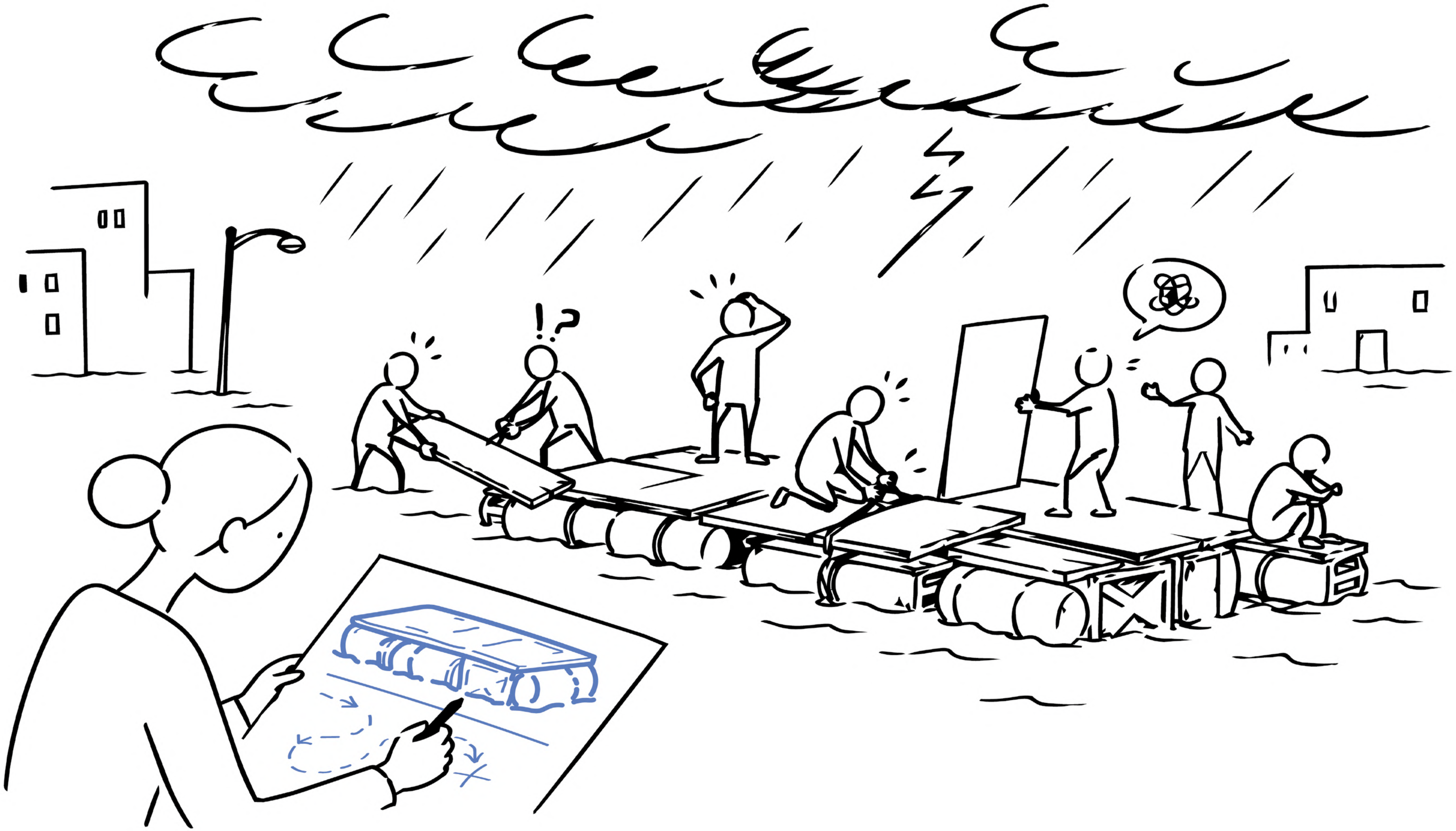
Change under Pressure: transformation and team leadership during the UN funding crisis of 2025



Foreword

Periods of disruption and profound change test not only institutions, but also the people who work within them. Across the United Nations system, 2025 was marked by significant financial reductions and pressure, organizational restructuring, uncertainty and evolving expectations. Yet throughout this period, UN personnel continued to advance critical mandates with professionalism, dedication and resilience.

