

# Enacting Humanitarian Culture: How Technical Communication Facilitates Successful Humanitarian Work

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** Technical communicators should look beyond for-profit industry to develop a fuller understanding of how technical communication can support, enable, and constitute successful work practices. To illustrate, we report a subset of findings regarding how technical and professional communication supports successful humanitarian work.

**Method:** We conducted a three-phase longitudinal study of an international humanitarian organization. In Phases 1 and 2, we conducted phone/Skype interviews with 25 practitioners, a group including international, regional, national, and local levels of the organization. In Phase 3, we engaged in ethnographic observation of work practices in six countries and conducted a total of 95 additional interviews (in person) with humanitarian practitioners.

**Results:** Communication plays an important role in the success of practitioners' day-to-day work when that communication pursues goals relevant to humanitarian culture, such as showing respect for local ways of operating. Specifically, our findings show that enacting humanitarian culture led practitioners to (a) localize how they speak, (b) collaboratively produce written documents, and (c) encourage bottom-up organizational communication.

**Conclusion:** We found that while many of our field's skills and areas of expertise carried over to humanitarian environments, the values and motivations associated with humanitarian culture are what influenced the effective application of these skills and are, therefore, key to the effectiveness of communication. In particular, fine-grained localization and empowerment at the lowest level are central to professional communication that supports successful humanitarian work.

**Keywords:** humanitarian organizations, organizational culture, workplace study of practice

## Practitioner's Takeaway:

- Takeaways can be summarized in a two-pronged implication: (a) many important skills and considerations of our field—such as localization, audience analysis, and collaboration—are necessary for successful humanitarian work, and (b) to support successful humanitarian work, the application of these skills and considerations must be undergirded by values and motivations congruent with humanitarian culture.
- Communicative practices, often more than communication products, are key to successful humanitarian work. For example, the utility of project management documents was not only—in fact, not primarily—in the content of the documents but in the process of creating them.

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### Introduction

The predominantly narrow context of technical communication—business environments—is insufficient for framing the role and influence of our work (Agboka, 2013; Blyler, 2004; Ding & Savage, 2013; Durão, 2013; Jones, Savage, & Yu, 2014). To develop a fuller understanding of how technical communication supports, enables, and constitutes successful work practices, we should look beyond for-profit industry to examine the role of technical communication in a wider range of contexts: for example, advocacy organizations (e.g., Jones, 2014), international development projects (e.g., Dysart-Gale, Pitula, & Radhakrishnan, 2011; Walton, 2013), extra-institutional contexts (e.g., Ding, 2009; Kimball, 2006), and, as we argue here, humanitarian organizations. Offering an alternative to technical communication's traditionally business-centric focus, humanitarian organizations serve as an important subset of the broader category of nonprofit organizations.

Although rarely featured as sites of technical communication practice and research, humanitarian organizations are representative of a broader scope of nonprofit work in which organizational values, culturally appropriate power structures, cross-cultural communication, and moral considerations play especially central roles. Humanitarian work supports a mission initiated by the Red Cross in the late 1800s to alleviate suffering during armed conflict (American Red Cross, 2011). The objectives of humanitarian action have since expanded to include disaster prevention and recovery efforts: “to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity during and in the aftermath of man-made crises and natural disasters, as well as to prevent and strengthen preparedness for the occurrence of such situations” (Good Humanitarian Donorship, 2003, p. 3). The number of humanitarian workers worldwide has grown to approximately 274,000. About 4,400 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) consistently engage in humanitarian work, with United Nations humanitarian agencies, Red Cross and Red Crescent national societies, and a small group of large, well-established international NGOs receiving the majority of funds and leading the implementation of efforts on the ground (Taylor et al., 2012). There is an increasing global importance of humanitarian

work and, therefore, expanding sites of practice and research for technical communicators whose expertise can support this work. Further, some issues of growing importance in our own field—such as participatory approaches to localization (Getto, 2014; Sun, 2013) and preserving human dignity through professional communication (Agboka, 2013; Dura, Singhal, & Elias, 2013)—have long been a central focus for humanitarian organizations. Thus, each field has expertise to share with the other.

Illustrating the value of studying technical communication in humanitarian contexts, we present a subset of findings from our three-phase research study “Valuing what works: Success factors in disaster preparedness,” which was collaboratively planned and conducted over an 18-month period with an international humanitarian organization (Mays, Walton, Lemos, & Haselkorn, 2014). The larger research study covers a full spectrum of successful practices in disaster preparedness, whereas this paper focuses on the implications of that study for (a) design and use of successful communicative practices and (b) the field of technical communication. Among other things, we found that bottom-up power structures and highly localized communication are key to supporting successful practice. The technical communication facilitating these humanitarian practitioners' work—e.g., illustrations of proper hygiene practices, building plans for temporary shelters, and training materials for engaging with community members—are adapted based on these factors of fine-grained localization and empowerment at the lowest level. We share these findings particularly for the benefit of technical communicators who “seek other sites of practice outside of business and industry, where technical communication practitioners who are committed to promoting human rights and social justice in the development and uses of technologies might be more effective” (Jones et al., 2014, pp. 146–147).<sup>1</sup> With growing interest in nonprofit sites of technical communication (Ding & Savage, 2013; Jones et al., 2014; Walton, 2013), practitioners, researchers, and instructors need more research-based recommendations to inform practice specifically within these sites.

