

Why potential is more important than experience in leadership roles

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New ways of working require leadership skills that are more important than experience, says Dr. Riitta Lumme-Tuomala, Head of Growth at Aalto University Executive Education.

Organisations in rapidly expanding sectors are wrongly prioritising experience over potential – components of which include adaptability and high learning agility – when deploying leaders.

Dr. Lumme-Tuomala studied the humanitarian aid sector, where highly experienced managers are often favoured despite new crises, such as those caused by climate change, requiring new ways of decision-making and leadership.

She says: “NGO managers, as in a number of other industries, typically spend their entire career in an organisation, working their way up from technical roles to management. Yet as sectors expand, particularly as we have seen in humanitarian aid, more leaders are recruited externally. Despite this influx of new talent, highly seasoned individuals continue to be deployed to increasingly complex operations which require new ways of working and new types of mindsets.

“Strong leadership is important in this context, as decisions made, often based on incomplete information and in rapidly changing situations, affect lives. Not only that, but leaders must build and maintain long-term relationships with various stakeholders, ensure livelihoods of survivors, and build resilience in communities in the long run.”

The humanitarian aid sector’s ‘heroic and macho’ leadership style of the past is being replaced by the need for managers to demonstrate emotional intelligence, including self-awareness, self-regulation and high levels of influencing skills.

Lumme-Tuomala continues: “Historically, leaders and founders of NGOs have been known to operate with a paternalistic management style. Often leaders of this type demonstrate drive and commitment, as well as an ability to mobilise people and resources. However, they can also dominate organisations, be unaccountable and fail to adapt their ways of working to changes in the context of their sectors.

“This is further proof that the skills and competencies which guaranteed success in the past are not always adequate today, and that leadership roles are changing. Talent management initiatives now, in humanitarian aid and sectors beyond, should prioritise problem-solving, strategic decision-making, goal and direction-setting, and understanding operational context in managers, rather than relying on high levels of – often outdated – experience.”

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