Leadership in transition:
the experience of the Italian Red Cross 2005-2014

Case study

International Federation
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is the world's largest volunteer-based humanitarian network. Together with our 189 member National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies worldwide, we reach 97 million people annually through long-term services and development programmes as well as 85 million people through disaster response and early recovery programmes. We act before, during and after disasters and health emergencies to meet the needs and improve the lives of vulnerable people. We do so with impartiality as to nationality, race, gender, religious beliefs, class and political opinions.

Guided by *Strategy 2020* – our collective plan of action to tackle the major humanitarian and development challenges of this decade – we are committed to 'saving lives and changing minds'.

Our strength lies in our volunteer network, our community-based expertise and our independence and neutrality. We work to improve humanitarian standards, as partners in development and in response to disasters. We persuade decision-makers to act at all times in the interests of vulnerable people.

The result: we enable healthy and safe communities, reduce vulnerabilities, strengthen resilience and foster a culture of peace around the world.

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Researcher's bias

Some degree of bias in research is almost unavoidable, particularly when researchers adopt an interpretative methodology. It is nevertheless important to distinguish bias that is intentional from bias that is unintended and contained by methodology (residual bias). In this study, care was taken to collect the same data from different sources, to use more than one method to obtain information, and to adopt a combination of theoretical positions through which to interpret it. To an important extent, the results were triangulated, mitigating the risk of favouring individual perspectives and lowering the effect of author's bias (Bryman, 2004).

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[1] *International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).*

Executive summary

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In May 2005, the Italian Red Cross revised its statutes. It ceased to operate as a public entity in the Italian public sector, financially dependent on the Italian government, and took the first steps towards becoming a voluntary association, financially independent of government.

As part of this process, the National Society altered its structure, from one divided into six separate voluntary components,[2] each operating vertically with minimal coordination, to a single integrated voluntary body that takes decisions and allocates resources at different levels of the organisation, including at branch level.

At the same time, a global economic crisis was transforming the external environment, increasing social vulnerability in Italy, and making fundraising and service delivery more difficult and competitive.

Managing such deep organisational change has required a high level of formal and informal leadership in the organisation. This case study examines the complex challenges of leading a membership-based voluntary organisation through a period of profound external and internal change. The study finds that:

- The reform process directed by formal leaders of the National Society was feasible because a grassroots movement for change was already active in the National Society.
- Changes in the external environment may have affected patterns of leadership in the National Society.
- Regular communication was an essential foundation of leadership.
- Leaders may take more directive approaches in periods of organisational crisis, in order to reach decisions fast.
- Such directive leadership may be sustainable for a limited time, before more consultative and distributed leadership processes again become the norm.
- Credible leaders play a critical role at local level, in convening volunteers and other stakeholders, reaching decisions, and being accountable for resources and performance. The report suggests that strengthening credibility across the organisation is crucial for organisational impact and sustainability in the medium and long term.
- No notion of effective leadership is universal.[3] The report finds that a variety of positive and negative perspectives and perceptions influenced the conduct of, and attitudes to, leaders of the Italian Red Cross in recent years.

While it is too soon to say whether the reforms will achieve all their aims, the study's portrayal of leadership during transition echoes several key messages of the 2013 National Society development framework. In particular:

- It is the primary responsibility of senior leaders to oversee the development of a National Society.

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2   *Youth; voluntary nurses (crocerossine); auxiliary military body (corpo militare); blood donors; women's national committee; emergency volunteers.*

3   *Effective leadership could be defined as the ability to increase an organisation's relevance, in terms of its reach, scale and impact, its ability to adapt, and its sustainability.*

- Leadership is located at every level of a National Society.
- The internal organisational life of a National Society (in this case, leadership) is influenced by the external environment.

At the same time, the case study paints a much richer picture. It reveals many forms of leadership, active at all levels of the Society, and shows how leadership roles and patterns evolved and interacted with other aspects of organisational change.

1. Introduction

It is commonly assumed that the formal leaders of an institution are primarily responsible for managing it. They are usually held to be responsible for organisational change and management, and their key characteristics are assumed to include the ability to articulate a vision and influence others to work for the goals they set. This common belief is challenged by several empirical studies undertaken in both profit and non-profit institutions (Barnes & Kriger, 1986; Murphy, 1988; Clarke, 2010; Battilana & Casciaro, 2013).

Leadership can take different forms, in the voluntary sector as elsewhere, because the number of people who are willing to take personal responsibility for achieving a given purpose extends beyond those who occupy a position in the organisational hierarchy. The concept of 'volunteer leaders' is widely recognised in the sector, to the point where specific development programmes exist to build volunteer leaders' competence and skills.[4]

If leaders are defined as individuals who inspire and mobilise others, who provide strategic direction and create an environment that enables goals to be achieved, volunteers can play critical leadership roles without being formally appointed to do so.

IFRC's National Society development framework emphasises that the senior leadership of National Societies is primarily responsible for their development. They guide the organisation to meet its mandate more effectively and more sustainably. However, the framework recognises that leadership takes different forms and can be more or less formal. It can be centralised and hierarchical (under an individual or group of senior executives) or it can be diffused or distributed through National Society branches, staff, members and volunteer teams.

Voluntary organisations like the Italian Red Cross (IRC) operate increasingly in complex, fast evolving environments where conflicting demands from multiple stakeholders may challenge their longer term survival. Leaders are confronted by both daily and more deeply rooted situations of crisis, which require them to remain pragmatic while continuing to inspire hope. Their professional competence, their ability to scan the environment and read the challenges and opportunities ahead, are fully tested, and trust can only be maintained by 'walking the talk' (Boyle, 2010).

It is plausible to argue that periods of organisational change, like that which the IRC currently faces, requires the leadership skills needed in emergency situations. There, those in charge are expected to stay lucid, to direct and at the same time empower, to be focused while demonstrating a personal commitment to achieve agreed goals (Kolditz, 2007; Piper, 2012; Rashid, Edmondson & Leonard, 2013).

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[4] See, for example, the volunteer leadership training programmes run by the Swedish and American National Societies. See their web-sites: https://rednet.punainenristi.fi/node/23977, and http://www.redcross.org/ca/los-angeles/volunteer/youth-services/ leadershp-development-camp

What is this case study about?

This case study describes and analyses the characteristics of formal and informal leadership in the Italian Red Cross, and identifies patterns of leadership that emerged during a period of organisational change.

'Formal' is taken to mean leadership associated with position and official authority. By contrast, 'informal' leaders exercise influence over others in an often democratic way; their authority does not depend on official status.

The case study asks: What leadership roles and practices were key to the recent change process of the Italian Red Cross? To answer this question, it:
- Identifies leadership practices at the IRC, by exploring who (regardless of formal position) took initiatives to influence and mobilise people and resources and realise a given mission.
- Defines specific characteristics of leadership in the organisation and the socio-political context the IRC faced.
- Describes patterns of leadership that emerged in the IRC when it experienced a legitimacy crisis, and made changes and reforms to address internal and external challenges.

The Italian Red Cross and its reform period

Over the past ten years, the Italian Red Cross has passed through a period of major and at times traumatic organisational change. This offers an ideal opportunity to explore the roles and different forms of

One voluntary body, one uniform. Photo: Daniele Aloisi/IRC

formal and informal leadership that occur in a member-based voluntary organisation, particularly during periods of turmoil.

The Italian Red Cross is one of 189 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in the world. This unique network, brought together in the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, provides independent social and humanitarian support to public authorities. Composed of volunteers and staff, each National Society provides a broad range of humanitarian and social services.

