

The Pitfalls of Wearing Overworking as a Badge of Honor in Humanitarian Aid

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In the demanding world of humanitarian aid, where the mission to alleviate suffering and promote human dignity drives every action, there exists a pervasive tendency among aid workers to wear overworking as a badge of honor. This phenomenon is often characterized by a culture glorifying excessive dedication—working long hours, skipping vacations, and neglecting personal well-being—to serve others. While the intentions behind this dedication are noble, the consequences can be profoundly detrimental, both for individuals and the organizations they serve.

The Culture of Overworking: A Badge of Honor?

In the humanitarian aid sector, overworking is frequently normalized and even celebrated. Long hours, skipping vacations, and working beyond contracted hours are seen as signs of commitment to the cause. Aid workers often prioritize the needs of others above their own, believing that self-sacrifice is necessary for making a meaningful impact. This culture is reinforced by the urgency and severity of the crises they address.

Impact on the Workplace and Individuals:

1. **Burnout and Diminished Effectiveness:** Overworking inevitably leads to burnout—a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion. Burnout diminishes an individual's ability to perform effectively, reducing productivity and creativity.
2. **Career Sustainability:** Continuous overworking can erode job satisfaction and lead to disillusionment with the field. Many aid workers experience a sense of being trapped in a cycle of unsustainable work habits, impacting their long-term career prospects.
3. **Personal Well-being:** Neglecting personal boundaries and well-being can result in a range of health issues—both physical and mental. Chronic stress, anxiety, and depression are common consequences of prolonged overworking.

Detrimental Impact on Mission and Agency:

1. **Decreased Quality of Work:** Fatigued and stressed aid workers may compromise the quality of their work, potentially affecting the outcomes of humanitarian interventions.
2. **High Turnover Rates:** A workplace culture that glorifies overworking often leads to high turnover rates as individuals seek healthier environments. This turnover disrupts continuity and institutional knowledge within organizations.
3. **Ineffectiveness in Crisis Response:** Sustainable humanitarian aid requires a resilient workforce capable of responding effectively to crises. Overworking undermines this capacity.

Rethinking Boundaries and Well-being:

Aid workers and organizations must challenge the myth of overworking as a badge of honor. Here are some practical steps to foster healthier work environments:

1. **Normalize Boundaries:** Encourage open discussions about work-life balance and the importance of setting boundaries. Shift the cultural narrative towards valuing well-being alongside dedication.
2. **Promote Self-Care:** Provide resources and support for self-care practices, including access to mental health services, wellness programs, and flexible work arrangements.
3. **Lead by Example:** Organizational leaders should model healthy work habits by prioritizing their well-being, respecting work-life boundaries, and encouraging their colleagues and direct reports to do the same.

Conclusion:

In the pursuit of humanitarian aid, aid workers should be encouraged not to mistake overworking for true dedication. Sustainable impact is achieved through a balanced approach that values both the mission and the well-being of those carrying it out. By redefining success away from sheer hours worked and towards meaningful impact and personal fulfillment, humanitarian aid organizations can cultivate a healthier, more resilient workforce that is better equipped to tackle the world's most pressing challenges with clarity, compassion, and effectiveness.