



Diplôme d'Études Supérieures en Leadership Humanitaire (DESLH) graduates' experiences and perceptions of mentoring:

SUPPLEMENTARY REPORT



CENTRE FOR
HUMANITARIAN
LEADERSHIP

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The aim of this report

This short report outlines the perceptions and experiences of Diplôme d'Études Supérieures en Leadership Humanitaire (DESLH) graduates who were participants of two mentoring workshops delivered by Centre for Humanitarian Leadership (CHL) in May and November, 2022. The aim is to inform and improve the integration of mentoring into CHL's leadership development offerings, including in relation to the Francophone Diplôme d'Études Supérieures en Leadership Humanitaire (DESLH).

This short report has been developed as an adjunctive to the substantive reports submitted to BHA as part of the Monitoring, Evaluation, and Research (MER) activities associated with the DESLH.

Report outline

Chapter 2 presents an overview of the four mentoring workshops offered through CHL, including the purpose, participants, and design and delivery of these workshops. Please note, only the first two of these are covered by this analysis, owing to the timing of data collection and higher prevalence of DESLH graduates in these initial workshops.

Chapter 3 presents key findings from interviews with DESLH graduates who completed these earlier two workshops, including their experiences of mentoring, and perceptions of the ways in which mentoring can help support leadership development.

Key conclusions are presented in Chapter 4, while the research design is presented in Chapter 5.

2. MENTORING WORKSHOPS: CONTEXT

2.1 Purpose of the mentoring workshop

In 2022 and 2023, CHL delivered four francophone Mentoring Workshops, conducted online in May 2022, online in November 2022, in-person in March 2023 (Dakar), and in-person in September 2023 (Dakar).

The workshops were held in response to growing awareness that the potential for mentoring to contribute to ongoing humanitarian leadership development was curtailed by the limited availability and accessibility of mentors. This issue directly affected DESLH graduates when seeking a mentor.

As early as Unit 3 of the DESLH, students are invited to identify a mentor with whom they can continue the leadership development adventure after graduation. Based on the principle that leadership development is a long-term journey, the DESLH teaching team requires students to draw up a leadership development plan at the end of Unit 4. In this document, they are invited to review their learning from the course and set themselves two or three SMART leadership development objectives for the 12 months following the DESLH. With this plan as a guide, they can start their mentoring journey/continuation of the leadership development with the person of their choice as soon as they have graduated.

For their mentoring pathway, the students themselves identify the person who will accompany them. To assist students, the DESLH team provides information about mentoring, how to identify a mentor and developing a mentoring plan as part of course content.

In 2021, the DESLH team noticed that many students were having difficulty securing a suitable mentor or mentoring arrangements not being fulfilled due to role changes, deployments and/or other circumstances, including the ongoing disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. While the course team was able to provide some ad hoc support to some DESLH graduates, both the nature of mentoring

and its status as a post-DESLH activity meant that developing a “matching” program was not seen as a viable solution. In addition, it was recognised that the challenges encountered by DESLH graduates in securing a mentor reflected wider challenges in the sector in terms of supporting the development of a diverse cohort of leaders.

Mentoring workshops were proposed as a solution: by training people in the principles and practices of mentoring, the pool of potential mentors would increase and have improved ability to mentor. This would benefit DESLH graduates seeking mentors, as well as have a positive impact more widely, and also strengthen the connection between leadership and serving as a mentor. The mentoring workshops, therefore, had three objectives:

1. To build a pool of mentors from across the humanitarian sector who could support both DESLH graduates and trainees from other CHL programs in continuing their leadership development;
2. To raise awareness of mentoring as a technique for professional development—both as a mentee and a mentor, and increase knowledge of good practices for effective mentoring;
3. To contribute to building and sustaining a mentoring culture in the humanitarian sector.

In addition, the workshops provided an important opportunity to gain further insights in mentoring from the perspective of participants to inform further mentorship development activities. This was achieved via a post-workshop participant feedback survey and semi-structured interviews with 13 participants.

2.2 Workshop participants

Initially, the workshop was offered to DESLH alumni from earlier cohorts. At the second workshop, registrations were opened to the wider French-speaking humanitarian community, including but not limited to DESLH alumni (Table 1).