National Societies are independent and autonomous legal entities that operate in accordance with humanitarian values and the seven fundamental principles of the Red Cross (humanity, impartiality, independence, neutrality, unity, universality and voluntary).[5]

The Italian Red Cross is one of approximately 4,000 active voluntary associations in Italy. Through a network of 150,000 active volunteers and 4,000 paid staff, distributed across 635 committees, its coverage and proximity to the communities it serves are without equal in the country. [6]

Until it revised its statutes in May 2005, the IRC was legally a public entity that operated in Italy's public sector, while adhering to the fundamental principles of the Red Cross Movement. In effect, it had a dual accountability.

After adopting new statutes, the IRC 'privatised': legally and operationally, it gradually became a voluntary association, mandated by the government to deliver services of public interest. It is expected to complete this process by the end of 2015.

As a public entity, the IRC depended financially on the Italian government and was subject to numerous official constraints as well as interference by 'Special Commissioners'. The main justification for interference was the need to address financial difficulties that were caused by the organisation's complex structure, which required any process of reform to be acceptable both internally and externally.

In October 2008, a new Special Commissioner was appointed to replace the President and address a large financial deficit. The IRC's organisational structure

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5   *See the IFRC web-side. At: http://www.ifrc.org/en/who-we-are/vision-and-mission/the-seven-fundamental-principles/.*
6   *Italian Red Cross, Annual Report, 2012. At: http://cri.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/8895.*

IRC Presidential elections, 2013. Photo: Ibrahim Malla/IRC

and services were reviewed, reform measures were taken, and in 2011 the National Society resolved its financial difficulties and launched new legal and institutional reforms. In 2013 it elected a new President.

The IRC's reform process was therefore triggered by a financial crisis; however, it was driven by an underlying demand for change and independence that came from its volunteers.

Prior to the reform, the IRC had six voluntary components, which functioned largely independently of each other, alongside a structure of local, provincial, regional and national committees that had limited influence and played a mainly administrative role.

The abolition of the voluntary components and the subsequent creation of a single voluntary association,[7] working to common objectives, was the key organisational reform. It profoundly shifted the organisation's centres of power, which had created a silo culture and internal competition for resources.

Why is this case study important?

This case study describes a National Society whose governance and accountability mechanisms were in transition. Research on leadership in the Red Cross/ Red Crescent is rare. Lessons learned will be used in the leadership development programme which the IFRC is currently preparing.

How was the case study developed?

Methodologically, a mixed approach was adopted, using information gathered from relevant academic and professional sources (desk review) and formal leaders, employees and volunteers of the Italian Red Cross, at national and branch level.

A review of theory highlighted the degree to which leaders of voluntary sector organisations are challenged during periods of change. Different theories were explored that seemed applicable to the research context; a summary can be found in Appendix A.

Primary research in the form of semi-structured interviews took place in March 2014, in Rome, at the national central committee and Rome's provincial committee, and in Torino, at the regional committee and the local committee of Moncalieri.

A questionnaire guided individual interviews and group discussions. A qualitative approach to analysis was adopted, recognising that the perceptions of different informants would need to be interpreted.

Because the IRC is a voluntary organisation that provides national, regional and local services, the role of the branch (understood to include local, provincial and regional committees) was central to the analysis. The way a branch operates is an indicator of organisational effectiveness and mission achievement. Interviews with local actors provided broader insights into the situation and context and made it possible to test the coherence and consistency of perceptions at national level and among the senior leadership.

Pre-reform – several voluntary bodies, different uniforms, one identity? Photo: IRC

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5 *The* Corpo Militare *(auxiliary military body) and* Crocerossine *(auxiliary voluntary nurses) remained separate.*

Informants were women and men from several age groups, occupying a variety of governance, executive, managerial and administrative positions, as paid staff or volunteers.

A number of ethical principles are relevant to the conduct of interviews and data analysis. They include accountability, confidentiality, non-discrimination, reciprocity, empowerment, accessibility and respect for professional values. These principles were adhered to during the research.

2. What leadership roles and practices were crucial?

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The findings presented in this chapter suggest that effectiveness is derived from an organisational approach in which leadership is practised at different levels of an organisation. As IRC respondents expressed it, formal positions matter because they carry legitimacy, but it is the collective dynamic that takes an organisation forward on a given path.

This dynamic is described below.

Leadership practices at the IRC

The research suggested that leadership in the IRC has evolved from a rather hierarchical although decentralised and compartmentalised form to one that is more structured, democratic, cohesive and cross-boundary.

The IRC's six strategic objectives for the decade.
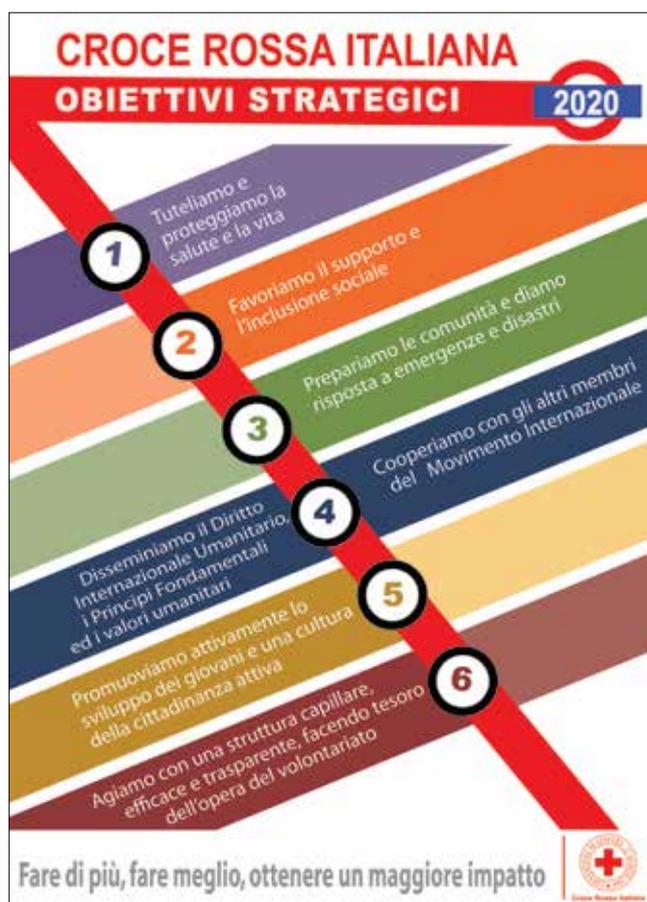
While informants concentrated on 'how leadership looks today', their answers revealed that the parallel structures that existed before reform had their own leaders, competition between whom often caused inefficient decision-making. The key result of the reform process was not so much the change in legal status, but the Society's reorganisation and unification. One interviewee stated:

"… The real reform has been the abolition of the voluntary components… factions with their own barriers… to create one voluntary system." (A senior official.)

Prior to the reform, presidents (all volunteers) of local, provincial and regional committees were somewhat disempowered, because the IRC had several well-resourced and influential voluntary components in place at different levels. By comparison with these components, presidents had little real power. This situation was captured in the comment of an interviewee who was closely involved with management of a presidency:

"Before the reform, nobody ever dared to question the power of the individual voluntary components, which were only nominally under the presidents and were functioning autonomously, like six sub-organisations, with their own

leaders… Previous commissioners only examined the presidents' structure, hence the governance system, but never questioned the voluntary components which were de facto the management function …"

This dynamic has now changed, as the progressive clarification of roles and responsibilities has created a leaner structure. All volunteers report solely to the president, who is now responsible for income generation and efficient use of resources.

Influence and power have always been in the hands of powerful figures at different levels of the IRC, which has never had a strong central authority.

Interviewees suggested that, at central level, governance and management have now been clearly separated. Ideally the same separation should occur at lower levels, where presidents still hold both positions; for lack of resources, however, this step may not be feasible at once.

