Creating a Transformative Leadership Culture
Executive summary

In 2014, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) partnered with Hult Ashridge Executive Education to create the Humanitarian Leadership & Management School (HLMS). The HLMS is building inclusive, authentic leadership at all levels by developing leaders to deal with humanitarian challenges in an effective way. Its purpose is to contribute a new transformative and inclusive leadership culture in the ICRC, bringing together diverse leaders from across the organization, to learn with and from each other. HLMS aims to break down silos across the organization and create space for more meaningful collaboration. The challenge – in response to the unique context of the expanding and pervasive effects of armed conflict and other situations of violence – is to deliver strong, field-relevant, reality-based learning and development that supports managers to build the necessary leadership capabilities.

Through remarkable levels of trust and collaboration between ICRC, Hult Ashridge and the leaders themselves, they have cultivated inclusive and authentic leadership at all levels by equipping leaders to work with humanitarian challenges in an effective and sustainable way. The HLMS is creating impact culturally and behaviourally, in both anticipated and unexpected ways. The program is helping to support ICRC’s credibility and performance in the future through the development of relevant leaders in the evolving Humanitarian field.

The approach has been to strengthen the focus on leadership, relationships, and collaboration across the ICRC. This has been achieved by having leaders learning together in diverse groups which span hierarchy, function, nationality, and experience. The program includes three modules, each comprised of Distance learning, 5-day Face-to-face programs including Action Learning Sets and all applied through Work-based learning.

The key outcomes from the Hult Ashridge-ICRC partnership include:
- HLMS participants now reflect more accurately the rich diversity of the ICRC people.
- Increased understanding of self, how to approach challenges, leadership impact on others and capacity to challenges one’s assumptions.
- Greater courage on many levels, including stepping out of comfort zones and taking risks with new ideas.
- HLMS teaching and its Alumni have contributed to creating a new leadership culture, and influenced many key strategic changes and initiatives.
- Improved behaviours around effective collaboration and relationships, breaking down silos and enhancing collaboration.

Participation in the HLMS is now an essential commitment for leaders in the ICRC and a prerequisite for senior management positions in the organization, demonstrating the importance of these teachings in shaping the leadership practices for the organization.

“The HLMS has a big role in bridging gaps and hierarchies in the ICRC.”

Gherardo Pontrandolfi
HR Director
Introducing the Partners

ICRC
Established in 1863, the ICRC is an independent, neutral organization operating worldwide, helping people affected by conflict and armed violence and promoting the laws that protect victims of war. It is based in Geneva, Switzerland, and employs over 20,000 people in more than 80 countries. The ICRC is funded mainly by voluntary donations from states party to the Geneva Conventions and from National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

Hult Ashridge Executive Education aims to be the most relevant business school in the world, helping organizations to improve their leadership talent, strategic thinking, and organizational culture since 1959. A triple-accredited, global business school with executive education programs, their work is underpinned by rigorous, relevant research by some of the best entrepreneurs and academics in the industry. Ashridge operates from 7 campuses globally, while also delivering virtually and at client sites anywhere in the world.
The Challenge

Working in a humanitarian context that is increasingly becoming more complex, ambiguous and demanding. The ICRC constantly seeks to increase its effectiveness in protecting and assisting people affected by violence, and to strengthen its multi-disciplinary response while optimizing organizational performance. The ICRC’s ability to maintain a strictly humanitarian approach, while operating in some of the most testing political and security environments, is at the core of its past success and of critical relevance to its future.

People affected by conflict and violence are at the heart of the ICRC’s mission. Saving lives, alleviating suffering and responding to people’s needs remain the driving force of the ICRC’s humanitarian work. Just as the nature and means of war and violence change, so too do the needs and coping mechanisms of the people affected, and facilitating their meaningful participation and agency within the humanitarian response is critical in addressing this situation.

The ICRC wants to ensure that people-centred strategies bring together its humanitarian activities and institutional initiatives, independent of their organizational labels or structures. It wants to guarantee that ICRC responses are perceived as more integrated and multidisciplinary by those people affected in conflict zones. This will also enable all ICRC staff, resident and mobile, to contribute to addressing people’s need for protection and assistance more effectively.

