changing BRAC’s paradigm](#)
Additional resources

- Conference presentations, blog posts, photos and videos can be found at the following link: [www.chsalliance.org/hhr-asia](http://www.chsalliance.org/hhr-asia)
- You can also visit our Facebook and YouTube channels to see additional videos and photos
  - [Facebook](http://www.facebook.com)
  - [YouTube](http://www.youtube.com)