Delegates:[8] vehicles of ideas

The reforms have clearly remade the presidents' leadership role. Leadership is now centred on 'delegating'. As one interviewee remarked:

"… Before, presidents had a network linked to the voluntary components, but in fact they did nothing. Now they have to create their own teams and learn how to delegate…"

Delegates in a given local, provincial, regional or national strategic area are now responsible for achieving objectives in their respective area of work. They are nominated by the volunteers and report to the appropriate president. They promote ideas from the communities. Delegating creates a form of shared leadership or shared power. Presidents provide directions and resources and delegates manage programmes, working with relevant volunteers to achieve given objectives, while maintaining a degree of autonomy.

For one individual, these changes signify a break in the pattern of leadership:

"… The hierarchical leadership has been broken. Now, it is the idea that dominates, independently from where or whom it comes. The idea, accompanied by resources…"

Explaining the ramifications of this break, the same source continued:

"… An organisational structure where delegating is key requires a system that allows resources to be redistributed where these are most needed. This is based on a continuous dialogue between the delegated and those who delegate…"

Volunteers do not just follow orders. Decision-making must be participatory and satisfaction is found in what is achieved, not in the position held. This is why communication is so important: listening but also providing answers, showing responsibility, and collaboration. The practical, daily consequences of this move are reflected in the following observation by a volunteer with operational responsibility in the local committee:

"… In my local committee we are 58 volunteers. I share the strategy but we work as a team to achieve objectives that we define together. We assess the needs of the territory and we share and distribute tasks according to interests and capacities…"

In terms of the personal consequences of this move for appropriate conduct,

"… I cannot act like a boss. My group would no longer recognise me. They (the volunteers) can bypass me if they want to… My role is to collect input from the bottom, find a compromise with directions from the top and take a position…"

Delegates therefore work as part of a team, as 'leader-coordinators' with the 'doers', passing on knowledge and experience and influencing from the bottom-up. Leadership of this kind becomes a form of coordination that influences by motivating people, creating an environment in which innovative thinking and achievement flourish, generating growth.

Not all presidents are familiar with delegating, however. Moreover, in their new roles as managers and leaders (in governance), they are highly accountable.

Volunteers' motivations vary greatly, from altruism to self-interest. Some are drawn by the corporate image, visibility, and the organisation's structure. Managing volunteers and understanding their motives is crucial to successful delegation.

"… Because we need volunteers, we tend to accept everybody. But not all volunteers have the ethical conduct, intellectual capacity, or professional experience required for the function they hold. With power and resources in their hands they lose focus. This is why we need volunteers with a true inner motivation…" (A senior volunteer.)

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8   *Delegates are volunteer technical experts elected by IRC volunteers to represent and guide work in a strategic area. See: http://www.cri.it/struttura*

Emergency volunteers in a simulation exercise. Photo: Max/IRC

The importance of careful assessment was highlighted by another interviewee:

> *"… When a volunteer comes to our committee, he or she needs to wait at least a year before we move him or her to emergency work. We test the real motivation…" (A senior volunteer.)*

Although delegates are therefore individuals who influence how people and resources are mobilised, as one senior manager put it:

> *"The influence game is like a bridge: different forces push against each other to reach some kind of balance. In the IRC these forces are at least fourfold: the presidents with their own dynamics; the administrative power; staff and trade unions; and the volunteers."*

Credible leadership

According to interviewees, credibility is another key aspect of current leadership practice. Credibility is perceived to be the distinctive trait of the national president, the volunteer serving her community, and the organisation as a whole at national and international level, including its staff, its services, and its auxiliary role.[9]

Credibility is perceived to be individual and organisational.

> *"… One can influence only if credible. Organisational voice matters if one is credible…" (A volunteer, local committee.)*

The role of credibility in the pursuit of a renewed role was highlighted by another interviewee:

> *"We need to rebuild our auxiliary role through institutional credibility, because this is what gives us power to influence. Integrity, coherence, capacity and professionalism are the key characteristics of a leading institution and political power is receptive to institutional credibility… When you speak, people listen!"*

The desire of the IRC to deliver a 'unique' service and not just fill gaps was articulated in the following terms:

> *"… We question why our specific civil protection role should not continue to be recognised through the privatisation… We have an impressive operational and logistics capacity… The government should value this capacity and treat us differently…" (A senior member of staff.)*

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9   *Auxiliary roles can take different forms based on Red Cross rules in each country. See* National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies as auxiliaries to the public authorities in the humanitarian field. *At:* https://fednet.ifrc.org/graphics/Fednet_files/Organisational_Development_11/Legal-base/ns-auxiliaries-role.pdf.

However, this is not proving to be an easy matter:

"… To define the auxiliary role is not a simple task. There are very few areas where the IRC can be auxiliary to the government and these areas do not generate resources for our infrastructure… Preferential treatment was acceptable when it was a public entity, not any more as a private organisation…" (A senior manager.)

Yet uniqueness results not only from a given mandate, but from organisational credibility, when an organisational purpose is clear to all stakeholders and when everything the organisation does is understood to contribute to that purpose. Putting this another way, stakeholders prize being aligned behind a purpose.

On the other hand, trying to do everything creates confusion and reduces credibility. Interviewees said that the new spirit of the leadership had created a closeness (with internal as well as external stakeholders, one presumes), but they also felt that abuse or misuse might be possible. The new striving for credibility is accompanied by greater awareness of reputational risk. The targets are tangible but the ultimate goal is less clear.

Many individuals are moving in this direction. It is a move that may bring traditional and formalised communication channels into question. At the most senior level:

"…(The national president) is friends with everybody. This is good and bad… The use he makes of social networks has abolished institutional barriers, but sometimes a leader needs a respectful distance from his followers…" (A senior volunteer, central committee.)

More generally:

"Bypassing institutional communication channels can create confusion and potentially damage the credibility of the different layers of the organisation…" (A senior volunteer, regional committee.)

Such practices, and their emphasis on informality, can breed ambiguity, as another interviewee noted:

"The ultimate goal of the reform is not very clear. We understand that we needed a more sustainable structure, but the process has had so many variations in a short time that it is difficult to follow…" (A volunteer, provincial committee.)

The organisation is still going through what one interviewee described as 'a tunnel', the early phases of a potentially protracted process of cultural change, accompanied by many often informal and spontaneous new initiatives and ideas that give the organisation a new identity and shape.

To maintain credibility in such a climate is a challenge. It requires from both formal and informal leaders a strong capacity to generate trust, deliver on promises made, demonstrate relevance, and practice what their rhetoric preaches.

The auxiliary voluntary components: voluntary nurses (Crocerossine) and the auxiliary military body (Corpo Militare). Photos: Marco Alpozzi/IRC (top) and Claudio Vitale/IRC (bottom)

Characteristics of leadership in the IRC context

The internal and external context in which the IRC operates is challenging and, at different levels of the organisation, those well positioned to positively influence the reform process had to develop 'adaptive behaviour' to control internal and external dynamics that might have stifled it.

Technocratic leadership trends

The Italian voluntary system is mature and possesses sectoral expertise, especially in the health field. Italian law also protects volunteers. If a volunteer takes absence from his or her paid employment in order to

provide assistance to the Red Cross in times of emergency, the government pays his or her salary to the employer, who releases the volunteer.

In what has become a rather saturated domestic operating environment (occupied by some 4,000 voluntary associations), the IRC is distinguished by its auxiliary and civil protection role. This positions the IRC as a strategic and policy-making partner, playing a critical role in times of emergency.

The current leadership could not disregard changes in its environment (notably the 2008 economic crisis). It initiated an internal change process, not only to address internal inefficiencies, but to meet the growing external demand to demonstrate value for money. According to one interviewee, there was nevertheless some initial reluctance to act.

