Coordination skills, methods and good practices

Key points

- Treat all sector and cluster colleagues as allies.
- Never assume that your preferred approach to data gathering, analysis or decision-making is necessarily shared by others.
- Do not take conflict or resistance personally, rather as part of a consensus-building process.
- Take time to get to know individuals and organizations that are critical for your coordination.
- Use your active listening skills, always and more than you would like. Let others talk while you identify opportunities and incentives and effectively coordinate.

1. Overview

In the context of emergencies, ‘coordination’ is the act of bringing organizations under a common protection and solutions strategy to work together in clusters and sectors to deliver protection and services effectively to persons of concern. However, coordination competencies and skills are more broadly applicable and also of great value to UNHCR in non-emergency situations. This Entry gives a snapshot of core coordination skills.

These skills not only improve coordination but are critical to general operational management and management of internal and external projects, change, and conflict resolution.

2. Main guidance
Underlying policies, principles and/or standards

A good place to start is De Bono's description of 'the coordinator':

The co-ordinator is a person-oriented leader. This person is trusting, accepting, dominant and is committed to team goals and objectives. The co-ordinator is a positive thinker who approves of goal attainment, struggle and effort in others. The co-ordinator is someone tolerant enough always to listen to others, but strong enough to reject their advice. For more on Professor De Bono's work on team roles: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Team_Role_Inventories

Committed to team goals and objectives, notably effective protection and delivery of services to persons of concern, the coordinator helps identify and formulate realistic objectives for the sector or cluster, and puts in place processes to reach them. Some of these processes are discussed below because they are key tools of successful coordination.

Secondly, a coordinator listens well: she is able to explore positions, identify underlying interests, search out opportunities to reach goals, work trustfully with sector and cluster peers, and chart a course of action that reconciles competing agenda and objectives.

What you think works may not always work for others.
Remembering this truism is the first step in accommodating other participants and working towards full and effective inclusion. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator offers a useful entry point for understanding and managing differences of preference, notably in the way we absorb information and the way we make decisions - two important aspects of sector and cluster work. For more on Myers-Briggs Type Indicator: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myers-Briggs_Type_Indicator

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator distinguishes (without value judgement) those who prefer data and detail from those who prefer structures and patterns. In meetings (and coordination communication in general), a coordinator needs to accommodate both, regardless of her own preferences. The second group will lose interest in prolonged discussion of data, while the first group will find ‘big picture’ conversations too abstract. In reality both are necessary to good decision making. You need to take the cluster or sector partners through the data and then move on to trends and opportunities to which the data give rise.

With respect to decision making, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator distinguishes (again without value judgement) those who take an objective and detached approach from those who focus on values and people. A coordinator needs to accommodate both to ensure that all stay involved and engaged.

Your role as coordinator is to design your data gathering and decision making processes in a manner that accommodates different preferences, while ensuring that progress occurs and decisions are taken.
Good practice recommendations

Coordination is a process

Coordination is best imagined as a series of parallel and interdependent processes (data is transformed into analysis that informs decision making that delivers more effective services).

Process is important for a number of reasons. It obliges a coordinator to think in terms of inputs and outputs; and it reminds the coordinator that she designs and facilitates them. Consider an everyday ‘coordination meeting’: a process perspective forces the coordinator to ask:

- What do I need to make this meeting deliver its output?
- Who needs to be present?
- How do I manage the meeting to ensure that the output is achieved?
- How does the output from this meeting feed into the next (phase of the) process?

The coordinator's role is to ask questions. (Do we really need this meeting? Are the right organizations and individuals involved in this consultation? Does this evaluation need to be reconfigured to achieve its objectives? Can we apply the output of this needs assessment to decisions we must make about food assistance or WASH programming?)

As a coordinator your point of departure must always be that the sector or cluster is populated by allies, individuals who may prove critical in taking the agenda forward.

Coordination meetings
Meetings are a critical aspect of coordination, provided you plan them in order to add value.