<sup>1</sup> Although the findings of our study may be valuable to some degree in for-profit business contexts, those contexts are not the focus of this article. The potential research benefits described to participants as part of the IRB-approved informed consent process specified that we sought to fill a research gap related to an understanding of humanitarian practice. In sharing outcomes and implications of the study, we seek to support and promote humanitarian practice.

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Organizational culture is “the set of artifacts, values, and assumptions that emerge from the interactions of organizational members” (Keyton, 2010, p. 1). Thus, organizational culture is collective but is enacted by individuals comprising the organization (Hofstede, 1998; Keyton, 2010) and therefore observable and inferable from their actions, including communicative actions (Hofstede, 1993; Thatcher, 2012). Language both influences and replicates values (Miller, 1979; Rude, 2004), and this dual role of language has implications for improving the work of organizations (Jones, 2014). For technical communicators to conduct research in nonprofit organizations that improves the work of those organizations and amplifies the agency of vulnerable people, we must better understand nonprofit organizational culture.

Distinctions between for-profit and nonprofit organizations can be understood partially by the different legal frameworks that have been built to define them and from which their respective cultures are partly derived. For example, U.S. law obligates businesses to maximize profits for shareholders—making profit the central organizational goal—while other value systems play secondary roles in these organizations (Lane, 2015). In contrast, nonprofit organizations are legally obligated to be “obedient” to their mission (Lane, 2015). By law their financial resources must support their mission and are specifically restricted from supporting profit (Lane, 2015; Salamon, 1999). The humanitarian culture, in particular, provides a clear contrast between for-profit business and nonprofit organizational values and objectives and, hence, ways of operating and communicating. These differences are represented in distinct, specific legal guidelines. Where businesses are legally accountable for creating profits for shareholders, humanitarian work is specifically beholden to (a) international humanitarian law; (b) the humanitarian charter upholding the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, and impartiality; and (c) the Code of Conduct of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief<sup>2</sup> (Advisory Service, 2004; Code of Conduct, 1994; Humanitarian

Charter, n.d.). These distinct legal foundations reflect very different organizational values and objectives (e.g., maintaining a code of conduct rather than maintaining profit), organizational structures (e.g., flat hierarchies or a bottom-up, decision-making authority), and constraints (e.g., constrained more by the means than the ends in organizational practice) (Chambers, 1997; Mays, Racadio, & Gugerty, 2012; Walton, Mays, & Haselkorn, 2011).

Nonprofit organizations’ central accountability to value other than profit, and therefore different overall work objectives, can be seen at all levels of evaluation. For example, business environments focus on discreet end products and services, often measuring performance by cost and task efficiencies. In contrast, nonprofit work is primarily focused on process (i.e., meeting the mission while maintaining a moral code) and the factors central to defining success are complex, interrelated, dynamic, and human centric (Mays et al., 2012). Quantifiable measures are not only difficult to come by but may be irrelevant to organizationally appropriate views of success (Tomasini & Wasenhove, 2009; Walton et al., 2011). Where humanitarian work interprets success in terms of inclusive transactions of participation, learning, and empowerment of communities in decision-making and planning, for-profit work measures success in transactions of money exchange. These core differences necessarily give rise to vastly different organizational support and communication systems that cannot be understood without replacing assumptions rooted in for-profit organizational values with values appropriate for the organization being studied. Therefore, technical communication practices that are implicitly based on the values and practices of for-profit business can be unfriendly toward, and inhibited from, serving nonprofit work.

Humanitarian agencies tend to organize work around a *preparedness* component and a *response* component, although these are highly interrelated (Mays, Walton, & Savino, 2013). Relevant to technical communication in these organizations, the evolving practice of community based disaster risk response (CBDRR) approaches within humanitarian work reflects a drive to support lowest-level empowerment through participatory methods and localized, contextualized communications:

2 This professional code was developed by eight of the world’s largest disaster response agencies and does not solely apply to the Red Cross. As of January 2016, 602 organizations were signatories of this professional code. (See [http://www.ifrc.org/Global/Documents/Secretariat/Code%20of%20Conduct%20UPDATED\\_JANUARY%202016.pdf](http://www.ifrc.org/Global/Documents/Secretariat/Code%20of%20Conduct%20UPDATED_JANUARY%202016.pdf))

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Top-down policies have largely failed to prevent the occurrence of disasters, thus prompting practitioners supported by some social scientists to suggest an alternative, bottom-up framework for reducing disaster risk. CBDRR fosters the participation of vulnerable communities in both the evaluation of risk and in ways to reduce it. CBDRR empowers communities with self-developed and culturally, socially and economically acceptable ways of coping with natural hazards. (Gaillard & Mercer, 2013, p. 97)

The participatory, bottom-up approach of CBDRR aligns with the work of Robert Chambers, a leader in advancing NGO practices since the mid-1990s. Chambers works to educate and influence practice toward greater realization of values central to humanitarians by drawing visibility to the inappropriateness and ineffectiveness of top-down approaches:

Human relationships can be seen as patterned by dominance and subordination, with people as uppers and lowers. Uppers experience and construct their realities and seek to transfer these to lowers... in normal top-down, centre-outwards development, new technology is developed in central places by uppers and transferred to peripheral lowers...normal professionalism, teaching, careers, bureaucracy help to explain errors in development, but not fully how and why they persist so long without uppers learning. (1997, p. 56)

In other words, when technology—and, we would argue, communication—does not recognize and reinforce power of lowest-level decision makers through localized methods and tools, it does not support successful humanitarian work but rather contributes to a pattern of “errors in development” (p. 56). We believe that technical communicators whose practice is informed by the values of humanitarian organizations (see Code of Conduct, 1994) would be well-positioned to help advance past this repeated failure in learning.