"… All other public administrations have reformed in the past few years. It is a paradox that the IRC did not. There was a strong need to adapt, and austerity has been a strong push, especially in the context of the civil protection system…" (A senior official, external.)

The IRC had to return to the core of its mission, its voluntary nature, reinforcing its 'competitive advantage', which could be intangible qualities such as reputation, quality and accountability that other broadly comparable agencies may not possess.

Above all, the external environment requires accountability, a requirement (and risk) that the public sector has transferred to the voluntary sector, as it increasingly asks the voluntary sector to manage services that it can no longer provide. The limits of outsourcing need, nevertheless, to be understood. As one interviewee remarked:

"…we cannot provide services to the government at a cheap price if we are doing it for them… The real problem is a lack of resources, but the need is out there and we have to cover it…" (A senior member of staff.)

Accountability is primarily seen in economic rather than social terms. Interviewees seemed to argue that this has generated a technocratic culture that values targets, performance measures and task completion. *"… Today we have all become puppets of a strategy. We have lost the human element and have witnessed a reduction of intellectual capacity… The consequence is a weaker leadership." (A senior manager.)*

An IRC volunteer helps a migrant just arrived in Lampedusa.
Photo: Marco Alpozzi/IRC

The interviews suggest that this important trend has affected the character of leadership in organisations like the IRC: the entire voluntary and humanitarian sector has been pushed into being more task-focused than people-focused, causing many organisations to struggle with problems of goal displacement.

Representational leadership

Over a number of years, the volunteer base of the IRC changed: whereas originally most volunteers were from the elite, the majority are now working class. This has affected the IRC's leadership, and (positively and negatively) its capacity to represent the IRC's membership. Some interviewees were reserved about the overall impact of this trend.

"… Broadening the volunteer base and reaching out to different layers of society has diluted what used to be the elite… A positive dilution in my view, because this made the

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Planning together at provincial level. Photo: Daniele Aloisi/IRC

IRC more representative over the years. But at the same time this process produced a less educated and competent leadership, more focused on tasks than substance and policy...” (A senior manager.)

One might question, however, whether less education equals less competence and less ability to lead. Changes in its internal situation therefore altered attitudes inside the IRC and pushed it in the direction of reform. The IRC's formal leaders (especially those at national level) have shown a strong capacity to relate to the organisation's many dynamics, create homogeneity, and assemble the elements of an organisation that is rooted in a variety of values and exercises many forms of accountability.

Context often drives individuals' choices. Choices that start as a personal vision or conviction become, in the course of interaction, reflection and support, more representative. This was a testing process for committed members of the IRC:

“... I had to expose myself... I visited the committees, talked to people... Mastering relational and social dy-

namics was key... I had faith in the new idea and was loyal to it...” (The national president.)

This effort to represent the new social dynamics of the organisation, internally and in public, formed a new kind of leadership that in turn created the need for structural changes. These included reconfiguration of the deeply entrenched volunteer system – described by some interviewees as a 'historic' change.

Before the reform, the IRC was a fragmented body, because power was spread across six separate components, each of which had significant resources. As one interviewee remarked:

“...these components had autonomous financial resources, autonomous disciplinary methods, approved their own budgets within their areas of responsibility, and independently of the committee nominally charged with their actions... They were only accountable to themselves... They could propose and dispose as they wanted, ignoring the political will of the organisation...” (A senior volunteer)

It was necessary to create a unified volunteer system that would be able to understand and analyse needs on the ground, and respond coherently to them.

This challenge required strong leadership from above that could represent the volunteers, provide a vision, and take clear positions, while reform of the IRC's constitution proceeded.

The IRC's transition from public entity to voluntary association meant that the leadership also had to reframe all the staff employment contracts, since, until the reform, staff had been civil servants.

Trades unions challenged and at times obstructed this process.

"… Trade unions have been against the privatisation… Not all staff understand the strategies, policies and dynamics… The IRC had become a bureaucratic elephant…"

"… Trade unions have been influencing and at times nurturing the internal conflict. Not only that, but the normative system in Italy did not facilitate the task either…"

Neither of these views takes a trade union perspective: they nevertheless indicate the potential significance of their interventions in the IRC's change process. Leadership had to show a capacity to represent staff and volunteers fairly, to juggle with the motivations of both, to show empathy but also provide clear direction. This sometimes required drastic measures: to become 'representative', leaders needed to empower themselves, to be empowered.

Empowered leadership: the president-volunteers

Most of those interviewed for this study were volunteers. This was true of all presidents, from national to local level. Presidents are elected because they represent the volunteers. In these terms, they are empowered, and given legitimacy and authority, to act on the organisation's behalf.

The reform process has shaped a new role for presidents, which they are now expected to play. It is one that has increased their accountability; and, because systems and capacities are not sufficiently in place to help them manage, there is some sense of abandonment. Interviewees recognised the personal exposure and vulnerability:

"… Before (the reform), (the presidents) were supported by civil servants for administrative matters. Not any more… And there are no systems in place, as in a private (firm), to ensure control and accountability…" (A senior official)

Annual meeting of committee presidents. Photo: Daniele Aloisi/IRC

"… In some locations, moving from public to private opens the door to criminal infiltration. Why would a president who is a volunteer take that personal risk?" (A senior staff)

Presidents are primarily coordinators; they are not necessarily financial administrators. To make the system function well, it is crucial to establish clear roles and responsibilities, not necessarily add to the hierarchy.

Clarity can be achieved by agreeing a direction and shared frameworks, allowing supervision and control to be managed by peers, rather than hierarchically. Some interviewees suggested that the president could be replaced by an executive body, which could better represent the IRC's diverse roles and functions, and could establish a form of shared accountability.

At present, the system is largely monocratic (led by single presidents at national, regional, provincial, and local levels of the organisation). This is described as a temporary measure to allow the reform process to proceed and achieve its goal, namely full privatisation of the organisation. However, monocratic leadership has limitations.

"… Presidents carry everything on their shoulders. They have legal responsibilities and no boards to support them…This is not appropriate for a complex organisation like the IRC…" (A senior volunteer)

The role also remains somewhat ambiguous, because presidents are responsible for both governance and management in their own committees (except at na-

tional level, where the two roles have been clearly distinguished by the creation of a National President and a Director General). Some interviewees considered that this is unsustainable and inadequate.

"… The responsibility is huge. We need a different system, where governance and management are clearly separated… Maybe we should introduce the role of administrator, partly remunerated, like in the American Red Cross… We need to find the right model…" (A volunteer, provincial committee)

Despite these challenges, the new leadership is generally trusted.

"… I have faith in the new generation of presidents, even if they don't have the managerial capacity that we might want… We could have provided better training, but did not have time or the instruments to do it…" (A senior manager)

Individual and organisational capacity needs to be strengthened.

Structured leadership[10] is perceived to facilitate decision-making. It requires shared frameworks and methodologies, and coherent management of projects, needs assessments, and resources. In the judgment of one interviewee, the IRC could ultimately run itself effectively without titular leadership.

"… We can work without a formal leader. The presidents' and delegates' hierarchy is not as formal as it looks. We have created a structure to distribute roles and responsibilities…The leader does not have a supervision function… He could be replaced by an executive body…" (A volunteer, local committee)

It is widely agreed that the new structure that is gradually emerging enables the IRC to do more with less.

"… Today I have less money but I run more activities. Before, costs were more of a structural nature… (This is) a sign that we are making savings." (A volunteer, local committee)

Patterns of leadership during the reform period

Interviewees generally agreed that reform had been unavoidable, and that the IRC was experiencing an identity crisis, exacerbated by a financial crisis.

As noted earlier, the government's initial intervention had been triggered by financial concerns, that were in turn due to its internal power dynamics, which gen-

erated conflicting demands and territorial competition. However, the demands for independence and ownership came from the volunteers.

