

Internal Resilience in Humanitarian Organizations: A Conversation with Harold Brooks

Global Resilience Institute
at Northeastern University

by Kathleen Fleischauer, July 2021

When discussing humanitarian work in resilience, we often think about disaster recovery efforts or development projects taking place across the globe. Humanitarian organizations and first responders are on the front lines of this work. Organizations that are more resilient are more capable of consistently delivering services and typically respond more effectively to traumatic or stressful events. So then how can we expect these organizations to help build global resilience if they are not resilient themselves? An expert in disaster response, Harold Brooks, who served as Senior Vice President of International Operations for the American Red Cross' International Services Department, CEO of the American Red Cross Bay Area Chapter, and is one of the Global Resilience Institute's Distinguished Senior Fellows, offers insight into how an organization that helps build resilience externally can also maintain internal resilience.

Resilience begins at the individual level. For humanitarian organizations such as the Red Cross, these individuals include staff and volunteers. For Brooks, a resilient individual "has to believe they can regenerate themselves to be what they need to be under the changing circumstances." In other words, humanitarian staff and volunteers are resilient by being prepared, adaptable, and assured that they will be able to handle the shock and strain that come from witnessing traumatic events. This begs the question, are humanitarian workers just born with the necessary personal qualities that help them be more resilient in this field? How effective can an organization and its leadership be in building individual resilience? According to Brooks, humanitarian workers do tend to have a "passion for compassion" that helps them be more resilient in the face of experiencing shock or witnessing traumatic events. However, simply assuming and expecting that humanitarian workers will be inherently resilient greatly risks an organization's ability to be effective in a crisis.

It is essential that the leaders of humanitarian organizations make an effort to create an organizational culture that fosters resilience among its staff and volunteers. These include individuals who are relied upon to sift through the rubble after deadly disasters, enter dangerous and unpredictable areas in order to deliver life-saving services, and support communities in the wake of mass casualty events. To ensure that humanitarian workers can continue to carry out this important work, it is critical that there exists an organizational culture in which they feel supported by their leaders and peers alike. For example, Brooks discusses the importance of humanitarian organizations having Protection, Gender, and Inclusion (PGI) Officers and psychosocial support (PSS) staff working internally. PGI Officers are specially trained to handle cases of harassment, inequality, and violence, and are vital in creating a safe space for individuals to discuss sensitive or troubling issues. Similarly, PSS staff provide essential mental health support services to staff and volunteers, offering them a critical emotional outlet where they can talk. Individuals may talk about their experiences, difficulties, emotions – whatever it may be that helps them decompress. These resources help contribute to an organizational culture in which individuals feel supported and valued. This in turn allows humanitarian workers to be more adaptable, self-assured, and ultimately, resilient. According to Brooks, people are the most important asset of a humanitarian organization. It is extremely important that they are supported in ways that reflect this fact.

In addition to supporting individuals, another important role of leadership in building internal resilience is motivating individuals. Humanitarian organizations, like all nonprofit organizations, are mission driven. Those that work and volunteer for these kinds of organizations do so for more than just material gain. For instance, Brooks recalls the inspiring "call to action" that his staff and volunteers felt, which brought them to work for the Red Cross. Particularly referencing his experience in disaster response and recovery, Brooks discusses the relationship between this higher "call to action" and a "pure adrenaline driven response." Are these motivations mutually exclusive or can one not exist without the other (at least in disaster response)? Does one reflect an approach that is more or less resilient?

Having spent years involved in both emergency response and disaster recovery, Brooks understands that both approaches are valuable among humanitarian workers. It is up to organizational leaders to recognize these motivators as reflections of what individuals value in humanitarian work. What someone may see as an adrenaline-junkie chasing emergencies, a strong organizational leader will recognize as an individual who is driven by the pure satisfaction of being there to help. Those individuals more interested in post-disaster recovery are not more or less resilient, but they find satisfaction in long-term projects that likely have less immediate results. Recognizing what motivates humanitarian workers is essential to creating an organizational culture that fosters resilience. The ability to bounce back is greatly influenced by a personal belief that this “bounceback” will provide a sense of satisfaction and sense of purpose. Therefore, humanitarian organization leaders can help build internal resilience by recognizing what motivates their staff and volunteers. What do they value? What do they consider a call to action?

The chief executive or leader of an organization can have enormous influence on the resilience of an organization. Effective leadership is a cornerstone in turning individual resilience into institutional resilience. But what makes an effective leader? According to Brooks, “the most effective leaders teach, rather than control.” Effective leaders should have a “great set of values and teachable point of view” that their teams can emulate to establish a strong and supportive organizational culture. Attempting to establish control without recognizing what motivates and satisfies teams, or what they value, can squash resilience by prohibiting individuals from feeling supported and self-assured in their roles. Rather, teaching teams (as well as being open to learning from team members) about helpful strategies, resources, and experiences in humanitarian work helps to establish internal resilience within an organization.

Of course, strong infrastructure, internal systems, security, and other more structural aspects of an organization are also important in establishing internal resilience. However, as Brooks reiterates, it is the people who are an organization’s most valuable asset, and it is individual resilience that sets the foundation for an organization’s internal resilience. In the case of humanitarian work, this is especially important to recognize as these kinds of organizations are relied upon to establish resilience among vulnerable populations, communities, and societies across the globe. The degree to which humanitarian organizations are successful in this mission is greatly dependent on the individual resilience of staff and volunteers.

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About GRI

Launched in 2017 with the approval of Northeastern University’s Board of Trustees, the Global Resilience Institute (GRI) is the world’s first university-wide institute to respond to the resilience imperative. Today, GRI undertakes multi-disciplinary resilience research and education efforts that draws on the latest findings from network science, health sciences, coastal and urban sustainability, engineering, cybersecurity and privacy, social and behavioral sciences, public policy, urban affairs, business, law, game design, architecture, and geospatial analysis.