Table 1. Mentoring workshops: overview

| Date | Modality | Number participants | Duration |
|----------------|-----------|--|---|
| May 2022 | Online | 17 (8 women & 9 men), including 17 DESLH alumni | 3 half-days (of 4 hours) over 3 consecutive weeks |
| November 2022 | Online | 18 (7 women & 11 men), including 12 DESLH alumni | 2 days (of 7 hours) |
| March 2023 | In-person | 29 (11 men & 17 women), including 1 DESLH alumni | Residential in Dakar, 2 days (of 7 hours) |
| September 2023 | In-person | 20 (11 women & 9 men), including 5 DESLH alumni | Residential in Dakar, 2.5 days (2 full days of 7 hours and 1 half day of 3 hours) |

2.3 Workshop design and delivery

The mentoring programme was initially offered in the form of three half-days (of 3-4 hours) online training sessions spread over three consecutive weeks (one half-day per week). Based on review of the May 2022 workshop and participant feedback, the delivery structure was subsequently changed to two full days for the November 2022 online workshop to increase participant engagement and maximise use of the scheduled time. This change also aligned the online version with the residential format of the March 2023 workshop in Dakar. The September 2023 workshop schedule was extended to 2.5 days to ensure sufficient time for all activities, which had been challenging in March, especially with a larger group.

The overall program learning objectives are as follows:

1. Understand their role as a mentor and how it differs from other roles.

2. Develop their core mentoring skills & capabilities.
3. Explore the 'mindset' and behaviours required to be a mentor.
4. Increase their self-awareness to allow them to bring the most to their mentoring relationship.
5. Be aware of the importance of building the mentoring relationship and creating a psychologically safe space.
6. Have access to a range of tools and frameworks and know how and when to use them.
7. Be able to manage the unexpected.
8. Apply everything they learn through practice.
9. Commit to their own ongoing development.

The mentoring workshop programme is organised into three modules:

Table 2. Mentoring workshop programme design

| Modules | Objectives | Thematics |
|----------------------------------|--|--|
| Fundamentals of mentoring | To define the context of the programme and establish working methods, then to study some of the fundamental elements of mentoring. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to the Program and fellow participants. • The mentoring journey from beginning to end. • Understand the role of Mentor and how it differs from other roles. • Identify the core skills requires of a Mentor. • 'Ask vs Tell' and Practice to gain an awareness of approach. • Deep Dive into two of the core skills through Practice. • Refresher on GCHL Leadership Behaviour. |

| Modules | Objectives | Thematics |
|----------------------------------|---|--|
| Prepare for success | To understand the important elements at the start of the mentoring process and to develop some of the fundamental skills that will help them to become outstanding mentors. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Starting for success including the relationship and process. • Introduce structure, contracting and objective setting. • Explore Psychological Safety and how to build trust. • Mentoring as a process and Coaching framework. • Real-play practice using GROW. • Introduce structure and checklist for mentoring sessions. • Mentoring Do's and Don'ts. |
| Mentoring Building Blocks | To set the context for the program and establish ways of working, and then to deep dive into some of the foundational elements of Mentoring. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce the Mentor as a critical friend through feedback. • Feedback model and practice. • Explore how to Manage the unexpected and potential barriers. • Closing the mentoring relationship considerations and structure. • Understanding the commitment (time, emotional) and when to say no. |

3. MENTORING AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: INSIGHTS FROM DESLH GRADUATES

This section considers two key questions:

- What were DESLH graduates' experiences of mentoring?
- How do these participants see mentoring— as a mentor and/or as a mentee— as supporting leadership development?

3.1 Experiences of mentoring

There are particular challenges for humanitarian workers who want to participate in mentoring. They face difficulties securing a mentor and meeting mentoring commitments due to unpredictable schedules, heavy workloads, serious competing priorities, rapid deployment or country reassignment and unreliable internet connection, to name a few. Despite this, all workshop participants had previous mentoring experience and valued it enough to pursue further training via a mentoring workshop. Because they had benefited themselves, many workshop participants felt a sense of “gratitude” and responsibility to “give back” and to help “future generations” of young leaders [11AlumM]. They believe that “you learn, you see, when talking to a mentor” and wanted mentoring training “to understand how to do it to have an impact [4AlumM]”

3.1.1 Types of impact of mentoring: experiences of workshop participants

Almost all the interviewees (n=12) had worked with a mentor and were mostly “very satisfied” (n=9) or satisfied (n=3) with the experience. They believed it had helped them in a variety of ways to develop their leadership capacity. Participants believed mentoring had contributed to changes in their careers, as well as their professional and personal lives. Some participants also believed mentoring could have a broader positive impact on the quality of the humanitarian response itself and in support of the localisation agenda.