If historical features of the IRC's organisation lay beneath its identity crisis, problems of sustainability triggered the change process. To recover relevance and recognition, domestically and internationally, each part of the organisation needed to surrender ground. This undoubtedly painful process created many obstacles and tensions for the new leadership appointed in 2012.

"… (The Commissioner, subsequently the president) had to deal with a list of critical issues of 300 pages, in bullet points… IRC had not approved its budget since 2003 and was working like a cashier, spending only what was available in the bank account…" (A senior manager)

Transparent leadership: the importance of communication

Communication was a central issue of debate within the IRC, especially during moments of organisational turmoil. Interviewees reported that, when the message and the goal are clear, people remain confident in the underlying intent and rightness of change, and change is therefore easier to cope with. Conversely, false statements or half-truths, whether intended or not, sow confusion and tension.

Interviewees suggested that effective leaders can create unity when opinion is fragmented, and integrate groups who have formed silos. By showing empathy and understanding, and being transparent and committed, IRC leaders propelled an attitudinal shift that helped the organisation to emerge from potential chaos and find new and shared ways of working.

Transparent leaders know their organisations from within and understand the perspectives of those who keep the organisation alive. They make hard choices, communicate them clearly, and stand by them – even at the cost of popularity or reputational damage. Remarking on the actions of one leader, an interviewee highlighted the ethical courage and persistence that was required.

"…He was asked to do the dirty job. It was not easy to gain support but he did… He's a great model, not afraid of losing face…" (A senior staff member)

Interviews also highlighted the quality of openness, and the value of social networks. While volunteers were generally happy to have direct access to their

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10 *One that is based on pre-defined frameworks, with identified roles and responsibilities.*

Annual gathering in Solferino – talking about the reforms. Photo: Daniele Aloisi/IRC

leaders, the organisation has had to deal with problems of distortion and reputational risk. The IRC's ability to be receptive to diverse views and perspectives on issues of relevance is deemed to be of paramount importance.

> *"… The use of social networks favours communication with the base, but we need to listen even more and through other channels." (A senior volunteer, regional committee)*

Attitudes and behaviours change through communication. Leaders who coherently communicate a consistent message reduce fear, which is the enemy of change, and create a climate in which people remain motivated and productive.

Emergency leadership patterns

An emergency is commonly defined as an unforeseen combination of circumstances, or its result, that calls for immediate action. In this sense, a situation of organisational turmoil can be likened to an emergency. It is not easy to determine whether the IRC's crisis has peaked. It can be said, however, that a form of emergency leadership emerged, capable of driving the reform process – or alternatively (in the words of one interviewee) that:

> *"Change happened because one man was in command. No boards. And this was necessary because, if you have boards during periods of crisis, all decisions are contested and you go nowhere." (A senior manager)*

During the IRC's crisis, a monocratic system appeared to work better, reliant on informal forms of consultation and participation, in which influencers could support or boycott the leader's vision.

Conflicts sometimes reflected individual interests but very often honest concerns for the organisation and its personnel.

> *"…If we are public, our cost is higher. If we are private we have to become competitive, earn less. Some salaries may be reduced by up to 40 per cent, which is a huge loss for a family budget…" (A senior official)*

Another interviewee focused on the IRC's long term organisational capacity.

> *"… It is hard to imagine how the IRC will sustain its current operational capacity, an emergency system in which 20,000 people are ready to be deployed at any time. We are autonomous in times of emergency, but tomorrow?" (A senior official)*

Many felt that privatisation was the only way to achieve competitiveness.

"… If the IRC is losing ground it is because our labour costs are too high and unsustainable… We have accumulated the rights and benefits typical of a public administration, and we are not competitive in the voluntary sector…" (A senior manager)

Conversely, a significant proportion of interviewees believed the reforms imposed too high a price on individuals. Arguments in favour of privatisation did not weigh heavily with those who saw only that the IRC would lose its unique and protected mandate.

"…It will be difficult to justify the use of emergency funding to maintain the infrastructure, instead of using it to provide relief to affected people. How can a private institution guarantee and maintain such an infrastructure in periods when it is not being used?" (A senior official)

Crisis also tends to prompt a sense of denial in those who are affected, often until it is too late to react. In organisational terms, effective leaders in a crisis are able to see what needs to be done and can convince their colleagues of the need to act urgently and together.

The IRC's reforms have undoubtedly shaken old power relationships. Though reconstruction and recovery are long processes, it seems clear that most of the actions taken have helped to rebuild the organisation in a more sustainable form. The current structure is leaner, and delegates are able to exert upward influence. Are these arrangements substantially different from the old regime? Contradictory answers were given to this question, but all respondents acknowledged the effort that has been made to work in a more integrated, holistic manner.

Many interviewees felt that no proper assessment has yet been made of the IRC's capacity to operate as a private association at local and provincial level. Not all presidents are equipped (in terms of systems, capacities, or skills) to guarantee transparency and accountability. One interviewee noted:

"… Volunteers pushed for this reform… There was a desire to free themselves from administrative and bureaucratic constrains… book-keeping, accounting… Now presidents are responsible for these aspects as well… Is this really what they wanted?" (A senior staff)

IRC Emergency infrastructure. Photo: IRC

Volunteer search & rescue teams at the Umbria earthquake, Abruzzo. Photo: IRC

Democratic leadership will eventually need to be reintroduced when stability has been restored. The general view remains, nevertheless, that decision-making must be effective, even if this sometimes means adopting coercive methods.

Transformational leadership patterns

Many of those interviewed concurred that the IRC is experiencing dramatic change – activity, empowerment, experiment, networking, maybe even chaos – but not paralysis. They feel things are moving, even if the extent to which deep-set attitudes have shifted is not yet fully evident.

The researcher observed that change was more visible from outside than from within the IRC. For example, one respondent remarked that relationships have profoundly improved between the IRC and the civil protection system.

"…Before the reform, the IRC was seen as operating in isolation, using its independence as an excuse to stay out of the coordination system. This was a handicap. During the response to the earthquake in Umbria, the IRC started to get more involved in multi-player strategic decisions, showing its capacity to play a critical role while maintaining its autonomy, but benefiting from synergies with other bodies…" (A senior official, external)

Leaders have played a key role in repositioning the IRC as a credible player.

"…The IRC's identity is changing… not just an ambulance service in people's minds, but far more than that…" (A senior official, external)

According to another interviewee, its reputation is improving.

"… The IRC is not only seen as a group of volunteers 'doing stuff' but as an organised institution where volunteers are the reflection of a shared mission, an organisation that is capable of building a relationship of trust with its citizens… It was not always like that for the IRC…" (A senior official, external)

One key is the evolution of the IRC's auxiliary role with respect to government. The auxiliary role is appropriate when the IRC supports government action in specific cases (for example, in providing services to arriving migrants). When it delivers social services to the community, by contrast, the IRC is in competition with other players and must cope with market forces.

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Leadership in transition: the experience of the Italian Red Cross 2005-2014 What leadership roles and practices were crucial?

One solution would be to find competition-free spaces, where the IRC could offer 'new' activities that other actors are not able or willing to provide. Interviewees felt this option would cause the IRC to drop certain activities with which it has historically been associated, a potentially painful process of adjustment that might nevertheless lead to a more appropriate and relevant mix of programmes.

"… We need to stop running ambulance services and get our hands dirty, go where there is suffering. Needs are changing… but the challenge is consensus, external image, things we may lose if we start caring for those on the margins of society…" (A senior manager)

"… We need to move away from a provincial and puritan approach and start looking at reality and address it with appropriate programmes, with no sense of shame…" (A volunteer, provincial committee)

IRC volunteers help the most vulnerable. Photo: IRC

This requires the IRC to make a strategic choice. It would need to answer the question asked by one volunteer: "Where is the Red Cross needed most today?"

