

VISIONARY CONVERSATION

Fabrizio Hochschild—author '*In and above conflict: A Study on leadership in the UN*' and
Director, Field Personnel Division, UN Department of Field Support

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In outlining his vision for a values-driven international system, Mr. Hochschild drew particular reference to his study in which he asked what makes for good leadership in the UN context, and in particular examined the work of persons he considered effective leaders, including Louise Arbour, Sergio Vieira de Mello, Kofi Annan and Sadako Ogata.

He underlined that the values of the UN are universal values, and not cultural values or beliefs, or particularly western values, and that they found expression in international norms such as human rights. Making these values relevant depended on the articulation of these norms and on the UN staff. In the latter regard, leadership was critical for translating these values into reality. Leadership should not be confused with titles or status, and it is not only about management, but it is about inspiring people, creating a vision and changing mindsets.

With respect to the challenges to emergence of such leadership, he lamented that in the UN culture there tends to be more focus on resources and on political will as vehicles for fulfilling the UN mandate than there is on the quality of leadership. In one sense the UN is advantaged in being a compelling platform to connect with people, but in another sense is disadvantaged in that the selection of leadership is not consistently based primarily on leadership ability, but in fact there can be a member state preference for the 'grey bureaucrat', someone who will not 'rock the boat'. As leadership from above can not be taken as given, the exercise of leadership is important at all levels and there are many examples of more junior staff who undertake great initiatives e.g. in Rwanda during the genocide where a junior UN Military Observer was responsible for bringing a number of persons to safety.

The UN is constrained by the fact of being a bureaucracy, which is inherently restricted by process, and also because it is at the confluence of political influences so political awareness, caution and compromise are often what steer senior managers, and these may not fully align with the core universal values. While junior staff may come in with these values, the more senior you become the more change and risk-taking are disapproved of, and you are indirectly encouraged to 'calm down'. He noted that integrity in the UN was now generally being interpreted first and foremost in terms of the absence of corruption in procurement practices or bribery, whereas Hammarskjöld's understanding of integrity was principles-based and about standing up for Charter principles in particular where it was unpopular to do so.

Regarding support for this kind of integrity and leadership being realized in the UN system, Mr. Hochschild said that there were some persons who had done it successfully, and from his study he had identified several features of effective advocacy for norms and principles as a critical ingredient in UN leadership. These were:

1. Political realism, that is, understanding that the UN was created to prevent the world from ‘descending in to hell’, and not necessarily to help the world to “go to heaven”
2. Making personal connections in terms of showing deference and respect, being flattering, and otherwise making significant or controversial messages more palatable
3. Creating alliances around a position
4. Appealing to public opinion, since often the public will support the more values-driven stand taken
5. Saying ‘No’ and telling Member-States when compromise is needed
6. Being persistent, and seeing beyond the short-term drawbacks, and this may mean losing the battle to win the war.

With regard to options for the way forward to promote more values-driven leadership, and related processes or mechanisms, he noted that the selection process for senior staff such as Resident Coordinators, is increasingly paying attention to other factors besides political acceptance of candidates, and leadership abilities such as upholding staff morale are becoming more important. More needs to be done, such as ensuring proven ability to stand up for beneficiaries and constituents.

Mr. Hochschild also noted that whereas in the past the UN consistently attracted exceptional people, this seems to have waned and there is a need to cultivate the prestige of work with the UN again. This may involve projecting the UN as unique in representing a particular set of values, more than for financial or political or academic clout, where it is out-ranked in any event by other institutions such as the World Bank, or by think-tanks.

Leadership ultimately depended on influencing others through a relationship of trust and advocating a clear vision.

The follow-up discussion covered the following:



With respect to a vision for the international system, courage was identified as a critical common element of effective leadership if not always sufficiently valued.

Regarding the reality to be addressed, in the UN, error avoidance or risk assessment was prevalent in the culture, and the threat was not always seen that the ultimate risk of risk of avoidance is steady marginalization of the organization. Such caution was responsible, for example, for failure in Rwanda, so that the organization's credibility as a body willing to do what it takes to make a difference is compromised. It is particularly disturbing that those who seemed most affected by the inaction or failures of the UN were junior staff or UN military, resulting even in suicides or alcoholism to cope with the stress of the consequences they may have keenly experienced, while other staff who had more direct responsibility for failure to act escape unscathed.

The governance structure of the UN, with key parties drawn from Member-States, the Secretariat and civil society, was also problematic and may not readily lend itself to seeking the interests of the organization itself given the range of national and other interests that tend to take precedence. This was further complicated by the fact that people moved between different roles among these varied parties and interests.

In terms of options for the way forward, it is a simple and important start to tell staff members that they are expected to make mistakes and thereby to learn, and to delegate more authority to them for such learning to take place. Through recruitment, training and management practices, it is key to send the message that initiative is valued as much as caution. The UN System Staff College could undertake a greater role in training in this respect. Other simple acts can be insisting on having roundtables, an open door management policy, or removing titles from business cards. It is also important to break the homogenization of experience in the UN and bring in different perspectives and methods for addressing problems. Such messages may be more relevant for the culture at headquarters than it is for the field and humanitarian work.