There needs to be more emphasis within field offices on stress relief. We often forget to just stop and breathe. Management needs to keep it among their priorities to give staff the means and opportunity to unwind.

(Comment by a humanitarian professional - LinkedIn discussion on the psychological preparation of aid workers)
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This White Paper Series is based on a LinkedIn group discussion (in the Humanitarian Professionals Group) that I launched in May 2011 around a statement and a question: “Humanitarian aid workers are often psychologically unprepared for field missions. Any views on this from field and headquarters staff?”. Hundreds of comments keep pouring in, and the debate is still open. Contributions used in the White Paper Series are published anonymously to respect confidentiality.
White Paper Series No. 6

The Joy of Teamwork!

Introduction

This paper will focus on the importance of a functional team in the field, addressing what can help aid workers to remain psychologically sane in an unstable context. I will also look at the role of so-called ‘people skills’ in managers, skills such as empathy, sense of humour, deep listening - and how mindfulness can help to develop the qualities of presence and leadership that are so needed in a mission. As in previous papers I shall give voice to aid workers who have discussed team dynamics at length in the LinkedIn forum¹, pointing out how such dynamics play an important role in aid work when it comes to psychological health.

Being in the field means working - and at times even living - with colleagues. There is a lot of talking about the importance of ‘teamwork’. The term itself and the concept of teamwork have become a mantra when referring to all that goes wrong (or not) in organisations – ‘it’s all about teamwork!’ we hear people say. My take is that it is also about teamwork, but not all. In fact, individuals do play a significant role, with or without a team, and without individuals there are no teams. Investing in individuals’ well-being and awareness, is a way to enhance team work.

Figuring out what helps individuals to be the kind of people you want to have in your team is what interests me, people who are committed, but with a sense of humour and the ability to be fully active and engaged, as well as reflective. Real people, not Supermen and Wonderwomen out of a job description.

Relations with colleagues are both a major stress trigger, and a crucial factor for the good outcome of projects on the ground. Effective and meaningful teamwork is about healthy relations, skillful communication and awareness of self and others. Some questions - for which I do not have any conclusive answer - sit at the core of this paper:

What is the impact of dysfunctional teams on aid workers?
How important is it to train managers in ‘people skills’?
Can mindfulness help to improve leadership?

¹ See White Paper #1 for an introduction and background to how the series was born and developed.
Healthy boundaries and enhanced self-knowledge are essential strategic tools to make it through a mission sanely. The heart of the matter is touched upon by a professional who asks: ‘How do you learn not to get entangled emotionally in every little issue?’ A suggestion follows: ‘Staff can learn this to the benefit of the whole organisation and of the projects on the ground’. Indeed we can learn this. Mindfulness can help frontline professionals and volunteers to be engaged, without being overwhelmed. Touched but not crushed by the events that they witness.

Are ‘bad colleagues’ and ‘bad managers’ worse than war?

An article published on Alertnet in 2006 suggested that a ‘bad boss is worse than war’. Most aid workers who took part in the LinkedIn forum commented that unhealthy team dynamics, and the lack of leadership often lead to low morale and psychological distress, and they are indeed more taxing than being in a war or disaster-zone. ‘The stress of a non-functioning team can often be higher than the stress of the field circumstances under which one is working’ says an aid worker. Another professional expands on the subject, making it clear how team dynamics are what make or break a project:

‘Security incidents surely impact […]. But the biggest stressor is a negative team dynamic. […] Destructive and unsupportive team dynamics are hugely demotivating, whereas if a team is strong and deals constructively with conflicts than there is a real sense of support and capacity to deal with challenges, no matter what they are’.

Informal support among colleagues is important, but not to the point of turning a workmate into a ‘counsellor’, hence, says an aid worker, the need of external and independent staff care:

‘Team spirit and team members, who can help and support if you have an overload of work or can listen and recommend ways of getting out of the ditch are important. At the same time team members should not be burdened with their colleagues personal issues, hence the need of a field professional as an external and independent support’.

Humanitarian professionals expect the field challenges that come with the job, but are often unprepared for the difficulties and conflicts that are present within the organisation. Let’s hear it from an ODI study on staff turnover:

‘The most stressful events in humanitarian work have to do with the organisational culture, management style or operational objectives of an NGO or agency, rather than external security risks or poor environmental factors.