The IRC can also increase its advocacy role, notably to press for certification, minimum standards, and services of guaranteed quality. The IRC is perceived in the country to be a public body, because for years it has complemented the official health system and delivered community services. Many interviewees felt that the IRC's reputation for delivering quality services should not be put at risk or lost as a result of privatisation.

The challenge will be to remain needs-driven (not finance-driven), and find a balance between income-generating activities and humanitarian service. Interviewees believed such a balance may be difficult to achieve.

Young IRC volunteers run an awareness raising campaign. Photo: IRC

"…Not everyone understands what going private means. Some committees are now run like private businesses where only the economic dimension matters…" (Volunteer, local committee)

Maintaining a dialogue with volunteers who know the situation on the ground will be essential if the right balance is to be maintained.

Internally, the change process has created a more structured organisation in which roles and responsibilities are more clearly defined, and a stronger sense of shared mission and identity. Unifying the voluntary spirit of association has been the real victory.

Transformation continues. Volunteers must fulfil a new profile, in which values and skills come together, in which motivation is accompanied by a sense of responsibility and accountability. Volunteers are seen as the transformational leaders of the organisation, who can influence policy and practice and take the organisation in a more sustainable direction. It is not the changed legal status of the organisation that has transformed attitudes and working practices but a *learning by doing* process, composed of numerous collective actions aligned to common goals. In this new organisational environment, delegates are central, because they are the catalysts of change.

A number of informants believed that local committees have more power and autonomy than some realise. By contrast, they believe the central committee needs to change further in order to remain relevant.

"… I don't see abandonment in this new form of empowerment. If we close the central committee today, most likely the local committee of, let's say Pordenone,[11] will notice it only after 6 months… What is our added value as a central committee? Many of these

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11 *A city in the north of Italy.*

committees already walk on their own… Does the central committee want to play a coordinating role?…" (A senior manager)

One risk is that a confederation of committees will come to marginalise the authority of the central power structure, reducing the organisation's sense of common identity.

Internally, privatisation required the IRC to deal with several structural and constitutional questions. Difficult issues have included changes to employment contracts and conditions as IRC staff were transformed from civil servants to independent employees; and resolving the position of military auxiliary bodies which, under Italian law, cannot be part of a private association.

Leaders at the top of the organisation decided to focus on what they called the IRC's core activities and competences. They took a long-term approach that replaced old structures gradually and reinforced those that were most relevant.

Many interviewees believed that full privatisation (up and down the committee system[12]) should be the aim, not something in between. This question touches on the IRC's identity, image, and reputation, as well as public perceptions, all of which have an impact on the organisation and its delivery of services.

The new leadership has demonstrated vision and gained the trust of staff partly because it clearly separated governance from management roles and responsibilities at national level. This created a mutual interdependence between the two functions: in an arrangement of mutual accountability, one informs and reports to the other and vice versa. However, this has still to cascade down to regional, provincial and local committees.

Many interviewees affirmed that the leadership style of the current national president was vital in driving reform. He emphasised order and structure but involved people and built consensus because his approach was honest and loyal.

"…He had the right tools and instruments to succeed. He made it happen because he took the right decisions, was inclusive but firm and exposed himself." (A senior manager)

"…He was personally involved, built general consensus. People could see his loyalty to the organisation… Although many people lost their jobs… people knew he was doing it for the good of the organisation." (A senior volunteer, regional committee)

The national president is perceived as a transformational leader who has succeeded in guiding the organisation to safe ground. Critical issues still need to be addressed but the institution's vulnerability has been greatly reduced.

"… The process has just started but we see more serenity. Anyway, the IRC has never depended very much on its formal leadership. The IRC is strong at its base, it has coverage and proximity…" (A senior volunteer, regional committee)

Predictably, nevertheless, some still have doubts.

"… The IRC is not ready to walk by itself… We need to be more present… a clear mandate…" (A senior staff member)

"If [the president] leaves, we are not ready to replace him with a person of the same calibre… He has shown energy, firmness, courage… He has openly condemned unethical behaviours… We need to transfer these characteristics to other people somehow…" (A senior volunteer, central committee)

To conclude, it is no doubt too early to say whether the reform is delivering its promises – to attract more young volunteers, to become competitive, and to deliver services sustainably. But institutional outcomes, and the outcomes for staff, seem to indicate that the chosen path is one that can be defended.

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12 *As this report was written, only local and provincial committees had private legal status.*

3. Conclusions

The research conducted for this case study suggests that, in the context of voluntary organisations, effective leaders:

• Have vision, inspire and provide direction.
• Are able to promote social change.
• Can read their environment, make use of the right tools, and exert influence in the right contexts.
• Adopt participatory, cross-boundary approaches that generate trust.
• Value collaborative, integrated and holistic ways of working.
• Adopt democratic models, based on consultation and delegation of authority.
• Focus on behavioural change.
• Are more people-oriented than task-oriented.
• Empower others but support them.
• Are ethical in their conduct; have personal integrity, are honest.
• Have wisdom.
• Have undergone a personal development process, so that their leadership is rooted in life experience.

In addition and specifically during times of crisis:
• Are able to act rapidly, handle decision-making pressure, and innovate.
• Highlight purposes that drive action and reconnect others to a common mission and goal.

The research also indicated that effectiveness is increased when leadership is exercised at different levels in an organisation, often independently of any formal title or authority.

Inclusive, empowering and directive leadership

The impulse and vision for organisational change in the IRC started among the volunteers. They detected the system's inefficiencies and the IRC's lack of independence, and pressed for change and empowerment. For a long time, the IRC's formal leadership does not appear to have shared the perception of volunteers. This was partly because the organisation had several centres of authority; many leaders had overlapping lines of accountability and different institutional interests, which created conditions in which the IRC was semi-paralysed for years.

Initiative Andrea, launched by IRC volunteers to fight discrimination and promote diversity. Photo: Diego Stellino/IRC

The president could not have initiated or pushed through a reform process alone, had volunteers not been agitating for change. Both before and after the reform, forms of 'invisible leadership' (Murphy, 1988) were critical, even if the new president played a decisive role because he was able to represent the base and frame a vision that it recognised. The president's personal style enabled him to build the conditions required to initiate reform. The formal leader was therefore instrumental in building the competences, systems and culture that made it possible for the organisation to take a different path (Nadler & Tushman, 1990).

The convergence of volunteer values and beliefs with those of the president gave the reforms legitimacy,

and encouraged volunteers to support them. In this sense, the leader's authenticity, his willingness to put his values into practice, generated the organisational commitment that was necessary (George, Sims, McLean, Mayer, 2007; Bennis and Thomas, 2002).

Interestingly, the formal leadership adopted different leadership approaches to external and internal challenges. Externally, it was pressed to be accountable (in relation to external institutions) and show value for money. Internally, it was pressed to reform systems and structures. To its credit, the new leadership was able to use the external pressure to develop a response to the internal pressure. Shifting from passive to active mode, it modified the organisation's behaviour to meet external demands and even took advantage of them.

The IRC's leadership played a central role in generating consensus, demonstrating the importance of mastering policy-driven dynamics and multi-disciplinary environments (Gibney & Murie, 2008). The IRC's experience also showed that drastic measures are sometimes needed to implement reform successfully. Leadership could exert effective influence, however, because its efforts were supported by external factors (official institutions, economic recession, etc.).

New ideas to reduce the impact of crises. Photo: Enrica Del Bianco/IRC

The research also revealed the importance of delegation and shared leadership. Delegates were crucial vehicles, carrying ideas that were essential to achieving organisational reform. Being volunteers themselves, they knew how to talk to volunteers. This demonstrates the vital importance of relational networks in a system. It enabled different layers of the IRC to interact, find agreement, and exercise peer-influence (Gibney & Murie, 2008). Delegates were key communicators and therefore catalysts of change.

