

A recipe for disaster

Lis Merrick explores how to design a mentoring programme for the front line in the humanitarian sector

By Lis Merrick

This is the fastest mentoring intervention I have ever turned around, but one that has given me some of the greatest satisfaction in my mentoring career. So what was the context?

International humanitarian advisers (the 'surge' team) were sent to Indonesia in response to the earthquakes and tsunamis of 2018. The plan was for them to upskill national team advisers. For the first time, they wanted to pilot mentoring as a swift, focused learning intervention, before leaving a few months later.

Some of the mentors and mentees were based in the same office in the capital, Jakarta, and could meet face to face. Other mentees were going back and forward to Sulawesi (the island where the first tsunami took place), so this pilot had a range of face-to-face and virtual mentoring.

Outputs from the programme

The mentees wanted to achieve:

- An increase in technical knowledge of thematic areas – particularly how to work in each sector in a humanitarian response, eg, child safeguarding.
- Improved confidence in delivering work – humanitarian responses need fast decisions.
- Each mentee to have a development plan over 6 or 12 months, eg, where would they like to be in their careers?
- National staff to fill all humanitarian adviser roles when the international surge ends.

Time and reflection

Mentoring can be effective in a short space of time, although it is often seen as a longer-term relationship. A mentoring conversation can be covered in 60-75 minutes. Focus is key and mentors were encouraged to use a process model, as well as a robust check-in and check-out process, rapport building and initial contracting.

The mentees are working in a fast-paced environment, with little or no space for reflection. Introducing mentoring requires a big change in mindset, offering headspace for thinking and reflecting about the real challenges outside of day-to-day firefighting.

Training We briefed the mentors and mentees by webinar. Some managed to get into one room in Jakarta and the rest we connected with in Sulawesi or whichever island they were on. The preparation stressed the need for focus, good direction setting, regular interaction (once a week at least) and that some directive coaching input may also be useful.

Matching The matching was based mainly on technical knowledge needs and skills. However, a large component of the mentoring was to improve the decision-making and problem-solving ability of the people on the ground. It was a way of introducing some reflective space for the mentees to sit back and think through some of the stressful, complex and very difficult situations they were facing.

Future potential To our knowledge, it is the first time that formal mentoring has been used in this way. We are looking potentially at rolling out this model to around 500 surge staff globally, so they can hit the decks running and are ready to be matched with local mentees on arrival.

The mentoring is now set up and we are about to embark on supervision and evaluation of the first few weeks. Hopefully the interaction with the mentors and mentees will help shape this potential model of emergency response mentoring for the future. 📍

● *Next issue: How to flex mentoring to work with different national cultures*

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