Impact on professional lives

For many participants, mentoring is viewed as “an art, a specific pedagogy” which is “essential for truly developing one’s leadership.” [5AlumM] Participants described a number of ways they believed their leadership had been impacted by their mentoring experience. While some participants chose to work on specific leadership behaviours with their mentor, some of the most noticeable, common impacts reported are greater self-reflection and self-awareness, as well as confidence and skills in active listening. According to interviewees, these new skills and awareness have helped them work differently with their teams. They describe a greater focus on “putting themselves in the place of the other” [5AlumM] and paying more attention to staff as people, by trying to understand them and listen and to accommodate different viewpoints.

‘Yes, obviously also in my professional life, because as much as we learn, we learn techniques for approaching other people, interactions, how do we come to understand a little why such and such a person behaves in such and such a way? How do you react to someone who behaves in a certain way? As I was saying, we’ve also learnt the ability to listen, the ability to ask positive questions, in fact, in order to come up with a positive response to this or that behaviour. So, inevitably, this has had a positive impact on my professional approach.’ [6AlumF]

For some interviewees, mentoring played a particularly important role in boosting confidence in their leadership abilities. For one participant, mentoring helped by contributing to a growth mindset. In this case, the participant was able “to develop [...] confidence in myself” because their mentor was “someone who showed me that everything is learned, nothing is made up” [1AlumF]. Another participant reported developing greater

confidence in their strategic decision-making through discussions with their mentor.

Impact on humanitarian response

According to 10 out of the 13 interviewees, mentoring has a role to play in improving humanitarian response. Participants highlighted how mentoring has made them feel better equipped to find solutions to problems, by following a more structured process of reflection and questioning. It also provides the tools to engage, listen and guide others in discussions “to help them understand the depth of the problem and to move towards a solution”. In one example, a participant described how they were able to “remove obstacles” and convince management to “expand” a crisis response that had been “restricted to a specific location” [11AlumM]. They did this by “engaging in quite open, but structured discussions, with careful questions” that led staff to “respond to their own problems” [10AlumM].

Participants emphasised how greater reflection helps them “to adapt” and builds their capacity to deliver humanitarian response programming that is “more flexible” and “more adapted” to contexts that “evolve a lot” [10AlumM]. Through mentoring, study participants believe they are “better trained, have better tools, are better supported” which helps to ensure they can deliver a quality humanitarian response.

Career impact

Some study participants (n=5) believed that mentoring played a role in their career progression and goals. For those participants, being mentored helped them practice and build their leadership skills and “contributed strongly” to their “success” in being selected for higher roles both within and outside their organisation. For participants with less direct formal experience in the humanitarian sector, working with a mentor provided them with access to someone to help them understand what “they lacked” in order to transition or progress in the humanitarian sector, and to develop a career plan accordingly [1AlumF].

Impact on personal lives

While not asked directly about the personal dimension of mentoring, most interviewees (n=8) wanted to highlight that mentoring had not only influenced them in their work, but also in their

personal lives. In doing so, many conveyed a deep sense of contentment about the contribution this has made to them and their families, through deepening their ability to listen, understand and guide loved ones. Participants describe using “mentoring with my own family, my wife and children” [11AlumM], because by using “very structured questions” it helps family members to express themselves. As a result, “I have seen how much I have gained in terms of my wellbeing” [1AlumF], said one participant; “it has helped my heart a lot”, said another [11AlumM].

Mentoring and gender

Interviews suggest that female humanitarian leaders may have different priorities for mentoring support due to the different perceived needs and challenges for male and female leaders in the humanitarian space. Reflecting this logic, two female interviewees had selected a female mentor because they felt they would understand that “being a female in the humanitarian space is not the same thing as for men” and could help them deal with the negative societal views towards young female leaders who live alone, or who are away from their families in overseas postings, where this is not the social norm.

As another example of potential gender differences in relation to mentoring, all three female interviewees reported that they had prioritised needing to work on aspects of personal development, including stress management, self-control and understanding how their behaviour was perceived by and impacted on others.

In contrast, none of the ten male interviewees reported prioritising aspects of personal development as part of their objectives for having a mentor. While the sample size is small, it is worth noting that these differences resonate with wider research on gender and professional development (please see the DESLH Gender and Leadership Study accompanying this report).

