

Introducing quality and accountability – scenario for staff discussion

The following tool was developed during a recent HAP deployment to Sri Lanka (2009). It was used with NGO staff to start discussions on quality and accountability and introduce the benchmarks of the HAP 2007 Standard as part of two-day workshops, and shorter 3-hour trainings.

This exercise works well in small groups, allowing participants to discuss the scenario and questions before feeding back in plenary. Noting the main plenary discussion points on flip chart provides a good reference to refer back to during the rest of the workshop, for highlighting the benchmarks and their importance. Depending on the depth of discussion this exercise may take about 45 minutes.

This scenario was developed by Goldan Gomara (from World Vision in Sri Lanka) for HAP, and the facilitator notes were drafted by HAP. The notes are for guidance and participant discussion should be used to highlight issues of quality and accountability, and link the scenario to the HAP 2007 Standard. All comments and feedback based on using this scenario are welcome, and can be emailed to erogers@hapinternational.org

A) Participant Handout:

Scenario – The Bus Service

Around 75 passengers including children and elderly people are waiting at a bus stand. They are waiting to take the bus to Tentaka, which is 8 hours away. The bus to Tentaka only comes once every week.

The bus arrives 3 hours late, forcing the passengers to wait in the sun. When it arrives the passengers surge on to the bus and their luggage is loaded on top and inside the bus. As the bus has seating capacity for 40 it is very over-crowded. A woman with 4 young children talks quietly to the bus conductor to see what she can do to get a seat.

But the bus does not depart. The bus conductor tells the passengers that it will leave within 10 minutes, but the bus remains at the bus stand for another 2 hours, while more cargo is loaded on the bus. Eventually the bus starts its journey, but some passengers begin to suffocate in the overcrowded hot bus, and everyone begins to panic.

One of the passengers, an old man shouts at the bus conductor and threatens to hit him. The bus conductor shouts back at him and stops the bus.

Questions for discussion:

1. What do you think happened next?
2. Why do you think this situation occurred?
3. What are the parallels with the humanitarian world (and NGOs)?

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B) Facilitator notes – suggested points that may be raised

1. What do you think happened next?

Possible ideas include:

- Argument erupts between bus conductor and the old man – others possibly become involved. This may result in a fight - the bus conductor is beaten up by the old man, and other passengers.
- The situation passes – no one else speaks out as they are afraid of the repercussions.
- The old man is thrown off the bus.
- Bus is stopped – the bus is delayed or the journey is terminated.
- The bus continues it's journey, people become sick due to the conditions on board.

Concluding comments:

- Many possibilities – none of them are great outcomes for the passengers, bus conductor, or bus company!

2. Why do you think this situation occurred?

Points to draw out from participants, if needed you can prompt by flipping the question: “How do you think this situation could have been prevented?” For reference the benchmark (BM) in the HAP 2007 Standard¹ that points could be linked to is in brackets. Points may include:

- Large power in balance between the passengers (who need to travel) and bus service (who provide the only service).
- There is an absence of a competing service and demand/need outweighs the supply, the bus conductor and company is able to do as they wish without being held accountable.
- Poor relationship between the bus company and passengers – the only way the passengers can make their needs heard is by shouting and threatening violence.
- Service does not truly serve the passengers or meet their needs.
- Cultural aspects, for example, culture of being patient; dependency to situation (i.e. this is how it works, things won't change etc); hesitant to complain or fear of speaking out against 'authority' figures.

The above may be exaggerated by or caused by:

- Service not focused on quality, or meeting the needs of the passengers (BM1). Passengers made to wait for the cargo to be added.
- Lack of standards, or lack of standards being adhered to e.g. numbers of people on bus, waiting times etc (BM1). (*NB this may raise discussion about how standards could have been met with so much need – if so ask participants what they feel the role of standards are and how they may have helped in this scenario*)
- Lack of up-to date information – for example about when the bus would leave, reason for delays, the service the bus company is aiming to provide etc (BM2).
- Passengers not consulted on what they consider a good service, the bus company is not listening to the needs of the passengers (BM3).
- Bus conductor approach (his skills, behavior and attitude) to dealing with his 'customers' (BM4)
- Lack of means to complain about the service (and means for these to be responded to) (BM5).
- Lack of monitoring, e.g. time bus left, number of passengers, passenger views of the service (BM6).

Extra question: What may have happened following the woman talking to the bus conductor to see if he could get her a seat? Link to the power in balance, and so the potential for abuse of power. For example he may have demanded a little extra payment, for example in the form of money or 'special favors'. What might these be?

Extra question: Was the conflict in the bus scenario the fault of the bus company or the bus conductor? The bus company creates the environment and systems within which bus conductor works, and this affects how the bus service operates. For example the bus company had not ensured there was a channel for complaints, perhaps the company had not guided the conductor on how to handle delays in the service or too many passengers, and possibly the bus company had no system to ensure the service continually improved to meet people's needs.

