Creating a Transformative Leadership Culture

EFMD Excellence in Practice Awards 2021
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 Pontrandolfini
HR Director