The importance and impact of these values and practices in disaster preparedness can be seen more readily when the work transitions into the response component (which is supported by preparedness work). This component of humanitarian work is characterized

by an environment of uncertainty; emerging/ad hoc, inter-cultural, and cross-organizational networks; and highly dynamic and incomplete information. For example, Walton et al. (2011) linked the success of humanitarian logistics operations to work systems that uphold these values, evidencing the central roles of localized solutions, communication, and lowest-level control of decision-making for humanitarian logisticians. A deeper understanding of communication in humanitarian work is vital for improved practice. Technical communication could play an important role in developing this understanding—but only if our research and practice moves beyond traditional, business-oriented assumptions about how work is most effectively accomplished. One key strategy for moving beyond these assumptions and facilitating a culturally informed understanding is to include members on the research team with insider and outsider perspectives of humanitarian organizations. For example, in the research reported here, Mays, a practitioner-researcher and humanitarian insider, played a key role in recognizing and explaining cultural norms, while Walton and Haselkorn, research scholars and humanitarian outsiders, could make explicit the implicit, shared assumptions of humanitarian culture.

### Method

Our research study investigated on-the-ground practice within an international humanitarian organization in partnership with a center newly formed to support disaster preparedness work across the organization. Before launching into support activities, the center first wanted to understand what successful practices were already being enacted by practitioners. Their approach to supporting practitioners avoids common problems that emerge when organizations develop tools, technologies, and other resources with a “disregard for the ways in which people organise their work, coupled with a disdain for the ordinary resources on which they rely” (Heath & Luff, 2001, p. 3). This is especially important in humanitarian work environments, in which the primary mission to meet local needs takes precedence over organizational systems. When there is a mismatch between local conditions and organizationally standardized processes and tools, adapting to local conditions is necessarily prioritized to meet humanitarian central values, such as those laid out in the

Humanitarian Charter (n.d.) and the Code of Conduct of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief (1994). For example, participants described altering the architectural, standard house plan for a community member with an eye condition. Because bright light impedes her sight, her home was built without the standard window so as to better meet her needs and to honor a commitment to the humanitarian imperative to take action “to prevent or alleviate human suffering arising out of disaster or conflict, and that nothing should override this principle” (Humanitarian Charter, n.d., para. 1).

When mismatches between local needs and standardized approaches occur, important elements of successful humanitarian work can be hidden from what Chambers (1997) called the *upper* organizational knowledge. Present in any type of organization, hidden work is especially central to the success of humanitarian organizations with their flat or reversed hierarchical structures. Elements of successful work occur where *lower* decision-making leads the upper organizational support and often resides within implicit expertise, informal relationships, unstructured communication, informal social networks, and unwritten work practices (Walton, Mays, & Haselkorn, 2016). Our full research study aimed to make these factors explicit, observing and distilling practitioners’ perspectives and work practices, ultimately revealing what strong humanitarian practitioners value and how those values shape and inform their day-to-day work. In this paper, we report a subset of findings especially relevant to technical communication: three of the ways that humanitarian practitioners enacted successful work through communicative practices.

### Phases 1 & 2: Scoping

The research study was approved by the University of Washington IRB (human subjects application #44762) and was conducted in three phases. The first two phases involved six months of scoping in preparation for ethnographic field research in Phase 3. During Phases 1 and 2, we conducted 25 semi-structured interviews of approximately one hour by phone and Skype. Participants included preparedness practitioners from 19 countries, representing all major levels of the organization: international, regional, national, and local levels. We engaged in purposive sampling by asking

each participant to identify additional countries or practitioners in the humanitarian organization whom they knew were doing good disaster preparedness work; participants were also asked to describe successful work and the factors affecting good preparedness. Thus, the definition of success informing our research emerged directly from experts identified by their peers as particularly strong disaster preparedness practitioners. Similarly, the Phase 3 research questions and selection criteria for potential field sites were directly guided by patterns that emerged from open coding the Phase 1 and 2 data. This research approach, which acknowledged the expertise of research participants and deferred to them in naming and defining the issues of focus, is congruent with Blyler’s (2004) call to decentralize research authority and make space for a more active role for participants. It is compatible with participatory perspectives of research authority that relinquish the fiction that all relevant authority resides with researchers (Mumby, 1993), that acknowledge participants’ authority to name issues that emerge in research (McLaren, 1991), and that share with—even defer to—participants the ownership of research questions (Smith, 1997).