Concluding comments:

- “Is the bus company operating in a way that is accountable to its passengers?” No. We can define accountability as *the responsible use of power*. For HAP this includes three main elements:
 - Taking account of...the needs of intended-beneficiaries when making decisions that will affect them
 - Giving account to...beneficiaries and others, explaining decisions and actions.
 - Being held to account by...beneficiaries and others by providing avenues for complaints and concerns (related to the decisions made and actions taken) to be raised and responded to.
- “Is this service a quality service?” No. Quality can be defined as a service or a product that is *fit for purpose*. The points raised above highlight gaps that mean the service is not necessary fit for purpose for the passengers as it does not take into account the stated or implied needs of the passengers such as timeliness, number of passengers, sufficient space, competent staff, basic information provision, etc.

Extra question: What do you feel is the relationship between quality and accountability? Strengthening accountability to the passengers (i.e. the relationship between the bus company and the passengers), by improving BM2, BM3, and BM5 would enable the bus company to better understand and meet the needs of the people. It would help the company to understand what is considered quality in this context. Coupled with strengthening the commitment and implementation of standards (BM1), the caliber and skills of staff (BM4), and how the company continues to improve the service (BM6), these will all contribute to improving the quality.

¹ The HAP 2007 Standard in Humanitarian Accountability and Quality Management is available to download for free from www.hapinternational.org

3. What are the parallels with the humanitarian world (and NGOs)?

Points may include:

- Insufficient resources - NGOs also provide a service which people need – often there are insufficient resources to meet people’s needs. As a result NGOs often need to make tough choices.
- Power in-balance - there is a power in-balance between the ‘users’ (i.e. beneficiaries), and the service providers (i.e. NGOs).
- Lack of choice - often there is a lack of choice for users – i.e. beneficiaries are rarely able to choose between NGOs for a particular service. There may also be high expectations of NGOs from beneficiaries.
- Disadvantaging vulnerable groups? - sometimes the way in which NGOs work can mean more vulnerable groups are disadvantaged further. For example the way in which emergency distributions are conducted or community representatives are selected will determine the extent to which vulnerable groups (such as elderly, disabled, children etc) are able to access emergency items or have their views and needs represented.
- Differing needs - different people and groups have different priorities that NGOs need to take into account and address. For example in the bus scenario some people may prioritize getting from A to B, where as for others the comfort of the journey may be equally or more important.
- Costs to end users – accessing NGO services may also result in costs for beneficiaries, often in the form of time that could be spent doing other activities. For example time is needed to travel to and wait at distribution points.
- Open to exploitation – the power in balance between the users (i.e. those who need the service), and providers or decision makers (i.e. those who have the power to decide who the resources will be distributed/provided to), means there are often situations that are open to exploitation. For example in the humanitarian world there are cases of aid workers exchanging food for sexual favors from beneficiaries, and community leaders asking for payment from families so that they may be added to the beneficiary list.
- Consequences of poor quality - There are also possible negative repercussions for NGOs who deliver poor-quality and unaccountable programmes – this may include damaged working relationships with the affected-community, inefficient programmes, reduced impact, damaged reputation, de-motivated staff, risk to agency staff (see below) and more.
- Risk to agency staff - bad relationships with the affected-community and beneficiaries, stemming from a lack of guidance on agency approach, and systems that ensure projects focus on meeting the needs of affected-people, can put agency staff (in particular field staff) at risk of conflict.
- Traditionally a lack of channels to raise complaints – sometimes an attitude that people should be happy with what they get. In addition there is a lack of regulation of the NGO world.
- Forgetting or neglecting the organization’s primary purpose – in emergencies NGOs’ values & mission can be forgotten (in the same way that the bus company had started to favor the cargo above it’s passengers). As a result priorities can be driven by the agendas of others. For example NGOs may be driven by the agendas of donors, external communications, ‘trendy topics’ rather than the needs of the people.
- Measuring of service quality / performance – are there similarities in how NGO’s measure success and good service? Is success getting from A to B (in terms of a humanitarian project this could be the equivalent to distributing 1000 non-food item packs), or do we also consider the process followed? In the case of the bus this is the ‘journey’, for NGOs this could be the process by which the items are selected, and distributed. Do NGOs ask the ‘users’ (i.e. beneficiaries) about their experience when assessing their performance?
- Lack of learning - sometimes we keep on making the same mistakes (*Prompting question if needed: Do you think this was the first time for the bad service? Why was it not improved?*)

Concluding comments:

The points above highlight many of the reasons that have been identified by the humanitarian sector for why there is a need to strengthen the quality and accountability of humanitarian work. A number of these were highlighted by the Joint Evaluation of the International Response to the Genocide in Rwanda, and again by the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition.

NB – participants often have examples based on their experience of situations where there has been a shortfall of quality and accountability (either based on the general way in which NGOs operate in that country or specific projects they have been part of). Asking them to share any examples they may have at this point can be motivational for then discussing how this can be addressed.