This change while pertinent for the organization to remain relevant and effective is a big transformation that challenged traditional ways of doing things and being, and created some resistance across the organization, particularly from staff that found safety in the ‘old’ ways. The resistance was as much related to their belief that this change would require time and deviate them from delivering the urgent needs at hand. It requires effective change management processes, as well as a shift in the mindsets, attitudes and behaviours to transform the organizational culture and leadership practices as well as breaking power dynamics and enhancing collaboration. It is also evident that this transformation would not happen without leveraging the exceptionally rich diversity of its staff.

ICRC leaders are required to bring together diverse teams consisting of different professions, nationalities, age, and varying amounts of experience within the humanitarian context to effectively deliver the organization’s humanitarian mandate. The ability to form and lead these teams effectively relies on them being able to work inclusively across these differences, laterally as well as vertically. They need to be able to build leadership at all levels to create one global workforce.

“This change will require time, new approaches, practical tools and techniques, and a deeper transformation of traditional structures.”

ICRC Strategy 19-22

“We must promote and foster an environment and practices that encourage trust and openness and a culture of integrity at all levels. We can strengthen this trust through inclusive practices in which staff feel valued and can make the most of their skills regardless of age, tenure, status, gender and background.”

ICRC People Strategy
Staff diversity has increased along with the overall number of staff, and today the 20,000 ICRC staff represent 141 nationalities, 36% are women and around 80% are locally employed (Resident). This has highlighted the importance of empowering staff at all levels and that leadership could be developed in the organization regardless of people’s hierarchy, ethnicity, contract or métier. This understandably created resistance from more traditional leaders, including at senior levels of the organization in spite of the clear organization’s commitment to move forward with this.

New leadership mindsets, attitudes and behaviours had to be adopted by leaders and for leadership to be assumed across the organization. This has been adopted as a key strategic focus aimed at managers being able to concretely deliver the strategic and operational objectives of the organization, as well as being able to do that in a way that is in line with ICRC values.

Historically, leaders were chosen from Mobile staff, expatriates hired in Geneva, and which by default meant that Resident staff were not expected to assume leadership roles. While this has gradually changed there remained a glass ceiling and implicit organisational cultural assumptions that prevented this from happening effectively. There remained a clear gap between the two categories of staff both in actual roles held as well as in access to leadership development. An evident example being that only a few Resident staff had taken part in a previously run leadership program that hosted around 200 ICRC managers. Additionally, silo thinking was prevalent between the different metiers stunting collaboration and reducing collective work outcomes at various levels in the organization.

For the organization to transform, the more traditional leadership model and hierarchical approach was clearly not sufficient to move the organization to the future and achieve its goals. To be closer to the affected people and be able to address to their needs, required a wider, more diverse ICRC staff that shared the same values and principles in spite of their diversity. This also required a different approach to leadership, one that was based on these humanitarian values, preparing managers to deal with the complexity of the environment and enhance collaboration across the organization.

Leveraging the diversity of staff in order to better deal with complex challenges and a more decentralized approach to leadership had to marry with the humanitarian principles and the 150 years of history. This change created resistance as it challenged the deeply embedded ways of doing and being for many staff members.

As such it was necessary for the ICRC to look for a transformative leadership program that aimed to new leadership attitudes mindsets and behaviours for leaders to effectively contribute to the organizational transformation. A program that considered, in its design and delivery the diversity of the workforce as much as the specificity of the humanitarian context and one that by default created the space for collaboration across all silos and hierarchies.

“To stay relevant in a crowded space, and while working with people affected by war and armed violence – it is a critical requirement for their leaders to reconcile some tensions – good solid execution while dealing with emergence in complexity, as well as respecting a strong heritage.”

Michael Gambs
Hult Ashridge Executive Education
The Commitment

An important contribution to the effective implementation of HLMS is the strong and trusting relationship between ICRC and Ashridge, and their shared understanding of human leadership. This is framed by the deep knowledge and understanding of both the organizational and humanitarian context, as well as of leadership theories and its development more generally. The diverse delivery team of facilitators from both the ICRC and from Ashridge demonstrates a cultural fit congruent with the program itself and the values taught in the program.

It has been an integral part of the approach that ICRC and Ashridge facilitators both design and deliver the program together. It aims to leverage the best of the corporate and academic research in practice in a way that fits the ICRC humanitarian context and stimulates ICRC staff to apply what they learn into their practice. It is only through this balance and partnership it has been possible to bring such a cultural change program to be adopted and accepted by the participants, including the sceptical ones.