Delegates personify the democratic model, versus the monocratic model still in place at president-level. They represent a field of activity but remain people-oriented because they depend on their colleagues to achieve the goals they set. The delegating approach emphasises collective performance and interpersonal relations, rather than self-assertion (Blunt & Jones, 1996).

Both formal and informal leaders showed transformational leadership. The IRC could have failed, given the scale of its crisis, if conditions for change had not been conducive. Those who led and influenced the reform, at all levels of the organisation, understood this and demonstrated a capacity to provide consistent direction and, to a large extent, pathways to reach the goals they set.

The national president (himself a volunteer, not a staff member) was able to personify an ideal RC leader. However, what made the model apparently successful was that followers found the motivation to change in themselves, and this is what led them to adopt the reforms. This confirms that transformational leadership is not unconditionally successful: followers subscribe to major change if they are personally convinced that the expected outcome will bring benefits (Bellé, 2014).

Transformational leadership was itself influenced by emergency leadership, which emphasises the capacity to take risks and make quick decisions under pressure, but reduces the extent of participation. Though drastic measures were sometimes taken at moments of adversity, however, those in formal positions of authority remained directive, inclusive and empowering. This made their decision-making more acceptable.

Clarity of purpose was essential for both staff and volunteers. People who are values-driven attach importance to the purpose of their efforts and to what they believe in; these purposes must be explicit and worthwhile (Kempster, Jackson & Conroy, 2011). Interviewees often mentioned that ambiguity was the enemy of reform. At the same time, they appreciated very highly their leaders' commitment to make the IRC more relevant and sustainable. People value determined and purposeful effort, and do not necessarily require a successful outcome (Rashid, Edmondson & Leonard, 2013).

Trust is intrinsically linked to ethics and can only be generated by leaders who show they are ready to share the same risks as their followers (Piper, 2012).

Leadership as a process and result of personal development

Many interviewees described leadership as a process of personal development – for them and others. This is not a 'one model fits all' notion; it values responses that people find in themselves. The individual's capacity to overcome hard times and build his or her resilience was often described as the core ingredient of effective leadership.

Roles must be interpreted. Authenticity and a capacity to relate and interact honestly and openly with others permit effective leaders to find the balance between 'playing a role' and 'being themselves'. They are able to establish an appropriate distance between the 'role' they allocate to themselves and the role that others allocate to them.

On this reading, human and social skills are at least as important as professional competence in effective leaders. Their understanding of the human dimension of organisational, administrative or normative systems is crucial. This is particularly important at times of organisational change: leaders working in stressed organisations must possess a high degree of empathy.

The ideal RC leader is the result of a personal development process. A leader can match his or her capacity to involve and motivate with an ability to take difficult positions that generate opposition. Integrity is essential, if leaders are to act in a manner that is consistent both with their organisation's principles and their own values.

Ideal Red Cross leaders are therefore values-driven, build unity and consent, and give a voice to others, without compromising the neutrality and impartiality of the organisation. They can read the environment and create conditions in which people around them develop and achieve, and becoming the protagonists in a collective story. The IRC's experience suggests that RC leaders must represent the organisation with honesty, transparency and pragmatism. The collective good must be more important to them than personal goals.

The contemporary Red Cross leader must balance strong values and principles with sound management. Management requires a more technocratic orientation, which may conflict with an identity that is values-driven. Leaders of voluntary organisations are currently being pushed towards a technocratic model

Francesco Rocca, IRC President, in Syria (visiting a school together with SARC volunteers in Zahira, Damascus). Photo: Ibrahim Malla/IRC

of conduct, to the detriment of values and policies, and balancing these two demands can be a continuing source of internal conflict. Red Cross leaders therefore need to possess an (unusual) combination of humility, competence, expertise and institutional knowledge.

Leadership theory tends to focus on the person, rather than the task, and affirms that a leader's capacity to build relevant networks is crucial. It is through networks that leaders build consensus and resolve more informal and emotional issues, where position and formal authority have less effect or relevance. Those who can create and manage networks enjoy great influence.

As one informant observed, the Red Cross leader is often a 'prophet without arms'. He must inspire, convince colleagues to follow, but has few means or resources to impose his views or recommendations. At the core of his leadership is recognition, trust, and a principled approach to action. It is not sufficient to manage the day, for growth is what will make the organisation sustainable. Organisational growth is the

result of clear purpose that leaders make explicit and incarnate, by creating inclusiveness and mutual trust and acting in a personally responsible manner.

Challenges ahead and recommendations

When this research took place, the IRC's reforms were not completed. A number of challenges still had to be addressed by its leadership.

First, communication was seen as an area that required continuous attention. Nurturing an engaged dialogue with stakeholders is vital because it is the best way to clarify the objectives of reform. Those in senior positions should use all channels, formal and informal, to communicate a consistent message.

Second, tensions between staff and volunteers need to be addressed. IRC senior officials should identify opportunities to help staff and volunteers feel they belong to one unique organisation. One suggestion is to organise (sooner rather than later) a national conference at which representatives of both groups can voice their concerns and find common solutions. Though discussions have taken place, no national gathering has occurred and it would be welcomed. Informal and formal leaders should facilitate this process by allowing staff and volunteers to share their experience and perceptions, learn from one another, and appreciate the complementary contribution that each makes to the Red Cross.

Third, it will be important to strengthen the skills of the new generation of presidents, who must manage new and demanding accountability requirements. One suggestion is that senior managers should identify appropriate training courses. For example, the Learning Platform[13] managed by the IFRC offers interactive online courses, face-to face training information, and various social learning tools (communities of practice, forums, etc.) to volunteers and staff of National Societies.

Alternatively, the IRC might create a knowledge sharing platform. Presidents could share best practices, ideas and concerns in an informal but structured space. Peer-support among presidents, and exchanges with other National Societies who have been through change processes, could be elements of this learning model.

Finally, interviewee feedback suggests that it may prove helpful to complement the current governance arrangements with consultative boards, which would support presidents and committees. Many interviewees recommended this democratic approach, and suggested that it should be introduced as soon as the current reforms have been completed and the IRC has stabilised.

Limitations and future directions

This study has explored leadership patterns in a voluntary organisation and the notion of effective leadership in such organisations.

The subject is a complex one and further research can only be beneficial. The study's primary finding is that formal positions matter, because they carry legitimacy. Even among volunteers, the delegates who are officially elected to coordinate a given activity have a 'position'. Their formal standing nevertheless matters less, because what takes the organisation forward on a given path is its collective dynamic, shaped by those who are actively engaged in the organisation's life and activities, whether or not they have a formal status.

A limitation of this research is that it focused on one organisation, whose experience may not be fully transferable to other forms of voluntary organisation or other contexts.

Additionally, the researcher was only able to study trends and attitudes at central committee level and in local and regional committees in the north of Italy. Had committees from the South been part of the sample, the findings might have been different. (Hearsay suggests, for example, that both coverage and service delivery are more challenging in the South.)

The research did not consider whether the characteristics of effective leadership can be acquired or learned, or are innate or the product of experience. This document should be read as a case study, which we hope can be used by learning programmes on leadership.

