



## Key Lessons Learned

- *Effective people management in humanitarian agencies — generally not a strong point anywhere in the world — is more essential in Iraq than elsewhere due to the difficult operating environment and unique challenges of remote programming.*
- *Operationality in Iraq is highly dependent on skilled and experienced national staff. Operationality is enabled by key staff but is threatened by their sudden loss or incapacitation. Lack of reserve capacity in such key staff represents a serious threat to effective and sustainable humanitarian operations.*
- *Strategic hiring for community, tribal or family affiliation ensures that info comes into the organisation from different directions, but also goes out from the organisation through the different personal networks of staff.*
- *Staff recruiting should be delegated, where possible, to national staff to ensure that new staff have the needed professional, personal and community profile and the trust of their colleagues and community.*
- *Regular face-to-face meetings between remote managers and staff on the ground are essential. These can be conducted in Iraq.*

# Briefing Paper 3

January 2008

## Personnel Management in Iraq

Greg Hansen

### Background

This Focus on Operationality Briefing Paper concentrates on lessons learned about the people upon which humanitarian operations in Iraq depend. It is based on ongoing conversations with Iraqi and international staff of a variety of humanitarian agencies currently active in Iraq, and incorporates the often-surprising observations of field staff, programme coordinators and senior managers. The paper examines lessons learned about how organizations have cultivated stable, effective and contented staffs in a difficult programming environment. By examining the experiences of humanitarian organizations that are doing relatively well in Iraq, a number of instructive patterns emerge.

### Operationality and Personnel Management

Dedicated employees who are willing to take personal risks for their work are a necessary condition for success in Iraq. Some organizations experience far lower turnover of personnel than others. Those that have stable staffs tend also to be the most effective in terms of their ability to become and stay operational, even in the face of severe setbacks and shocks to the organisation. In sum, there is a clear correlation between effective personnel management and operationality.



Photo courtesy of Mercy Hands for Humanitarian Aid

As in other contexts — and in contrast to the private sector — surprisingly few humanitarian organizations make personnel management a sufficiently high priority. Comments from field staff indicate that lapses are particularly evident in the area of soft skills, or “people management”. Problems with staff turnover and motivation often stem not from Iraq’s dangerous and complex humanitarian landscape, but from shortcomings in how staff are managed and treated.

These shortcomings make the acute risks to aid workers in Iraq much more difficult to bear. A much greater problem, however, is that the effects of weak personnel management are compounded in the Iraq context

*“Managers in a remote management setup need to have the managerial experience and maturity to trust in the judgment of their national counterparts. Trust is a big issue, both ways. If you don’t have it, nothing gets done.”*

Iraqi field coordinator

*“Under Saddam, many Iraqis got used to decision-making that was very centralized. There were consequences for saying ‘no’ to authority. It’s partly a gender and culture issue, too. It’s hard for Iraqi men in particular to say ‘no, I can’t do that’. The first time my Iraqi colleagues said ‘no’ to me I felt it was a huge success. It took a long time for them to trust me enough to say ‘no, we should do this another way.’”*

International prog. officer

*“I ask my field staff every day if they’re having any personal problems that could affect their temperament. If they are, I encourage them to avoid going out.”*

Iraqi field coordinator

*“There is wisdom in having many counselors. It makes sense to have a diverse staff in Iraq.”*

NGO Head of Office

**‘Focus on Operationality’ Briefing Papers** are meant for humanitarian organisations inside Iraq, supporting agencies, policymakers & donors. They provide information on current policy & operational challenges, as well as lessons learned & best practices drawn from recent field experience. They have been researched in Iraq, Jordan & Kuwait.

by the many additional challenges of remote programming and low profile modalities: isolation from beneficiary communities, teambuilding, trust and communications issues, and the differential risks undertaken by Iraqi and international staff.

### Current Issues and Trends

#### Staff Retention

Loss of Iraqi staff due to insecurity, “brain drain”, and poaching by wealthier organizations has slowed, but has not stopped. Attrition has been particularly high among medical staff, who have been at especially acute risk of being victimized by kidnapping for ransom in Iraq, leading many to flee the country or to minimize their exposure by leaving their jobs with humanitarian organizations.

Generally, operational agencies feel that work-related attacks on staff have decreased as staff experience and management proficiency has increased, but some loss continues due to general insecurity in the background: some opt to leave because of prevailing insecurity and the wish to get their families to safety.

A more frequent reason for Iraqi aid workers to leave their jobs is dissatisfaction with management or frustration with bureaucracy and administrative demands. (See related box, Page 3). Loss of key Iraqi staff to other, more gainful employment has been avoided by some NGOs by finding ways to pay them international salaries.