### Phase 3: Fieldwork

In Phase 3, we conducted two-week research visits to six countries that had been named for doing good preparedness work and that were representative of key attributes identified by Phase 1 and 2 participants as relevant to preparedness programming. In Phase 3, we conducted a total of 95 additional interviews with humanitarian practitioners at the lowest organizational levels and engaged in ethnographic observation of work practices. To reduce the risk of coercion and to create a safe environment for participants to share their perspectives, all data were anonymized upon transcription, and quotes are not labeled with identifying information. To analyze the Phase 3 data, we used a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to identify patterns in the data, patterns common across practitioner experiences. We open-coded transcripts (i.e., inductively identified patterns, per Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011) to determine themes for a focused-coding scheme. The coding process included both humanitarian insider and outsider perspectives, with at least one coder who had humanitarian experience and one coder who was a qualitative researcher who participated in the in-person

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interview. Six student-researchers were also trained to conduct focused coding, iteratively analyzing meanings and connections among patterns that emerged across countries. For the humanitarian center that invited our research study, we produced a report overviewing our major findings relevant to a humanitarian audience (Mays et al., 2014). In this paper, we present a more in-depth discussion of technical communication elements of three of the findings named in the report as “speaking with cultural competence,” “creating clarity of roles,” and “structuring for flexibility.” In the Results section below, we present expanded examples, quotes, and descriptions from the data to illustrate the relevance of these findings to technical communication and the relevance of technical communication to successful humanitarian work.

### Results

Communication plays an important role in the success of practitioners’ day-to-day work. We found that communicative practices upheld goals relevant to humanitarian culture, such as showing respect for local ways of operating and encouraging the participation and decision-making of local communities. These goals led practitioners to (a) localize how they speak, (b) collaboratively produce written documents, and (c) encourage bottom-up organizational communication.

#### Localizing how to speak

Localization has long been recognized as relevant to technical communication. Though often linked with language translation (e.g., Maylath & Thrush, 2000; St. Germaine-McDaniel, 2010; Walmer, 1999), technical communication scholars have also investigated the localization of academic programs (Ding, 2010), technology design (Sun, 2012), and infrastructure (Getto, 2014). Relevant to humanitarian environments is an emphasis on participatory approaches with communities that operates at a more fine-grained level than that of national culture (e.g. Agboka, 2013; Getto, 2014; Sun, 2012). In investigating factors that contribute to successful humanitarian practice, we learned that fine-grained localization is motivated and designed by values congruent with humanitarian organizational culture, as illustrated by the interview quotes below:

It is about the technique we use to approach people. You know, when you have to deal with people, you need to be honest. You need to be a responsible person, respectful, and to know that the people that you are going to meet are people who are different from you. So you need to accept them, listen to them, be patient, all of these.

It is about how to approach to people, since the time you say hello, to know how to listen to them, a very careful approach to the families.

Professional communication is classically concerned with audience analysis and rhetorical strategies crafted to resonate with specific audiences. And, as illustrated in the above quotes, this concern is central to the professional communication of humanitarian organizations as well. But what makes humanitarian communication distinct is the core humanitarian obligation to uphold human dignity (see “right to life with dignity” in the Humanitarian Charter, n.d.). Successful humanitarian communication is intentionally and centrally undergirded by the humanitarian mission to support the right to human dignity. For this communication to facilitate successful disaster preparedness work, it must be informed by the organization’s central humanitarian goals and values. Participants explained that even the timing of communication is relevant: for example, visiting communities early in the morning before people begin working in the fields and avoiding scheduling community meetings when people are likely to be hungry and therefore less engaged.

Practitioners emphasized that it is not just techniques that are important but the underlying mission of human dignity that make these techniques effective. This reflection of humanitarian values in the design of humanitarian work and the communication facilitating it is notable for technical communicators entering these organizations as sites of research or practice because it suggests important specific considerations of what makes localization effective. A wide range of considerations can inform appropriate localization practices (Agboka, 2013; Getto, 2014; Sun, 2012), and organizational values are key considerations in humanitarian contexts. Humanitarian practitioners emphasized word choice, nonverbal cues, indirect

approaches to difficult topics, and explicit connections to issues of concern for individual community members.

**Word choice** Regarding word choice, practitioners said that they show respect by using local terms and language that could be readily understandable by community members:

The language is also very important. We don't use a very technical language. So it is not like we are the professionals and they are the community, but it is a peer-to-peer approach.

If you use the term "malaria" in the community, people will look at you as if you were an alien. But if you use the term "paludisme," they will understand you.

In the field of technical communication, we are keenly aware of the importance of word choice in making communication audience appropriate. But our focus has typically been on making technical communication easily understood so that the audience can take quicker, more efficient action and does not get frustrated or confused. While understandability is also relevant in humanitarian environments, we see here that using easily understood words appropriate to the local community is also an important way to reflect humanitarian values of promoting dignity and respect, values that are central to facilitating successful work.

**Nonverbal cues** Strong practitioners have developed an advanced understanding of the importance of localizing how they speak, drawing from a variety of experiences and sources including those outside of the humanitarian organization, but, organizationally, this importance is much less known. We see an important role here for technical communication in amplifying the organizational visibility of localized communicative practices. Many strong practitioners described explicitly addressing how to speak when they themselves train new humanitarian practitioners. For example, one practitioner said that when he trains health education volunteers, he instructs volunteers to pay attention to community members' body language as a way to gauge the appropriateness of their own communication. Similarly, another practitioner said that he teaches new humanitarian practitioners how to ask, how to listen, and how to show respect when speaking with community members:

When you are assessing, you have to listen, teach them [new humanitarian practitioners] how to listen and how to pick the right information, how to ask. At times when I go to those communities, . . . someone gives you a seat. They sit down on the mat, and if you want the information, you have to be like them. If they give you a mat, then you sit on the mat. Be calm. Show them that you're like them. That's when they give you information.