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13 *The Learning Platform. At:* *https://ifrc.csod.com/client/ifrc/default.aspx.*

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Annex A: Summary of explored leadership models and theories

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Theory/model: *Traits of leadership*	
Description	Extensively explored during the 20th century. Takes the position that leaders are born with specific personal characteristics, such as charisma
Limitations	Leaders are not born with personal traits that can be clearly distinguished and replicated. The identified characteristics of leadership are also disputable. Other identified 'traits' include authenticity, humility (Level-5) and personal resilience, which are more the result of personal growth and mindfulness.
Relevance to dissertation context	Relevant identified traits include authenticity, humility (Level-5) and personal resilience. Leadership effectiveness appears to be more the result of life experience, of adaptation and processes of personal development.
References	Bass, 1960; Bird, 1940; Stogdill, 1948, 1974; Collins, 2005; George, Sims, Mayer, 2007; Bennis & Thomas, 2002; Kim & Hays, 2010; Armstrong, 2012.

Theory/model: *Situational leadership*	
Description	Proposed during the late 1960s as an alternative to the 'traits model'. It attributes leadership success or failure to more or less favourable conditions in a given situation. It therefore admits that leaders can learn and develop appropriate skills for different situations.
Limitations	It cannot predict what forms of leadership are most effective in a given situation and is not easily replicable.
Relevance to dissertation context	Limited relevance because leadership effectiveness does not seem to be the result of applying specific skills to a given situation.
References	Hoy & Miskel, 1987.

Theory/model: *Contextual leadership*	
Description	Puts context (inside organisations and their evolving environment) at the centre of leadership. What matters are the attributes, competences and experience of individual leaders and their capacity to read environments and use the tools and forms of influence that work in their context.
Limitations	This model still focuses on the individual leader and her ability to fit in or influence a given context. While requiring skills of a more participatory nature, the model has to be set in a wider cultural space in which context is one aspect. Limitations may result from low cultural sensibility.
Relevance to dissertation context	The model is useful in periods of organisational change and for dealing with global environments, because it depicts leaders as outward-looking and multi-skilled persons.
References	Macris, 2006; Hailey & James, 2004.

Theory/model: *Civic leadership*

Description	Concept introduced by P. Drucker (1973) and traditionally attributing civil society leadership to specific sectors (e.g. Social and voluntary sectors). Leaders of those sectors act as facilitators, conveners and catalysts of change.
Limitations	The concept appears to be limited to a certain type of context and sector and not broadly replicable.
Relevance to dissertation context	Leadership is associated with the capacity to influence social change and matters of public utility and concern, where the capacity to influence is detached from position and authority.
References	Drucker, 1973; Chrislip & O'Malley, 2013.

Theory/model: *Leadership of place*

Description	Model proposed by Gibney and Murie (2008) and putting contextual and environmental dynamics at the centre of leadership. Leadership approaches have to fit to policy-driven, long-term and vision-led, multi-layers and multi-disciplinary environments (a municipality, a region, but also normative-based institutions). It is more participatory and based on collaborative efforts.
Limitations	Not easy to apply as it requires an organisational capacity to lead without formal power, to maintain commitment over long periods of time and make things work through the use of networks and relations. It may not fit to a situation of crisis (identity crisis, organisational change).
Relevance to dissertation context	Leadership effectiveness seen as the result of a participatory, cross-boundary and trust-driven approach, where collaborative, integrated and holistic ways of working are valued.
References	Gibney & Murie, 2008.

Theory/model: *Emergency or crisis leadership*

Description	Model applicable to situations of crisis, both of operational and organisational nature. It requires a capacity to act rapidly, address tensions between short-term and long-term objectives, handle decision-making pressure and show innovation.
Limitations	The model would appear more successful if a directive or more coercive style is applied. In this sense, it can only be applied for limited periods of time as it would tend to create demotivation and a sense of exclusiveness in the long run.
Relevance to dissertation context	Relevant to periods of organisational change, where there is a need to break failed business habits and create a situation of chaos where new ways of working emerge and where empowerment is balanced with control and boundary settings.
References	Leuneburger & Goleman, 2010; Clarke, 2010 (ALNAP); Goleman, 2000; Hailey & James, 2004; Rashid, Edmondson & Leonard, 2013.

Theory/model: *Shared leadership*	
Description	Model introduced to move away from the individual leader concept, hence seen as more democratic. It implies a relational system in place where influence can be exerted through networks, teams, independent from authority or position. Key characteristics of these leaders are the ability to act as facilitators, be inclusive and less directional.
Limitations	When the model is intended as "shared power" it may have little applicability in non-Western culture contexts where power-distance is higher. It may also fail if overused, as would generate poor decision-making, perceived lack of leadership, lack of control and loss of authority. In periods of crisis, the model may add ambiguity and confusion, hence fail because nobody is "in charge".
Relevance to dissertation context	A democratic model that would fit the context of a voluntary-based organisation, because consultation, delegation of authority and democratic and participatory approaches are valued.
References	Slater & Doig, 1988; Murphy 1988; Gibney & Murie, 2008; Clarke, 2010; Blunt & Jones, 1996; Faraci, Lock & Wheeler, 2013.

Theory/model: *Transformational leadership*	
Description	A model focusing on behavioural change, more people-oriented than task-oriented. Specific characteristics and skills are usually expected from the individual transformational leader, such as a capacity to role-model, to be inspired and inspirational, to provide direction and the means for fulfilling it, to empower without abandoning, and at the same time improvise and adapt.
Limitations	Not unconditionally successful as followers must find the motivation within themselves to adhere to the proposed transformation and this requires their involvement and engagement in life / professional experiences which convince them of the benefit of their changed behaviours.
Relevance to dissertation context	Relevant to periods of organisational change in principles-based and value-driven organisations, where leaders' behaviour and styles are expected to be less aversive, and more directive and empowering,
References	Duck, 2002; Kotter, 2007; Kim & Hays, 2010; Pearce & Sims, 2002; Bellé, 2014.

Theory/model: *Leadership as purpose*	
Description	Model emphasising purpose as an essential aspect of leadership, where purpose is identified as a search for "internal good". Leaders who position purpose at the heart of their work, also demonstrate personal integrity, honesty and wisdom.
Limitations	When purpose is implicit it can lead to negative results and impact. The purpose of a leader may not match with followers' purposes.
Relevance to dissertation context	People working in voluntary sectors are expected to be driven by a worthy purpose, often of an altruistic nature. Adherence to a meaningful goal is what drives the sector.
References	Kempster, Jackson & Conroy, 2011; Marta, Guglielmetti & Pozzi, 2006; Acquadro Maran & Soro, 2010; Costa, Ramus & Andreaus, 2011.

Theory/model: *Ethical leadership*	
Description	Not so much a new model in itself as ethical elements are found under other leadership models mentioned above. Because virtue – an Aristotelian ethical conception – and values are seen as key to this type of leadership, ethical leaders would tend to adopt a more "serving" style in their relationships with others.
Limitations	To adopt unconditional ethical behaviours is challenging. It requires the willingness to stand by what deserves attention and not to fear potential isolation.
Relevance to dissertation context	Relevant to govern partnerships in the voluntary sector, where what matters are business behaviours based on trust and openness, not bargaining; relevant to periods of organisational change where qualities such as honesty, integrity and wisdom are key to building trust; helps organisations manage identity crises of goal-displacement where it is important to reconnect to a common mission and goal.
References	Harris, 2000; Kempster, Jackson & Conroy, 2011; Kim & Hays, 2010, Broussine & Miller, 2005.

The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

Humanity The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

Impartiality It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

Neutrality In order to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

Independence The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

Voluntary service It is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.

Unity There can be only one Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.

Universality The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.

In May 2005, the Italian Red Cross revised its statutes. It ceased to operate as a public entity in the Italian public sector, financially dependent on the Italian government, and took the first steps towards becoming a voluntary association, financially independent of government.

Managing such deep organisational change has required a high level of formal and informal leadership in the organisation. This case study examines the complex challenges of leading a membership-based voluntary organisation through a period of profound external and internal change.

In doing so it reveals many forms of leadership, active at all levels of the Society, and shows how leadership roles and patterns evolved and interacted with other aspects of organisational change.

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