While leadership might have common threads and principles across industries, ICRC staff have not in the past been that receptive to the applicability of concepts from ‘outside’ the humanitarian context. This has been even more relevant for leaders resisting the overall organizational transformation and it required a very specific balanced approach to be able engage participants in a transformative learning experience.

To reflect the intentions of the program, the shared approach has capitalized on the diversity of the delivery team and our strong alignment, and sometimes tensions, around working with purpose and a human focus.

ICRC selected Ashridge as a partner due to their focus on the human, interpersonal and reflective approaches to learning, teaching and research, which is aligned with the ICRC vision and goals related to transforming the leadership culture. Ashridge were also chosen for their capacity to partner in the real sense of the word and work through any tension such a partnership might naturally create, through listening. Ashridge also had experience of working with ICRC after designing and delivering a leadership program for the ICRC (from 2008-2012) and had therefore had a great understanding of the culture, tensions and challenges.

This partnership has evolved over time, both creating a more effective balance in how the HLMS has been delivered and the quality of the interaction between facilitators and participants, which also helped in the HLMS evolving over time. The content and design evolution has reflected the participants’ evaluations and has also aligned with other relevant organizational changes that feed into different aspects of the content of the modules contributing to the wider organisational transformation.

“We all need to focus on building a healthy and inclusive working environment where everyone feels valued, empowered, and encouraged to challenge the status quo. Genuine and seamless collaboration – across hierarchical and geographical boundaries – also needs to be incentivized and strengthened, to allow for creative thinking and new ways of problem-solving.”

Robert Mardini
ICRC Director General

“To connect on a basic human level sounds simple, but for it to be transformative requires engaging in difficult conversations, challenging assumptions and the capacity to listen with empathy, individually and collectively. This is what we try to create for participants through their HLMS journey.”

Sally Al-Nakshabandi
Head of HLMS
The L&D Initiative

Hult Ashridge Executive Education and the ICRC have co-designed and co-delivered the HLMS since 2014. The three-module program aims to develop strong and passionate leaders who manage, empower and inspire a diverse and high-performance workforce.

The main focus of the content has been on the balance between the “how” of leadership and not just the “what”. As such the HLMS had to focus on transformative attitudes, mindsets and behaviours and a common leadership language across the organization. This would contribute to a wider organizational transformation.

This diversity of the participants and cultural change it promotes, and the resistance and uncertainty it creates for most, requires a design that is engaging and stimulating for all participants in spite of their differences. It has to be applicable to people of different educational, cultural and technical backgrounds as much as their different seniority levels.

Based upon the understanding that learning has the greatest results when it is built around personal motivation, leaders are asked to apply for a place by way of a ‘Letter of Motivation’. This is designed to help them define what they want to achieve in joining the program and when they are ready to take this journey.

There are three modules, which consist of three successive phases:

- **Distance learning** – Approx. 20 hours including reading, assessed e-learning and coaching.
- **Face-to-face** – A 5-day program of experiential learning, exchange & reflection.
- **Action Learning Sets** – during the face-to-face week participants work in smaller groups to discuss challenges and be supported through a peer coaching process.
- **Work-based Learning** – Approx. 30 hours of applying learning skills to transfer into the reality of the workplace.

### Module 1 – Leading by Example
- Learning and leadership
- Authentic leadership
- Management and leadership
- Collective intelligence
- Influencing skills
- Creativity and innovation
- Commitment and motivation
- Building trust

### Module 2 – Leading High Performing Multi-Disciplinary Teams
- Effective team leadership
- Critical analysis
- Dialogue
- Team Resilience
- Diversity and inclusion
- Conflict management
- Team performance
- Team dynamics

### Module 3 – Leading Complex Operations and Transformation
- Strategic thinking
- Organization Resilience
- Managing change and transformation
- Organizational development
- Effective partnerships and networking
To date, there have been 92 five-day face-to-face programs delivered, with 1389 leaders embarking on their leadership journey within the ICRC. Of those, 229 have gone on to graduate Module 3. Module 1 began in 2014, Module 2 began in 2015 and Module 3 was launched in 2016.