Another trainer described role-playing activities that he facilitated with volunteers to help them pay attention to how they speak:

After training the volunteer, we give him the data collection [interview] techniques. We then try to make a simulation. We choose one volunteer to play the role of the interviewer, and the other volunteers play the role of the community. The interviewer then comes and performs the interview in front of everybody. In the meanwhile, some will be noting down the strong and weak points of the interview. Everything is followed-up: the way he talks, the way he looks at people, the way he is dressed, his mastery of the text—did he stick to the text or did he twist some parts. These are some examples. Once the interview is over, he will first do a self-evaluation before the other observers give their point of view. These role-playing games are notation criteria and when a volunteer gets good grades, it means he is well trained and will bring back good results when we send him on the field.

The above two quotes explicitly connect communicative practice and effective humanitarian work. For humanitarian practitioners to, for example, collect important information from community members, those practitioners should not only "stick to the text" but dress appropriately, look at people in an appropriate way, and speak in an appropriate way. These aspects of training for successful practice illustrate what it looks like to teach technical communication-relevant skills to new representatives of the humanitarian organization, empowering them to engage in some of the fine-grained localization of communication that characterizes humanitarian culture.

**Indirect approaches** Many practitioners said that how they approach people was at least as important as

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what they said, especially when broaching topics that could be sensitive. For example, one practitioner told a story of volunteers who approached a local butcher who did not follow sanitary practices. The volunteers were blunt and direct, saying that his business was suffering because of the unsanitary practices, and the butcher ran them off, waving his knife. The information may have been accurate, but the communication was counter-productive. Other practitioners described positive examples of broaching sensitive topics, such as how to inquire about whether community members' children had lice or how to instruct women in the proper use of sanitary products without embarrassing or offending them. Practitioners described coming at these topics in a roundabout way after building rapport with individuals by chatting about related but innocuous topics such as the number and age of children the community member has and whether she plans to have additional children.

**Connection to community priorities** The broader collection of research findings indicated that as practitioners develop relationships with communities, these personal connections inform their ability to localize how they speak to communities (Mays et al., 2014). Their communication helps to develop and strengthen a sense of oneness—a process that Burke called identification (1969). Identification is centrally facilitated by communication, particularly spoken words in combination with nonverbal communication like gestures and underlying factors like attitude or motivation (Burke, 1969). Using this combination of communicative factors, practitioners align their communication, as well as themselves and their work, with the community, deferring to its ways and interests. This identification of practitioner communication and the work it facilitates with a community is important for successful practice in humanitarian environments.

### Collaboratively developing written documents

Humanitarian work is highly collaborative, particularly between humanitarian practitioners at the local level and community members but also involving government actors and partners such as other nonprofit organizations. These stakeholder groups, including local communities and the humanitarian organization itself, are not monoliths but are comprised of disparate subgroups and individuals, creating a complex

collaborative environment for humanitarian work. Research within the humanitarian and international development fields has focused on developing more effective ways to work with communities, with a strong emphasis on participatory methods. A communicative practice key to successful participatory work is “creating clarity of roles” among the full range of stakeholders (Mays et al., 2014, p. 15). To achieve this clarity, practitioners facilitate the collaborative development of written plans, projects, and contracts. In creating these documents, successful practitioners facilitate the tedious and explicit defining of each party's responsibilities—responsibilities that are mutually agreed upon by the community, partners, government, and the humanitarian organization:

It is all about knowing your role and accept it and division of labor.... Another factor is the involvement and participation of all stakeholders, of sharing the responsibilities across [stakeholders] has been a critical issue.

The above quote shows the importance of sharing responsibilities across stakeholder groups. Also key is mutually deciding upon the responsibilities and creating a record of who is doing what. For example, one participant described “as a matter of pride for us” being asked to coordinate a collaborative workshop involving the chiefs of government offices, police, army, community members, and other stakeholders. In this workshop, the group defined roles for each stakeholder, carefully creating a written record of mutually agreed upon responsibilities. It is an arduous and time-consuming process to collaboratively develop written agreements that are directed by the community's priorities and decisions, but the effort is imperative for building community trust:

We have managed to gain community trust as the Red Cross, you know? We are always there when a disaster happens, and we've also initiated what we call beneficiary accountability. Previously, we'd only account to those who give us the funds and we'd ignore those we seek to serve, you know? But now [there is] the fact that we engage the communities themselves to identify the areas of project implementation. And it was a very intense, it was a very intense exercise.