#### Recruiting

Turnover of international staff is high, and many organizations report difficulty recruiting experienced people because Iraq is notorious among internationals for its remote-programming modality. One long-serving head-of-office put it this way: “Good aid workers want to get their hands dirty. Who wants to work on Iraq from Amman? You have no contact with your beneficiaries, and you live your job in the abstract.” As in other humanitarian operations, the typical one-year posting is just long enough to build trusting relationships with Iraqi staff in the field, gain an understanding of the context, constraints and opportunities, and a feel for how to make remote programming work. In comparison to other contexts, though, the costs of turnover are higher because the demands on international managers are different than elsewhere: it takes a major investment of time to establish trust between managers and remote staff in the field, and the process starts anew with each new manager.

It has become somewhat less difficult to recruit skilled Iraqi staff in most areas over the last six months, mainly due to the growth in an informal aid worker network in Iraq and word-of-mouth referrals by friends and colleagues. However, the low salaries offered by some NGOs and the prevailing lack of trust in Iraq make recruitment and retention an ongoing challenge.

#### Staff Effectiveness

Individual Iraqi staff tend to have less personal access to different areas than previously, due to the escalation in inter and intra-communal violence, the proliferation of checkpoints and other attempts of combatants to control and limit movement between areas and neighborhoods.

Several years of stressful turmoil in Iraq have also taken their toll on staff efficiency and motivation. Iraqi field staff, many of them highly motivated in the past, reported feeling overwhelmed and frustrated by psychological pressures on themselves and their families, combined with ever-increasing workloads and unsupportive remote managers.

There is an almost mirror image phenomenon among some remote international managers in Amman: frustration with being distant from the action, feelings of being cut off from the reality inside Iraq, and a strong sense that many of the preoccupations of the Amman-based aid apparatus were time-wasting exercises in futility.

### Lessons Learned

#### Strategic Hiring

The tribal and other affiliations of staff can provide safer access. An employee from a respected or influential family can open many doors. Seasoned managers in Iraq stress that operationality is well-served by careful hiring, and that deficiencies in staff composition can threaten safe access. According to one field coordinator, “Our biggest problems are people problems. We have to avoid getting anyone upset at us. Out in the field, our staff have to be very good at conflict avoidance and resolution. It helps if they’re accepted by the community.”

Managers of several operational agencies emphasize the need to hire strategically to ensure optimum benefits from the composition of staff for acceptance, access, and knowledge of context. In practice, this means basing hiring decisions partially on community ties — family, tribal, party or other connections — to ensure that there is information flowing out of the organisation in the needed directions, as well as information coming into the organisation from all quarters.

*"Iraq is not a training ground for anybody. NGOs should be recruiting experienced international staff."*

NGO Head of Office

*"I sit down with my Iraqi staff and say, 'You're in Baghdad and you don't know everything. I'm in Amman and I don't know everything.' Together we put together a more complete picture than either of us has alone."*

NGO Head of Office

As one manager put it, "A good CV isn't enough. Being connected to various power structures through our staff helps to ensure that we are better understood or at least not suspected so much. It's like vaccinating ourselves against misunderstandings about who we are and what we're doing. Our staff do our explaining and outreach for us, through their own networks." The safety of staff and the sustainability of programmes are thus enhanced.

Gender and age considerations are also extremely important. One organisation that sends 2-person teams on field visits each day tries to ensure that teams are composed of one female and one male, since this opens the door to far better understanding of needs in a community than would be accessible to males alone. In the experience of this organisation, it is also essential, particularly in tense situations, to pair one older employee with one younger one — each will have better access to, and interaction with, different strata in a community. Older males, especially those that know how to carry themselves with an air of quiet authority, will garner more respect from local authorities than young people.

Female staff, on the other hand, may enjoy greater access and acceptance than males in the cultural context because they are regarded as more "neutral" or at least less "obtrusive" than males in some situations. An inclusive approach to hiring yields obvious benefits for access. Staff that reflect the different backgrounds of people living in the programming environment can more effectively reach out to those communities with the greatest likelihood of success. As one field coordinator said, "If your staff looks like the community, you will do better."

### Hiring Through Relationships

Experienced international and Iraqi managers have recognized the value of partially or fully delegating hiring decisions to local Iraqi colleagues. Strategic hiring implies the need for an acute understanding of local dynamics, which is in short supply among international managers and Iraqis who are not from the areas where staff will be employed. An international head of office put it this way: "I've been here for a while now but I'll always be an outsider. I wouldn't know where to begin to do this."