Before the COVID19 pandemic, Modules 1 & 2 were delivered in English in Kenya, Jordan & Thailand, and in French in Senegal. Module 3 has been delivered close to the ICRC HQ in Switzerland. Since global travel restrictions have been in place, the program has successfully transitioned to a virtual platform and has grown to become a truly global, blended program. The principles fundamental to the original face-to-face design have continued in the virtual delivery; to be experiential, encourage exchange and reflection. The impact of all modules is thoroughly assessed using both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Evaluations post-program reflect a positive rating of the virtual experience by the participants, significantly above expectations. From a design perspective, the individual investment and active engagement in their learning has increased, as they have more self-directed learning within the flipped design versus a traditional facilitators-led face-to-face approach. That said, most learners report missing being with others and especially the informal exchange between sessions.

1 Face to face delivery – 56 x Module 1s, 26x Module 2s and 9x Module 3s
This WBL phase is intended to transfer learning skills into the reality of the workplace – the development of one’s capacity to reflect on action so as to engage in a process of continuous learning, leading to developing insight. Participants must successfully complete each Module to be able to move to the next and all participants, regardless of their experience and hierarchy have to start from the first Module. In total, they are assessed across twelve assignments: three for Module 1, five for Module 2 and four for Module 3. As part of the work-based learning for Module 3 – the participants work together with a coach to write a comprehensive narrative essay.

“I had the opportunity to participate in the 3 HLMS modules a few years ago in my previous roles. From my perspective, both the challenge and the strength of this learning program is the part that it plays in the ICRC’s cultural transformation by building a learning culture and a growth mindset. I was also fortunate enough to meet colleagues from across the globe, with whom I would never have engaged with otherwise. We created personal bonds and some remain trusted colleagues to whom I still turn to today for peer-to-peer exchanges on organizational challenges.”

Mohini Ghai Kramer
Head of L&D Division
The Impact

The HLMS has contributed significantly to the wider organizational transformation across ICRC. All staff have a very positive view of the HLMS regardless of whether they have attended the program or not.

- It brings together people from across the organization, breaking down silos and enabling more effective collaboration.
- It unites people through a common leadership language, attitudes, behaviours and mindsets as well as providing transformative tools and practices.
- It creates a network of leaders across the organization that contribute to wider organizational transformation.

In line with the intentions of the program, there has been an organizational shift to make HLMS an essential commitment for its leaders; leaders being seen by others to behave differently as well as their own acknowledgment of how they are both thinking and acting differently as a result. The program has now been accredited to support an optional ongoing journey of a Master’s Degree in Humanitarian Leadership from the University of Lucerne.

The important role HLMS had for leadership became more visible when a new policy meant HLMS became an essential path for all senior managers or managers wishing to grow into senior positions in the organization. It is also part of the career development path for the majority of the managers in different métiers. This shift reflects the positive impact the HLMS’ teachings have brought into the leadership culture of the organization, the healthy tension it created through the early adopters and their observed effective leadership practices.

The HLMS, its teachings and alumni, have directly influenced key policies and strategy. Building on the HLMS content and outcomes, the ICRC governance adopted a leadership philosophy that acknowledges leadership at various levels, and a diversity of styles of leadership in line with the diversity of its staff and shared values. It also defined the acts of leadership expected of leaders at all levels, namely to: Inspire, Empower, Align and Act.

A new performance management tool launched in 2018 focused on the balance between “how” and “what”, and ‘Leadership’ has become one of the six key competencies for all staff. This has been greatly influenced by the observable impact HLMS participants brought to their environments and the leadership language and practices the HLMS created across the organization. The HLMS design and content also informed a new Leadership and Management Framework that has been adopted by the organization in 2020, one that applies to all staff.

“This is absolutely fantastic. It allows the ICRC to connect with the learning and development world outside. For the first time, we will have our own learning and development programs accredited by the world of higher education. This is very powerful.”

Yves Daccord
ICRC Director General (2010-2020)
Learning community for leaders
The diversity of participant profiles is a great indicator of the effectiveness of the HLMS in breaking down silos within the organization and bringing this wide variety of people together in a meaningful and transformative way. The end of program evaluations reflects this with great testimonies from the participants themselves.

The HLMS creates space for leaders to connect with each other across the organization, a network that they build a common understanding with. Many develop coaching and mentoring relationships that continue beyond the program. What really unites them together is the common language, mindsets and a constant thrive to learn.