Engaging in these intense exercises of collaborative planning and accountability creates mechanisms for shared transparency and decision-making with communities, principles important to humanitarian organizations. For example, practitioners described using a community-driven assessment process to develop action plans that were very detailed, including each step involved in, for example, building a water tank, with an entry for each step designating who is responsible. We observed team and community meetings in which practitioners facilitated agreement among disparate stakeholders by leading the whole group, line by line, through written documents intended to express clear and mutual agreement. Other written communication that facilitated humanitarian work included contracts, in which volunteers and project partners would ratify and personally declare their commitment to their roles as part of the group. This written record, collaboratively created in the presence of all stakeholder groups and signed by them, is pivotal for mutually clarifying roles. These signed agreements are valuable not only for planning work but also for sustaining it because the written agreements can be consulted at a later time to hold parties accountable. In fact, when asked about what they did when people did not follow through on their agreed-upon tasks, practitioners referenced the collaboratively developed written records and said that because the roles are clarified and written down, it is rare for parties not to follow through. In some cases, external factors, such as unavailability of a certain material like concrete, may delay stakeholders from fulfilling their duties, but the written documentation helps to prevent complete disengagement.

Practitioners expressed the need for stronger organization skills and attention to detail to engage in communicative practices that would create a shared written record to clarify parties' roles. Moving forward, developing and maintaining records and reports requires keen administration skills to sustain projects over the long term. To build community capacity to sustain this work, some practitioners trained community members—those who had been nominated by the community to form a project action committee as well as members of the broader community—in how to develop records and reports for themselves:

We got community representatives in each, trained them on how to write reports and recordkeeping,

you know, just basic skills, leadership roles, you know? And also trained the wider community on what risk reduction is all about, how can they participate in risk reduction. And for me, I think that has been the reason why, besides the usual being the first on site when a disaster happens, I think that has also helped gain their trust in us.

In other words, when professional communication is designed to support humanitarian objectives such as community empowerment, it facilitates successful work in disaster risk reduction. Organizational values prompted practitioners not only to collaboratively develop written documents but to train community members in technical communication skills like developing records and reports to facilitate project management. The documents that communities produce facilitate collaboration with local government groups who receive copies of these reports so that community risk reduction plans can be incorporated into local government plans. Again, we see that communication developed in accordance with humanitarian values facilitates successful work in disaster risk reduction. Underlying this strategy of involving the many community stakeholders in developing the written plans is the recognition that they each have valuable contributions to make:

We tell them to draw the action plan, the community action plan, which they own. It's drawn by them. We only support them in facilitating, and we're just guiding them. But the ideas are theirs.

In summary, written documentation plays a key role in facilitating humanitarian work in part because this documentation is developed according to work practices congruent with humanitarian culture—participatory processes focusing on mutual agreement and accountability as opposed to top-down direction. The development of this documentation provides a forum for collaborative decision-making and expresses respect for the authority and capacities of all parties to make valuable contributions to the proposed work. And when practitioners model relevant skills in professional communication and project management and then train community members in those skills, they facilitate successful work over the long term by building community capacities.


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### Encouraging bottom-up internal communication

Whereas the first two findings describe communicative practices between humanitarian practitioners and stakeholders, such as community members and government agencies, the third finding relates to communicative practice within the organization itself. Internal organizational communication is a promising area for contributions by technical communicators who understand humanitarian culture and the centrality of its values to effective bottom-up communication and organizational decision-making. This contribution is especially important in the current environment, in which much academic work that seeks to inform nonprofit organizational communication and practice ascribes to inappropriate business values and models (Chambers, 1997; Mays et al., 2012). Practitioners described internal communication that is key to facilitating successful work as being characterized by open and approachable leadership and by distinct roles at the local and national levels to adapt tools and practices locally and to share knowledge broadly across the organization, respectively.

It is humanitarian practitioners at the local level, as opposed to those in positions of national or international leadership, who best know how to localize communication with communities, expertise which provides evidence for the appropriateness of humanitarian decision-making at the lowest level:

How do people communicate? What do they use to communicate? If you find out that there is very little reading in the community and instead they spend more time listening to the radio, so, in terms of preparedness, you don't waste your time in printing written materials. Instead you choose to use your money for soap operas in radio or in key advertising in radio.

In addition to localizing communication  as described in the above quote, practitioners at the local levels often partner with community members who speak local dialects and are familiar with local communicative norms to adapt written materials, such as questionnaires, based on knowledge of a particular community:

It's essential for the questions to be well oriented so that they are well adapted for the population because the populations are not the same. . . . The wording of the question can also make it easy to get the desired answers.

What this fine-grained localization means is that for internal organizational communication to be effective, it must have a strong bottom-up flow of communication and decision-making. Successful work is achieved by empowering local-level practitioners as leads (i.e., subject matter experts) in the development of external communication materials. Sometimes this process involved starting with standard versions of documents passed from national to local practitioners, who would then localize the materials and share them back with the national level. Sometimes this process involved starting with collections of localized materials, which practitioners reviewed to inform the development of materials that incorporated the strengths of several localized versions. Those with the most specific knowledge of communities led the fine-grained localization of materials focused not at national or regional levels but at the level of particular communities. Consistently, the internal organizational communication that practitioners described as facilitating successful work had a strong bottom-up flow, which reflects the flipped organizational structure common to nonprofit organizations.