Aid workers, basically have a pretty shrewd idea of what they are getting into when they enter this career, and dirty clothes, gun shots at night and lack of electricity do not surprise them.

2 Overseas Development Institute, Britain’s leading think tank on international development and humanitarian issues.
Inter and intra-agency politics, inconsistent management styles, lack of team work and unclear or conflicting organisational objectives, however combine to create a background of chronic stress and pressure that over time wears people down and can lead to burnout or even physical collapse”


Lack of constructive communication and trust between HQ, ‘coordination/capital’, and the field are a great source of stress. Such issues, when not addressed skillfully by managers, can turn a manageable stressful scenario, into a situation where professionals and volunteers leave the field, team members stop actively communicating and start avoiding each other. A ‘stuck’ atmosphere is hardly conducive to meaningful and effective humanitarian work. Readers have probably witnessed this more than once in their career.

In preparing staff for the field there has to be an emphasis on **developing emotional intelligence** and people skills. Managers do not need more technical training, but rather the ability to listen, and be able to reflect before acting. Learning to ‘think on your feet’ requires a high degree of reflectivity.

Aid workers need to be able to stand their own ground, speak up when needed, not shy away from conflicts, say no when appropriate, and have clear boundaries in place. These are simple ways to maintain dynamic team relations, develop healthy empathy rather than cynicism, and prevent burnout.

As pointed out in the introduction, the ability not to get entangled emotionally and not to take everything personally is crucial in aid work. This is how awareness is heightened, stress reduced, and burnout prevented. In mindfulness-based interventions this is called ‘reperceiving’. The term refers to a personal capacity to shift perspective, and rather than be hooked in the drama of our personal narratives, we learn to engage with events, not with our often emotionally *misguided interpretation of events* (Chaskalson, 2011). Of course this has nothing to do with being detached or disengaged. We need to be active, passionately engaged, and wildly wise to be effective humanitarian professionals.

**What can managers do?**

Emotional intelligence and people skills are what managers need in order to lead and support their staff. The best managers know that a timely kind word is an effective way to make sure staff feel seen and valued.

Tony Vaux (2002) claims that ‘managers must set limits for staff’, not requiring them to work 14 hours a day, and encouraging a life beyond work. Working such long hours in non-emergency situations can be a sign of burnout, rather than of commitment. The ‘guilt culture’ can be quite pressurising within humanitarian and development agencies, with employees (whether paid or unpaid) feeling that they have to give all, and sacrifice all. *Ending up with no life beyond work is not unusual in aid circles.* This may lead to a lot of
repressed anger, frustration, built up stress and culminate in physical and mental exhaustion, or alcohol and drug abuse as a form of self-soothing medication to beat stress and loneliness.

A professional on LinkedIn notices how ‘a lot of times people who are in stressful situations for extended periods will not recognize the symptoms themselves. It is helpful to have managers who can recognize the signs of stress in their teams’ and support them so that burnout will be prevented. Managers in the field have the power to foster a culture that is not about guilt, shame and burnout, but about connection and support. Humanitarian agencies need ‘leaders who are not afraid of change’ (Seth, 2009), and are aware of the crucial value that healthy individuals and teams bring to a project.

Mindfulness for leaders

Mindfulness is now widespread in corporate business, prisons, hospitals, law firms, and schools as a means of staff care.

People, whether we work for Google, the local hospital, for the UN, or for an NGO, have the same basic needs for meaning and connection, for being seen and valued, and not succumbing to stress and burnout. Ignoring such needs is an expensive business. Wigley, a researcher in occupational psychology, illustrates what goes on in the aid sector: ‘There is a tendency in aid agencies to think that because their goals are worthy, they don't need to pay attention to fostering good staff relations, but that this impairs efficiency’ (Wigley, 2005 quoted in AlertNet, 2006). As research and turnover data show, this lack of attention does indeed impair effectiveness, leaving people burnt-out and disillusioned.