*Iraqi and international staff of humanitarian organizations who were interviewed for the Focus on Operationality research and felt content with their jobs attributed their satisfaction to good management, good salaries and a feeling of sharing in the important mission of their organisation. On the other hand, those who were unhappy in their jobs identified frustrations with managers and bureaucracy as the most pressing constraint on their work. As illustrated by research described in the AlertNet piece below, this is consistent with experience in other difficult settings.*

### A bad boss is more stressful than war, aid workers say

By Ruth Gidley, 26 Jan 2006 (reprinted with permission from Reuters Alertnet)

**LONDON (AlertNet)** - It's easier for aid workers to cope with bullets outside the door than a boss who doesn't support them, according to a new book. Aid agencies are starting to wake up to the idea they need to do more to look after their staff than write guidelines and hold management workshops, author Barb Wigley says. "I was expecting the conflict and the stress, but what really brought me down was how mean my manager was to me," one aid worker traveling to Sri Lanka told her. Many aid workers leave jobs because of poor management, Wigley said. Her research on workplace violence found aid workers were vulnerable to high stress from problems with managers and bureaucracies, especially when they spent long periods away from home without the support of friends and family. "Their whole life can be absorbed by work," Wigley said. "They need a little bit more from their managers, because they're working in situations with violence and insecurity."

#### Abusive Managers

Wigley said managers needed a good understanding of team dynamics, of how to tell who will cope well with difficult situations, who should be evacuated from danger and how to explain security procedures like which restaurants are out of bounds. Instead, managers often resort to bullying. One manager told her it was difficult making decisions in highly charged situations, often working with young people on their first assignment. He told her: "They wanted to go to an exotic location and help people in a nice way... and they find themselves in the middle of a muddy, stinking Rwandan refugee camp with 200,000 people, some of who were the perpetrators of unimaginable horrors. It's very tense." The problem is not restricted to work in remote field postings. Aid workers told her they were constantly frustrated by the dynamics of large organisations, like the United Nations. "It starts to feel like no one cares," Wigley said. "There ends up being a lot of conflict within organisations." Wigley's research found there was a tendency in aid agencies to think that because their goals were worthy, they didn't need to pay attention to fostering good staff relations, but that this impaired efficiency. After a couple of decades of massive growth in the industry, agencies are starting to realize that the structures they created are not working, but it's difficult to overhaul a whole culture, Wigley said. "They are thinking, what the hell do we do next?" She said. "It's hard and it's messy and it's much easier to hire someone to write a new set of guidelines in the hope and fantasy that will solve it, but it's not enough. "It means tackling the development of managers in a more comprehensive way than just throwing them into a workshop." She suggested coaching and peer support to improve leadership and accountability. It was also important for organisations to show they took it seriously when staff broke codes of conduct. "Workplace Violence", which includes a chapter by Wigley, is published by Willan Publishing.

*“A professional approach calls for qualified staff – national and international, specialist and generalist – who are familiar with and understand the different contexts in which they work. They require special qualities: sensitivity, curiosity, the ability to listen, and a desire to find solutions to even the most intractable problems in highly complex environments.”*

ICRC Overview of Operations, 2008.

*“I lived through a war and worked as a national staff officer in my home country. Now I’m dealing all day with Iraqi national staff. I think this has given me an important perspective on them, and they seem to relate well to me.”*

Prog. officer with an international NGO

*“Iraq has traditionally been state-heavy and state-centric, and the remnants of this are still very apparent. People, including our staff, will over-state needs because they see that the services that used to be provided by the state are absent. It’s hard to break through this kind of thinking when we’re trying to take community-based approaches.”*

Prog. officer with a medical NGO

*“Head offices need to be willing to take risks and delegate their authority to the field. Iraq is a gold mine for qualified national staff.”*

NGO Head of Office

Relying on trusted staff for referrals and recommendations on new hires has been an effective way of ensuring that teams are cohesive and harmonious. Where staff are already known or connected to one-another, these relationships have helped to minimize staff accountability problems because team members feel obligations to one-another, as well as to the organisation.



*Briefing of local youth recruited locally for humanitarian distributions in Baghdad*

Photo: private collection

In the experience of several agencies who follow this practice, it results in a staff that is self-policing. Due to the risks involved in being an aid worker in Iraq, staff tend to be very conscious of the shortcomings of colleagues and, since their personal safety can depend on it, they are often acutely interested in who should or should not be brought into an organisation. For example, past employment as an interpreter for the MNF-I, or a relationship with a troublesome and unpredictable militia, can have debilitating effects on all staff to the point where operationality is threatened. After a newcomer is hired, peer pressure minimizes the need for field coordinators and remote managers to intervene in disputes or to micro-manage their staff. One organisation reported that they put new staff on probation for one month, during which their interaction with the community – and not just their technical competency – is assessed by their colleagues. At the end of the month staff are asked whether they are comfortable working with the newcomer.