For local-level expertise to have a long-term and widespread impact, it is important to have mechanisms for sharing materials and formalizing insights and contributions across the organization. One example that illustrates how this may happen is that of a modified shelter design used in a refugee camp. When volunteer practitioners were building shelters in the refugee camp, one refugee informed them that no one would use the shelters as designed because the mats were hung on the wrong side, indicating death. For the shelters to be appropriate (that is, to be used by people and to be beneficial to their lives), the mats should be hung on the other side. The practitioners immediately changed the way that they built the shelters, which shows that they were empowered to adapt their work to local contexts without requiring organizational approval to make changes. They then shared their new knowledge with the team leader, who was offsite at the time, to enable the change to be formalized in new shelter drawings.

This technical communication, the shelter drawings that documented the design of a humanitarian work product, was key to formalizing local knowledge and sharing it across the organization. The respective roles of headquarters and local levels were distinct, and both were important for supporting knowledge sharing: The local level led adaptations for specific environments and conditions, and the headquarters shared what had been learned across the organization.

The above example also illustrates the point that key decision-making occurs at the lowest level of the organization, with those in team leadership roles conveying openness and approachability to support local decision-making. Approachability was conveyed in several ways, such as intentionally creating both public and private spaces for questions. For example, one practitioner leading a team said that he makes a point of starting the day with a team-wide meeting in which people are encouraged to bring up questions or problems, which he tries to address on the spot so that all can benefit from the exchange. This same person said that he also seeks out team members one-on-one to ask how they are doing and to provide an opportunity for them to raise questions they may not have felt comfortable asking in a more public setting, whether because of the topic or because they are shy.

Other examples of how the design of internal communication is central for bottom-up flow included lessons-learned workshops in which honest and open information-sharing was the established norm. Practitioners also have traditional, long-standing project management tools such as log frames and even, occasionally, borrow tools such as SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis from business disciplines, but all are used in a way that is congruent with organizational values such as lowest-level empowerment. Practitioners are trained in emergency-response practices in which they are to collect and share particular information. But they said that as an emergency situation changes or their understanding of community needs becomes clearer, they are encouraged to freely contact their leaders with changes, corrections, or additional information beyond what is designated in the standard forms if they feel that information to be relevant. In other words, higher-level roles in humanitarian organizations tend to serve more of a support function to facilitate effective humanitarian practice on the ground, deferring to

the expert knowledge of local practitioners as the lead decision makers regarding specifics of the work. Internal communication plays a key role in facilitating successful work as local-level practitioners lead the adaptation of materials and practice and as organizational leaders share and formalize that knowledge across the organization.

## Discussion

Workplace studies is a productive area of inquiry for technical communication scholars because many of us seek not only to meet immediate workplace needs but also to produce research that can improve work practices (Spilka, 2000). To do so, scholars must uncover and understand current practices. This means not only learning about “the ways in which individuals, both alone and in concert with each other, use tools and technologies in the practical accomplishment of their daily work” (Heath & Luff, 2001, p. 4) but also learning about how the values and motivations related to organizational culture play out in the practical and effective accomplishment of that work. With their mission-driven organizational cultures, nonprofit organizations offer rich sites for workplace studies of practice in which technical communicators can conduct research that improves the communication facilitating work that alleviates human suffering and saves lives. This contribution—i.e., the ways our field can support and improve life-saving work—has huge implications for research, practice, and pedagogy. In analyzing the professional communication of humanitarian organizations, we can realize (in the sense of understanding clearly) the power that this communication has in structuring and facilitating humanitarian practice. And in preparing students to work in humanitarian organizations, we can realize (in the sense of making real) the largely dormant power that our field holds for contributing to these sites of work and the missions these organizations pursue.

This study has brought to light several specific takeaways for technical communicators interested in humanitarian organizations as sites of practice and research. These takeaways can be summarized in a two-pronged implication: (a) many important skills and considerations of our field—such as localization, audience analysis, and collaboration—are necessary for successful humanitarian work, and (b) to support successful humanitarian work, the application of these

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skills and considerations must be undergirded by values and motivations congruent with humanitarian culture. For example, when engaging with community members, humanitarian practitioners were careful to use understandable language that was not overly technical. Gauging the appropriate level of technical language for a particular audience is a classic focus of technical communication. However, the reason that nontechnical word choice was so important for supporting successful humanitarian practice was because it is one way that practitioners preserve the human dignity of community members and engage with community members as peers whose concerns are at the core of humanitarian work. In other words, in humanitarian environments, using nontechnical language is a strategy for recognizing and amplifying another's dignity and power.

Similarly, both humanitarian practitioners and technical communicators are concerned with appropriate localization to facilitate understanding and to do so respectfully. But, again, our research shows that in humanitarian work, localization occurs not primarily for the purpose of being understood by the audience but, rather, primarily, for the purpose of opening a space for shared understanding and decision-making by the community: that is, for showing dignity and respect and developing a Burkean identification with communities. The overall research findings indicated that it was not just these communication strategies that supported successful work but employment of these strategies motivated by care and respect for communities that made the strategies effective. Technical communicators preparing for work and research in humanitarian organizations must be aware of how central the values comprising humanitarian culture are to the successful enactment of communicative practices.