Today the HLMS Alumni, a diverse group of transformative leaders, are also treated as a ‘test group’ for larger organizational changes, and as such various change initiatives, surveys and projects have been first road-tested with the HLMS alumni, seeking their feedback. They are always relied upon to engage constructively in these initiatives.

Observable Leadership Attitudes, Mindsets and Behaviours
One of the main messages of the HLMS is that ‘nothing has been learned unless it results in a change in behaviour’ and so capturing how leaders are learning in ways that lead to changes in behaviour is essential. This has been demonstrated in the Transfer of Learning Evaluation Reports and from the Work Based Learning (WBL) Reports.

Transfer of Learning Evaluation Reports provide us with insight into how HLMS leaders are translating what they are learning into practice in ways that are demonstrable to others. Some of the main observable behaviours, for those who took part in the survey, are:

Self-awareness and Emotional Intelligence
87% of HLMS participants say they effectively deal with emotions while interacting with others confirmed by 74% of their line managers and 82% of direct.

“One can tell the difference between managers who attended the HLMS and those who did not. They are clearly more self-aware. They might not be less biased but at least when they speak, they acknowledge these biases. There is also an enhanced ability to listen.”
Senior Manager in the field

Giving and receiving feedback
85% of direct reports receive feedback from their HLMS managers; 87% of participants ask for feedback from their colleagues.

“I used to dedicate a lot of time for my team but not enough time to coach and support them in their career growth. So now I intentionally give more time to coaching and development.”
Engagement Management Advisor, HQ

“I feel there has been an impact on the ICRC leadership culture and this impact is also reflected in the staff barometer data that came out where we realized that people who have done the HLMS Modules are more positively assessed by their teams.”
Balthasar Staehelin
Former Deputy Director General of the ICRC & current Director of Digital Transformation
Trust
85% of direct reports say that their HLMS managers make an effort to build trustful relationships with colleagues, confirmed by 92% of direct reports and managers.

“With HLMS I became more trusting of colleagues and partners, started delegating more and giving quality feedback.”
Protection Field Officer, Afghanistan

Effective collaboration
86% of HLMS participants say they consult with direct reports and colleagues and consider their opinion when making decisions (using Collective Intelligence); confirmed by 69% of their direct reports.

Authentic Leadership
85% of direct reports consider their line managers (HLMS participants) are authentic leaders, more aware of their impact on others, more at ease in sharing their vulnerability being true to themselves with their teams.

“To feel more self-confident! And that is linked to knowing more about yourself, also having these new glasses and lenses to read others. I feel that HLMS changed my self-confidence”
CIM Engagement Management Advisor, HQ

Motivation
85% of participants who took part in the survey state that they know what motivates their colleagues and use this knowledge to achieve better results; confirmed by 75% of their line managers and 66% of their direct reports.

Reflective Learning
95% of HLMS participants applied the ‘double loop learning’ method and state it helps them to be more efficient and achieve better results.

“I have worked for nearly a decade at ICRC and in that time I was focused on tasks and remained within my comfort zone. Following HLMS I saw the potential that I have, how to look at things differently and how to contribute more than what I have already been doing”
Participant, Afghanistan

“For me one of the things I appreciated the most about the HLMS is the diversity of the cohorts and that it is across hierarchies, I have met and exchanged with colleagues that I would never have met otherwise.”
Gherardo Pontrandolfi
HR Director
Concluding remarks

As has been demonstrated, the enduring collaboration between ICRC and Hult Ashridge Executive Education has served leadership at the heart of the increasing challenges being faced in the humanitarian context of armed conflict and other situations of violence. As leaders working with an evolving and a much broader range of vulnerabilities emerging from the indirect disruption that conflict and violence create, there is increasing ambiguity, complexity, and risks to their own security as well as those of the populations they work with.

For seven years, HLMS has served its purpose to contribute to a leadership culture in the ICRC that brings together diverse leaders from across the organization, both horizontally and vertically, in an essential place to learn together and from each other. Together with the dedicated facilitation team, the learning has been strong, relevant, and directly applied to their reality to build the relevant leadership capabilities.

“I feel I have grown as a manager, but also as a person, a father, a husband and a colleague. I have been the sceptical one that need to be convinced, the critical challenger during these modules, often sharing strong opinions and doubts. You provided a safe space to learn, to exchange, to motivate me to continue to believe on the beauty of the ideals for which we work.”

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