As noted, it is important to ask ‘Is this meeting really needed?’ Meetings serve many purposes at different times in an emergency, from pure information sharing (mostly at the onset) to analysis and decision making. They are also costly, in time, in money, and in terms of activities foregone. Consider a meeting involving 40 participants; it lasts 2 hours; participants travel for another two hours to attend it. Four working weeks have vanished. As a coordinator, your duty is to maximise the quality of meetings, ensuring they add value. This is why cluster and sector members attend them.

To prepare for effective meetings, it helps to think concretely in terms of before, during, and after the meeting.

Surprisingly, most of the coordinator's time investment actually lies up-front i.e. before a meeting. As investment in meeting stakeholders before a meeting, ensuring that all are ready and that the right individuals are present for effective decision making etc. The book ‘Making Meetings Work’ (Forsyth, 1996) lists a number of very practical things to remember:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before</th>
<th>During</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Is the meeting really necessary?</td>
<td>1. Ensure that the right person is chairing. (It is not necessarily you or the most senior person.) In general, pick the person who is best at chairing meetings.</td>
<td>1. Share decisions as agreed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Prepare and share the agenda in advance.</td>
<td>2. Respect the agenda's timetable. Keep within the time allocated to each topic.</td>
<td>2. Follow-up with one-on-one meetings as appropriate.</td>
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<td>3. Ensure that participants understand the purpose of the agenda. (Are you meeting to share information or take decisions?)</td>
<td>3. Manage disruptions and interruptions.</td>
<td>3. Facilitate consultation about the next agenda and restart the cycle.</td>
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<td>4. Manage the meeting environment. (For example, rotate chairs and note-taking.)</td>
<td>4. Ensure that all those who need or want to participate are given an opportunity to do so.</td>
<td>4. Do not be afraid to postpone or cancel a meeting if it is not seen to add value.</td>
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<td>5. Ensure that key participants understand their role beforehand, and that doubts or concerns have been settled in advance.</td>
<td>5. Work hard to enforce or develop effective ground rules for meetings.</td>
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**Decision making**

**Advanced Facilitation Skills** (Bens, 2005) provides useful advice on the variety of decision-making tools that are available. As coordinator, your role is to suggest and identify the best decision-making tool for each issue that needs a decision. Decision making is a continuum - from majority voting to consensus building via compromise.

Decisions by majority are rarely suitable in a cluster or sector context. Compromise is often seen to be the optimum (or default) approach by coordinators but it often leaves all parties unsatisfied - including persons of concern.

The best strategy - is consensus building. When this works, it can help broaden the understanding of the problem at hand and by extension of the possible solutions. It often leads to better decisions with more ownership and better relationship building. Consensus building, however, takes longer but should be used to the maximum by the cluster or sector coordinator and in particular when the issue or ownership of the decision is important. It requires continuous investment of time from the coordinator in understanding and exploring bilateral needs as a basis for more sustainable decision-making.

**Influencing**

As a coordinator your point of departure must always be that the sector or cluster is populated with allies. As you have no direct authority to tell cluster or sector participants what to do, you need to apply your influencing skills to move the agenda forward.

The following model depicts influencing as a conversation that involves both self-awareness and relationships. Overall, it is based on reciprocity or exchange of things of value (‘currencies’).

Things that are valued could include recognition, or the need to be seen to lead a process. The coordinator’s key skill is to identify what is important to different participants, meet their needs wherever possible, and encourage trading in order to advance the cluster’s or sector’s agenda.

Active listening is the critical skill in this process. After clarifying her own goals, the coordinator explores the interests of other participants, by asking open-ended questions and listening attentively to the answers. The important point is that this approach gives the coordinator access to numerous incentives. For example, she can:

- Assign leadership of technical working groups, task forces, or advisory bodies.
- Publicly acknowledge particular efforts, contributions or initiatives.
- Co-share national or sub-national bodies, taskforces or working groups.
- Create win-win outcomes for organizations, projects, or funding decisions.
- Involve individuals or organizations in working groups and taskforces.
When you begin to think in terms of incentives, you become aware of many leverage points that you can deploy to advance a group’s collective agenda.

3. Links

Humanitarian response UNHCR Data website

4. Main contacts

UNHCR Global Learning Center (GLC):

- Joel Nielsen at: Nielsenj@unhcr.org.
- Peter Kessler at: Kessler@unhcr.org.