3.2 Perceptions of ways mentoring can support leadership development

Having direct, positive experience with a mentor was felt to give mentoring workshop participants unique insights and perspectives into the way mentoring can support leadership development. For study

participants, mentoring is “an approach” that is “essential for developing your leadership” [5AlumM]. It does this by providing a role model to follow and a unique opportunity and methodology for receiving constructive feedback and encouraging reflection. It enables leaders to focus on issues specific to their individual needs and contexts, and to keep evolving by practising problem solving and integrating new learnings, which further builds their confidence.

3.2.1 Role Models

Mentoring provides access to role models and helps mentees learn to be role models as well. Some interviewees highlighted that it is difficult for leaders to develop without help and emphasised that leaders “can’t grow on their own” or “don’t get far on their own”, particularly when they work “in humanitarian action” [9AlumM, 5AlumM]. For some interviewees, this meant that having a role model was felt to be particularly important. Role models give an opportunity “to learn here and there” from very experienced people, and they provide an example “to copy”, but without mentees “disappearing into their model” or losing their own way of being [9AlumM]

‘When you’re in humanitarian response, I don’t think you can improve alone. Often you don’t have to try to progress alone and [instead] to have people beside you, to help polish your career profile and or your skills, so that you can copy people who have been identified as a good model without merging into their model.’ [9AlumM]

Interviewees also indicated that they saw being a role model as part of being a leader. By having a mentor who acts as a role model, mentees also have an example of a role model to follow. One interviewee stated that “it is very important to be a role model” and “to be able to guide people” [9AlumM].

3.2.2 Unique relationship for challenging and providing feedback

To develop as a leader means to grow and be challenged, which means needing to receive honest and open feedback that can inform future actions. Mentors play a key role in providing this, according to interviewees. Interviewees reported that it is not always possible to get “candour from colleagues and peers”, due to “human nature” or because of cultural

norms, with one participant noting “how people are raised in Africa” as an impediment to frank feedback [7AlumF]. This means that the type of discussions mentees have with their peers “are not the same as discussions with a mentor.”

For interviewees, having a mentor who can give “clear and constructive criticism” without having to “put on kid gloves” was seen as really beneficial for helping them “evolve”. As one participant commented, “I improved so much from these critiques,” from someone “spitting out the truth to me’ so to speak, what they think” [7AlumF]. For interviewees, having someone who “doesn’t judge” but who can “find the ways, the words, the academic way to say to change” was felt to be very important for helping them to improve their leadership abilities [6AlumF].

For some mentees, mentoring also provides an opportunity to get this type of constructive feedback from “people with lots of power” in more senior, powerful positions [6AlumF]. Importantly, this was not viewed in solely transactional terms, but was also transformational for participants’ confidence. Discovering that people higher up “want me to progress” was helpful and important for one interviewee, who believed this made it “a lot easier” for them “to advance” [6AlumF]. As such, mentoring was felt to provide interviewees with a unique relationship and methodology to receive constructive feedback, which challenged interviewees to grow by critically assessing themselves and their leadership approaches and capacity.

3.2.3 Specific methodology for promoting reflection and problem-solving

Mentoring was also seen as critical for promoting ongoing, deeper reflection and questioning which is crucial to leadership development. For participants, being guided to continually reflect, by someone they trust, was “vital for truly developing one’s leadership” as it creates “a learning process that is vital for personal transformation” [5AlumM]. For participants, “mentoring helped to keep up a rhythm of self-examination” which reinforced their learning [7AlumF]. One participant highlighted the importance of being skilfully guided to reflect and ask themselves the sort of questions that help them identify the keys to change. They viewed this as a practical and critical part of their leadership development.

3.2.4 Longer term, individualised support, to practice in real-life

Mentoring was also felt to have a particular role to play in leadership development because it provides ongoing, tailored support to mentees for the time they need it, rather than being confined to the time limit of formal educational or training programs. Study participants viewed their leadership development as “a process” and mentoring as a way to “maintain a rhythm of evolution”.

Having longer term support enabled participants to receive practical guidance as they tested new behaviours and approaches in their work settings. This enabled the study participants to reinforce and embody their learnings about leadership “in real life”, and some reported that it also helped them to “raise their level of performance” and observe their own progress which helped build confidence [7AlumF]. They also built confidence in their leadership capacities through the ongoing process of dialogue and discussion with their mentor itself, pointing to the importance of feedback and reflection as a continuous and iterative process.