Hiring through relationships has also proven invaluable for organizations with protection or medical assistance programmes. It works because they are able to go through the personal and professional networks of trusted staff to forge relationships relatively quickly with far-flung legal and medical professionals – even on a country-wide basis—who were once the classmates or former colleagues of the organisation's employees.

There are obvious theoretical pitfalls to hiring through relationships, including the dangers of nepotism or of delegated staff members “stacking” an organisation so that it becomes biased towards a particular tribal, religious or other group. If hiring through relationships fails, reduced access is possible. In practice, however, such risks have been avoided by ensuring careful oversight from mature and experienced international staff and trusted field coordinators.

### Firing and Layoffs

Although it does not appear to be as common a problem as in other violent contexts, some organizations in Iraq have encountered security problems from terminated staff and from those with whom terminated employees are affiliated. Firing a staff-member can have implications for an organisation's relationship with the employee's network. “It's very easy for a disgruntled employee to make an accusation against us that we're spies, or that we're working with the Americans. So we need to be careful about who we hire because someday we might need to let him go. And if we end up firing him, we need to be careful about how we do it.”

Firing for poor performance or misconduct has been avoided to some extent by careful strategic hiring through relationships and relying on peer pressure from the team to correct staff deficiencies. Experienced managers stress the need to be very clear with staff about what is expected of them, and to have transparent disciplinary processes when there are lapses in performance. In one case, this helped to avert difficulties because other staff—who were embarrassed by the poor performance of a fellow employee – came to the organisation's defense when the employee claimed that he had been unfairly fired.

As in other violent contexts, downsizing is a recurring need for humanitarian programmes when donor resources shrink, or following sudden bursts of humanitarian activity. In at least one case, downsizing has resulted in real threats to an organisation's continued operationality. Strategic hiring through relationships can again help to avoid the risks, but managers have also found it useful to be crystal clear to new hires that their period of employment is limited to what is stated in their contract, and they should have no expectations beyond that. Although few organizations have the donor resources necessary to provide severance packages, in some cases these have helped to soften the impact of lay-off notices.

*“Someone from outside Iraq, or from a different part of Iraq, will notice different things about a place or a situation than a person who is from there. It’s good to have a mix of eyes and ears on the ground because different people will focus on different things.”*

International employee of an international organisation who travels regularly to Iraq

*“The Iraqi staff we’ve recruited from the big cities are well-educated and dedicated, but they’re often shocked when they encounter real poverty. Sometimes they lack the perspective it takes to do this job well when they go into towns and villages and encounter a way of life that’s foreign to them. They don’t recognize the coping strategies people have.”*

International prog. manager

*“Complaining about lack of information is bullshit. It’s become an excuse not to do things. Working in Amman, it’s like we’ve been dropped in jelly. It’s like we’re all drugged. We all seem to move so slowly. National staff and NGOs get fed up with it. We don’t see, we don’t feel. But if you don’t have the emotional push you’d get inside Iraq by seeing it and feeling close to the beneficiaries, then you should at least use your professional knowledge to do what is needed.”*

Former NGO Head of Office.

*“Some younger managers seem to have something to prove, and tend to want to micro-manage Iraqi staff who are more experienced than they are. That can cause serious problems.”*

Iraqi prog. manager

### “People Management”

Field and support staff in Iraq and Amman credit supportive management as the single-most important enabler of their work, and the reason why they intend to stay at their jobs in spite of the risks. Iraqi and international managers who were consulted for the Focus on Operationality research repeatedly mentioned the importance of nurturing organizational cultures and management practices that reflected care and concern for staff welfare. In their view, staff welfare extended well beyond concern with staff safety to encompass measures and supports that helped staff do their jobs effectively in stressful, dynamic, and often frustrating and dangerous environments.

Managers of organizations that enjoyed good staff retention credited good “people management” and good salaries with persuading people to stay. An experienced field coordinator in southern Iraq makes a point of cultivating a sense of family among staff. He gives employees time and opportunity to air their concerns, problems and ideas, while also providing “strong but kind” counsel and leadership. He also advises managers to stress the importance of the humanitarian work that staff are doing, and to nurture a strong sense of the humanitarian mission that can often become lost amid the burdens of administration hassles, reporting requirements, and day-to-day routine.