Another finding with implications for technical communication scholars is that communicative practices, often more than communication products, are key to successful humanitarian work. In other words, it is the shared understanding (Bukean identification) cultivated through mutual trust and relinquishment of power that makes for useful deliverables. For example, the utility of project management documents was not only—in fact, not primarily—in the content of the documents but in the process of creating them. Project participation was supported by the process of gathering the wide range of stakeholders together and collaboratively laying out plans, with specific tasks

mutually agreed upon by the parties. The participation of stakeholders in these projects was supported by the process of deciding together who was responsible for what and collaboratively documenting those responsibilities in writing. Also key to the power of documents to facilitate successful disaster preparedness was the community-level localization driven by lowest-level expertise and decision-making. The localized documents themselves are useful for facilitating successful practice, but underlying the successful practice is the flipped organizational structure that allows for decision-making at the lowest level, as is congruent with humanitarian culture. Oral communication was similarly at least as much about “how” as about “what.” The way that practitioners approached people, the timing of their visits, how they listened to community members—these were keys to successful communicative practice emphasized by practitioners. This finding is congruent with previous research on humanitarian practice that argues humanitarian work systems are primarily means-oriented versus utility-oriented (Mays et al., 2012).

Supporting Rude's (2009) call for a greater variety of methods to address research questions in our field, one implication of our findings is that technical communication research not be limited to the analysis of text (even text broadly conceived to include “print, digital, multimedia; visual, verbal” p. 176). Rather, our work must also be informed by an understanding of how that text is produced, how it is used in everyday work, and the motivations underlying communicative practices—culturally and socially contextual knowledge more likely to be gleaned through fieldwork than solely through text analysis. Many scholars ascribe to broader scopes of technical communication research than textual products, for example considering contexts in which text is produced (Rude, 2004), documentation in the broader sense of designing processes (Grabill, 2000), and not just production but conduct (Miller, 1989). We concur with these scholars' broader vision of technical communication research. Particularly regarding the study of nonprofit organizations, we emphasize the importance of conducting field research that includes analysis of not only communication products but also communicative contexts and processes. This broader vision of our field's research can inform a more complete understanding of the ways in which technical communication facilitates work practice in a variety of contexts.

## Conclusion

We argue that technical communicators should look beyond for-profit industry to develop a fuller understanding of how technical communication supports, enables, and constitutes successful work practices. To support this position, we have reported a subset of findings regarding how technical and professional communication supports successful humanitarian work. We found that while many of our field's skills and areas of expertise carried over to humanitarian environments, the values and motivations associated with humanitarian culture are what influence the effective application of these skills and are, therefore, key to the effectiveness of communication. In particular, fine-grained localization and empowerment at the lowest level are central to professional communication that supports successful humanitarian work.

Moving forward, we see several promising areas for future work. First, our field needs more workplace studies of practice in nonprofit organizations. This research could provide detailed pictures of what it looks like to engage in professional communication in the day-to-day work of, for example, humanitarian logistics teams, free healthcare clinics, and peer-counseling programs for at-risk youth. These studies could then provide a foundation for taking action to improve the ability of these groups to meet their respective missions, and longitudinal studies could track the outcomes of these actions intended to improve practice. A significant enough collection of case studies could then allow us to develop a generalized understanding of how our field's expertise supports mission-driven, as opposed to profit-driven, organizations.

Future work should also include incorporating into our academic programs topics, assignments, and classes that would prepare technical communication students to work in humanitarian and other nonprofit environments. To inform our students' understanding of their own field, we could bring in humanitarian practitioners and other professionals from a wide range of organizations to speak about the relevance and importance of professional communication to their work. As our students engage in service-learning activities, we should take care not to frame nonprofit and community organizations as sites where they can practice for the "real world" of technical communication but as viable career paths for those "for whom issues of

peace, social justice, equal rights, and environmental justice represent higher values" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 147) and who wish to enact those values in their careers.

Technical communicators operating outside of traditional sites of practice must learn about the organizational values that individual practitioners enact in their daily work and be open to a much broader vision of what it may look like to enact those values. When some of the same words are used in both humanitarian and for-profit industry contexts, it can be even more challenging to develop a clear understanding of the implicit values enabling successful communicative practice. "Empowerment" is a prime example. Clark (2007) explored the rhetoric of empowerment, pointing out that many knowledge workers have not been truly empowered through increased access to information, but "at least they are not digging ditches" (p. 156). This phrasing was striking to us because digging ditches—trenches, actually—represents an example of empowerment we encountered in this study—e.g., of people walking in their own power to prepare the community for disaster. This example of empowerment emerged when discussing how a practitioner would engage in in-depth participatory assessments with communities that regularly suffer flood damage to their homes and crops. The practitioner facilitated reflective activities in which community members consider what the community itself can do to protect itself and prepare for these emergencies. In this case, community members recalled that their grandfathers' generation had dug trenches around the community to divert flood waters. The community organized itself to dig and maintain trenches, and when the community was spared flood damage the next year, this practice spread to nearby communities that were also then empowered to take action to protect themselves.

In humanitarian environments, effective communication often focuses on drawing out local knowledge that facilitates communities walking in their own power, which can take many forms, including digging ditches. This example of empowerment in humanitarian contexts shows what we may find when we answer Blyler's (2004) call to "rethink issues of power to put a priority on empowerment" (p. 145). Humanitarian environments offer technical communicators rich opportunities to enact this priority by engaging in and improving communicative practices vital to the work of amplifying agency.

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