Study participants also believed mentoring helped their leadership development because it allowed them to focus on their individual needs and “our own objectives” [7AlumF]. It also provided guidance that was directly relevant to the needs of the mentee in the specific context they were working in, including “the essential issues of our mission” [7AlumF]. Given the high stakes of humanitarian assistance and the diversity and fast pace of change in work settings, mentoring to support leaders in their individual needs and in their specific environments appeared to be valued by study participants.

3.2.5 Mentoring helps leaders in their personal development as “human beings”, not just as workers

Participants expressed an understanding that leaders are human beings and that “human beings

come first, before competencies” [7AlumF]. For some participants, mentoring helped their leadership because it allowed them to “to work on themselves” and support their personal development, rather than focus only on their technical competencies or how to solve problems they face in their work [7AlumF]. This meant focussing on them as a person and the family and social challenges they also face as humanitarian leaders.

‘Mentoring can take several forms. If the person knows the areas they need to improve, that can be crucial, not just looking for a technical person to guide us in the management of this or that situation, but working on oneself. The human being is key, as the primary tool, before specific skills.’ [7AlumF]

Study participants described taking this understanding of people as human beings first into their work and using mentoring tools and approaches to help them do this, such as listening and asking questions to try to understand the other person, and finding out what people need to grow instead of just focussing on their technical competencies or results.

3.2.6 Mentees modify their leadership approaches by using mentoring approaches and tools

Participants reported that having direct experience of mentoring tools and approaches that they could replicate in their work developed their leadership capacities, including changing their leadership approaches. Study participants said that mentoring “enabled them to truly support their staff” by taking time to get to know their staff as human beings, ask questions, and work with them individually, not just as a team, to help them “work on a career plan, and a professional and personal plan, as a human being” [2AlumM].

4. CONCLUSIONS

The thematic findings offer insights into mentoring as a practice—what factors make it more likely to succeed—as part of leadership development. These are articulated as key conclusions below:

- For mentoring to have the greatest impact, mentors need to be credible in the eyes of mentees (for instance, to demonstrate the skills and competencies which mentees wish to develop).
- Men and women interviewed for this study report different motivations for undertaking mentoring, with women more likely to indicate they want to work on their own professional development.
- A key motivation for participants wanting to undertake the workshop was to be seen as a recognised and credible humanitarian leader within the system.
- Participants were also motivated to become mentors because of the potential impact on their own professional careers, including their ability to demonstrate mentoring skills and to advance their own leadership development.
- Mentoring workshop participants also expressed their interest in developing their ‘soft skills’ (such as listening), which are useful for both professional and personal spheres.
- DESLH participants who had received mentoring described the benefits of having first-hand experience of the impact that mentoring can have on their leadership development, in their own experiences when becoming mentors.
- Participants also reported benefits of being mentored by someone who understands the mentees’ situation, such as DESLH students who had received mentoring, and then undertake the mentor role.

5. RESEARCH DESIGN AND ETHICS

This study is covered by the research ethics permissions of the DESLH Impact Study, project reference HEA-21-199. Please see main Impact Study report for details.

5.1 Research design

This is not a traditional impact evaluation, but a small-scale qualitative study investigating humanitarians' experiences and perceptions of mentoring delivered by Centre for Humanitarian Leadership.

Research question

This report addresses the following research question

- What are DESLH graduates' experiences and perceptions of mentoring, and how do they see mentoring as supporting leadership development?

Research methods

To answer this research question, key informant interviews were held with 13 interviewees, including

3 women and ten men. All interviewees were mentoring workshop participants who were also graduates of the DESLH, representing Cohorts 2 (4 interviewees), Cohort 3 (4 interviewees) and Cohort 4 (5 interviewees).

Interviews were conducted with 13 participants of the May and November 2022 mentoring workshops in February-March 2023. These online interviews were semi-structured, lasting up to one hour. The same interviewer conducted all interviews and was responsible for review of the interview transcript, as well as completing a post-interview research memo reflecting on the interview, which was used to provide additional context during analysis.

Appropriate consent protocols were followed as required by ethics approval HAE-21-199. Interviewees were provided with a Plain Language Statement about the research, how their interviews would be used, and their right to withdraw consent at any time prior to publication. All information was provided in French and completed consent forms were required prior to an interview being conducted.

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