Another senior manager stresses the need to ensure that staff are nurtured in their commitment to the basics of humanitarianism. This means spending time to inculcate a sound understanding of humanitarian principles, codes of conduct, and so on. In his view, when staff are given an opportunity to discuss and reflect on their experiences, this helps to further strengthen their commitment to effective and principled work.

An international manager based in Amman, meanwhile, emphasizes the need for face-to-face meetings not only for building trust and exchanging information, but also for “exchanging energy.” When field staff are brought together with remote managers and support staff, he feels that he and his staff are motivated by the energy, dedication and self-sacrifice of the field staff, and believes that his field staff are likewise motivated and reassured by the commitment they see in the Amman support staff.

### Managing Remote Management

Remote managers and field staff alike have a litany of complaints about the frustrations and inefficiencies of remote control and remote management modalities. Some, however, appear to have adapted extremely well to distance management and have evolved various systems and approaches to make it work. One experienced international manager of an organisation that had a very stable and effective staff found his Amman-based Iraq post a refreshing change: “I spend less time on personnel management than I’ve done in other places and I can focus more on programme. We made an initial heavy investment in training and mentoring our staff — both here and in Iraq — and it has paid off. Once this investment has been made, contact and trust is good and you can have a routine.” He identified the following measures that helped to nurture good relations and smooth-running programmes run remotely:

- **Delegation of Authority.** If you have good staff you don’t need to micro-manage them. They are in Iraq and you are not, so I don’t second-guess their judgment about what we can and cannot do. I might push them a bit sometimes, but they know how to say “no” to me. More often than not, they’re coming to me with ideas about how we can do more.
- **Face-to-Face Contact.** We have Skype on all the time and I have an open-door policy. But Skype and e-mail aren’t enough. Remote managers need to know one-another very well for things to work smoothly. We write into our proposals sufficient budget lines for travel to allow us to get together face-to-face on a regular basis — about every 2 months. They come armed with a long list of questions, and we take the time to go through them. Sometimes we gather all together in northern Iraq. It’s good for them to see how it is up there. It motivates them. And when they come to Amman, we make sure they have time to unwind.
- **Systems.** We make sure that everyone knows exactly what is expected of them, and we’ve put in place systems, oversight, accountability and performance standards so that no-one is left floundering. Surprisingly enough, the systems give us greater flexibility when things change because it allows us to delegate authority to the field: we’re careful that our systems don’t become a burden. This is important. We’ve been doing remote management for more than 2 years now. We welcome reflection, creativity and new ideas, but we don’t need new staff re-inventing the wheel and learning from mistakes that could be costly to our work and our staff.



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## Reserve Capacity Needed Among Key Staff

Few organizations have been able to afford to duplicate key staff to ensure that programmes are not threatened if key staff are incapacitated or lost. In a programming context where skilled and politically astute key staff are a necessary condition for safer access and operationality, this represents a troubling vulnerability of existing humanitarian programmes. In a serious lapse in donor adaptation to the context, only a very few donors have been responsive to the need to have a degree of redundancy among key staff in order to better ensure the survivability of programmes.

In response, some organizations have encouraged “indispensable” staff to mentor or double up with other employees in their role in order to prevent fatal staffing gaps from suddenly emerging. This has not been easy, in one manager’s estimation, because, “Iraqis don’t respond well to plural leadership.” Another manager, however, sees it as a way of encouraging junior or less-experienced staff to progress through the organisation. “When our best junior staff are given opportunities to take more responsibility, they are more motivated and they want to stay with us. The benefits for us are longer staff retention and some reserve capacity if one of our most important field managers is killed or has to go into hibernation.”

**‘Focus on Operationality’ Briefing Papers** document lessons learned and best practices drawn from the recent experiences of operational humanitarian organizations inside Iraq, and provide information relating to current policy and operational challenges. Their content does not necessarily reflect NCCI member views. The Briefing Papers are intended as living documents. Readers, particularly from operational agencies inside Iraq, are encouraged to provide feedback and suggestions to the author, Greg Hansen, at [ghan-sen@islandnet.com](mailto:ghan-sen@islandnet.com) and to NCCI at [webmanager@ncciraq.org](mailto:webmanager@ncciraq.org). This and other Operationality Briefing Papers are available for download as PDF files from <http://www.ncciraq.org/spip.php?rubrique316>. Readers are welcome to quote or reproduce them entirely or in part but are requested to give due acknowledgement.

## Further information and resources

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