As the United Nations system's interagency learning institution, the United Nations System Staff College (UNSSC) is uniquely placed to help capture, analyse and share lessons emerging from periods of transformation. Learning goes beyond developing skills and capacities. It is also about making sense of experience, identifying what works in practice, and creating opportunities for collective reflection across UN entities and professional communities.

This publication contributes to that effort. It forms part of UNSSC's broader work to support leadership, organizational effectiveness and institutional transformation across the United Nations system.

Produced within the ambit of the United Nations Lab of Organizational Change and Knowledge (UNLOCK) initiative and as part of the "UNLOCK-ing Change in the United Nations" series, it builds on earlier work on relocations, downsizing and mergers. While previous publications explored how such transformations can be planned and managed, this paper examines how managers have experienced and navigated change during this particular moment of rapid organizational change in the United Nations' history.

The focus is on middle managers and team leaders, often working outside headquarters and across multiple UN entities, who found themselves at the intersection of institutional decisions and their impact on people, teams and organizational performance. By bringing together their experiences, this publication draws on knowledge generated across the United Nations system and reflects the collective insights of a system of learning, adapting and evolving in response to shared challenges.

The questions explored in these pages extend beyond the immediate circumstances of 2025. They speak to broader challenges confronting international organizations in an increasingly complex and turbulent operating environment: how to sustain trust during disruption and uncertainty; how to support people through transition; and how to remain agile and mission-focused while adapting to change.

At UNSSC, we believe that organizational learning is a key enabler of institutional resilience and transformation. By systematically drawing on experience from across the United Nations system, we can strengthen our collective capacity to respond to future challenges and seize new opportunities for renewal and innovation.

It is our hope that this publication and the suggestions for action it contains will encourage dialogue, reflection and practical action among leaders, managers and practitioners across the United Nations system and contribute to building the capabilities needed to advance the United Nations' critical mission in a world in flux.

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Overview

Executive summary

In 2025, many UN entities experienced significant and sudden reductions in available funding as donors reduced or delayed financial contributions. These cuts compounded pre-existing financial challenges and led to a funding crisis.

This crisis coincided with the launch of the UN80 process – a systemwide reform effort aimed at improving efficiency and effectiveness. While many UN agencies and entities had already begun reviewing organizational structures and staffing, the need to reduce expenditure rapidly accelerated and deepened downsizing, internal mergers and relocations.

This paper considers the experience of these changes from the point of view of middle managers – and particularly those who were responsible for leading teams, units or branches – in 10 different UN entities. It draws on a literature review and on recurring themes from interviews and discussions with a purposive sample of 11 managers and a convenience sample of a further 34 managers from 10 organizations. The paper identifies recurring themes from managers' experiences as they relate to perceived impacts of these changes on staff, and the ways in which managers responded to mitigate these impacts. The findings and related recommendations are intended to support learning and reflection across the UN system.

Interviewees described **major structural changes** that were generally carried out over short periods of time and **had dramatic effects on staff**. These included:

- Significant increases in workload
- Decreased organizational performance, as time and attention were diverted to the change process
- Challenges related to doing new and unfamiliar work
- Loss of social support systems
- Negative impacts on professional status and on future career prospects
- Feelings of uncertainty around future employment.

Many interviewees also experienced or observed a range of strong emotional responses typically associated with change, and particularly with “traumatic” changes such as downsizing, relocation and mergers. Emotional responses were often expressed in decreased individual morale and performance.

While these responses are an inevitable element of any change process, research on organizational change from the fields of psychology and business studies have identified several **“change management” practices that organizations can use to decrease these negative impacts**. They include:

- Taking a strategic, rather than purely reactive, approach to the change, outlining how the organization will prioritize activities in the future to achieve its goals
- Having a clear plan for the change process that includes measures to maintain business continuity while the change is taking place, which is adequately resourced and guided by a transition team
- Ensuring that there are clear, objective criteria for who is affected, and that these criteria are communicated and followed consistently
- Engaging staff in the design of the change process
- Communicating effectively around the change process
- Ensuring that HR guidance and support is in place.

Different UN entities and units incorporated these practices into their change processes to different degrees. The extreme political, financial and time constraints surrounding the events of 2025 made some of these approaches difficult to implement. This placed additional stress on team leaders, who – in addition to operationalizing the changes, ensuring the continuation of existing work, and supporting their teams – had to “plug the gaps” left by these organizational oversights.