If efficient profit-driven companies such as Google pick mindfulness as a staff care and leadership approach, and the UK NICE\(^3\) recommends it as a treatment of choice for a number of psychological conditions, there may be something worthwhile in it. So let’s look closely at what mindfulness-based interventions can do for leaders and their teams, through the words of Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program:

> "Leaders today are being asked to perform and thrive in a global environment that moves and changes at lightning speed. To become more adaptable and flexible in this environment, leaders need to move beyond familiar or habitual ways of seeing the world and open up to new ways of listening, leading, responding, and innovating" (www.umassmed.edu).

Leaders need to move beyond familiar or habitual ways of seeing the world. Does this happen in humanitarian organisation? Aid workers point out that hyper-bureaucratised agencies have actually become afraid of change, a risky approach because change happens regardless of our pro-active stance.

\(^3\) National Institute for Clinical Excellence www.nice.org.uk
‘Cultivating attention and awareness through mindfulness training provides a way for leaders to live all aspects of their lives with a greater sense of skill, connection, openness, and balance’ (www.umassmed.edu). Mindfulness is an approach that helps us to focus, while maintaining an eagle-eye view of the situation.

Presence is also essential for leaders:

‘Although assumed to be subject to our conscious control, most of the time our minds are easily distracted habitually shuttling between the past and future. Little time is actually spent living in the present. Yet, our capacity to listen deeply, to make informed decisions, to effectively handle stress, to ignite innovation, and to access previously untapped resources and apply them to the challenges we face every day – all rely on our capacity to be mindful and present’ (www.umassmed.edu).

Jon Kabat-Zinn continues by pointing out how ‘only when we are fully present in the moment can we optimize our capacity to:

- Slow down or stop the cascade of our automatic and habitual reactions.
- See ourselves and others more clearly.
- Listen deeply and understand situations just as they are.
- Be open to creativity beyond conditioning.
- Respond effectively to complex and/or emotionally charged situations.
- Act competently and ethically.
- Achieve balance and resilience in our personal and professional lives’.

(Source: www.umassmed.edu)

It seems to me that all the above are essential features of a humanitarian manager and leader. I came across managers – and was lucky to have such kind of field coordinator during my first mission with MSF - who are naturally inclined to carve out time for themselves throughout the day to create a space for reflection and relations. They do not need the HQ to offer a training course. I have seen people working in Iraq or in Gaza being able to make time to pause, reflect, take stock, fostering teamwork by sharing a coffee or a meal with their staff, creating an informally supportive atmosphere in the office simply by being interested in the employees’ needs and requests. Even when difficult decisions had to be implemented, the ability of such managers to listen deeply and be authentic made them effective leaders.

It is an open question whether such empathy and leadership can be taught. I believe that we can create a culture that encourages such presence in individuals. Currently many humanitarian professionals report that the opposite is true across the sector. Rediscovering the ‘human’ element of ‘humanitarian’ is what may be needed.
Open Conclusions

Reading the over 200 comments provided by humanitarian professionals in the LinkedIn forum, it is clear that the inescapable reality of teamwork requires more attention. It is one of the major causes of stress and burnout, at times leading staff to cut their mission short. Aid workers ask for is a type of pre-deployment training that includes skills that will help them to deal with difficult team dynamics, fostering emotional intelligence and awareness in order to respond to challenging situations, the kind of ‘reperceiving’ training mentioned above.

Professionals and volunteers tell stories of conflicts blown out of proportion due to the lack of appropriate interventions, with manager who, instead of facilitating a way out of a difficult situation by acknowledging that feelings were hurt and people's contributions dismissed, imposed top-down decisions.

Conflicts within teams will not simply go away if ignored, they require attention and the courage to 'sit in the middle of the fire' (Mindell, 1995), addressing power issues, personality clashes and looking at the 'shadow' side of aid work, acknowledging that humanitarian missions are not just made up of selfless souls, but of people with ordinary needs, hung-ups, flaws, etc. placed - out of choice of course - in an unfamiliar environment without a familiar support network.

As illustrated by decades of work by Jon Kabat-Zinn and his team at UMass, mindfulness training is a tool for good management and good leadership because it is asking us to use the most powerful tool that we have: our mind. It is asking us to be responsible, assertive and kind.

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Next in the white paper series No. 7: The Breaking Point (Life in the Field Series)