While it was not possible for team leaders to fill gaps left in organizational processes, or to create a ”perfect” transition process for their teams, **team leaders played an important part in decreasing the negative impacts of the changes**. They did this by:

- Recognizing the human, emotional element of the change process
- Recognizing, and working with, team members as individuals

- Injecting energy into team conversations and supporting activities that gave team members a sense of agency
- Linking the changes to future career progression
- Rationalizing the changes to team members in ways that aligned with their values and made them easier to accept
- Creating opportunities for team members to support one another, building or maintaining the cohesiveness of the team.

Looking back, the team leaders interviewed also suggested that they should have put more emphasis on looking after themselves physically and mentally.

Hopefully, the experience of 2025 will provide lessons to make future change in the United Nations more effective and less painful. Interviewees, certainly, felt that more changes were coming. Many suggested that the United Nations needs to fundamentally transform itself to become a more adaptive and agile organization that is better able to respond to rapid and unexpected change. The report concludes with suggested actions for organizational leadership, HR departments, change managers and team leaders. These suggestions are intended to serve as the basis for discussion and action within UN entities, and to contribute to the development of a United Nations system that is better adapted to address future crises.

Introduction

In 2025, the United Nations faced a funding crisis. The United Nations has a history of financial challenges reaching back to the 1960s, and over the past decade has been under increasing financial pressure. By the beginning of 2024 the UN Secretariat had record annual arrears of USD 859 million and had severely depleted its cash reserves.[1] UN programmes, funds and specialized agencies, on the other hand, had generally seen their revenues increase since 2010, but this trend went into reverse from 2023.[2] Beyond these purely financial challenges, the United Nations faced widespread demands from member states and civil society for greater efficiency, transparency and relevance to meet multiplying complex global crises. It is not surprising, then, that many parts of the UN system had been involved in organizational and transformation programmes for several years, and that in early 2025 it was working on the UN80 plan to deliver "a simpler, more effective and more coherent UN system... amid shrinking resources and rising needs".[3]

In the words of UN managers interviewed for this study, "What happened in 2025 was different." Several UN entities experienced very sudden and significant reductions, delays or uncertainty in available funding, against a broader backdrop of constrained multilateral financing, which compounded the already precarious financial situation.

In response, the UN Secretariat and many UN entities had to make radical and rapid changes. In many cases, this meant decreasing staffing by 20-30 percent, making changes to organizational structures (particularly internal mergers) and cutting costs by relocating teams to less expensive duty stations, or accelerating existing plans for relocation.[2] Often downsizing, mergers and relocation were combined.

To managers navigating the changes, this situation developed “literally overnight” and was described as “stunning”, “brutal” and “damaging”. The funding cuts and the organizational responses to these cuts were experienced as a “crisis” – and this term has been used here.

This report looks at the experience of UN staff members, and particularly the experience of team leaders and managers, during the 2025 crisis. It aims to answer two questions:

1. How do downsizing, relocation and mergers affect teams, team leaders and team members in the United Nations and related organizations?

2. What effective approaches can be used to address the negative impacts of downsizing, relocation and mergers?

The report is based on four elements: a literature review on experiences of downsizing, relocation and mergers in public sector organizations; a series of 11 interviews with managers, covering (mainly) their experiences of 2025/6, as well as some broader experiences of change in the United Nations; insights gained from 12 peer coaching sessions, involving a total of 34 staff from 10 UN agencies and multilateral organizations; and finally a facilitated discussion among 10 of those managers plus 4 UNLOCK network members that builds on their experience, and the key points made in the report, to make suggestions for moving forward.

For simplicity, all of the information from peer coaching sessions and interviews is referred to as “interviews”. The report is explicitly written from the point of view of these managers – rather than from, for example, senior leadership – and reflects common themes that emerged in interviews, particularly those which align with findings from the literature review (see the Annex for more details on the methodology, constraints and limitations).

How did staff experience the organizational changes?

The impacts of organizational changes on working conditions

The financial crisis and subsequent organizational response had immediate and distressing effects on many staff members. The most prominent effect was a **dramatic increase in workload**, which was described by interviewees as “a doubling or tripling of work” to “unsustainable” levels.

The most prominent effect was a dramatic increase in workload

Increased workload was often a result of teams trying to deliver on existing workplans with fewer staff: “doing more with less”. It was also a result of the additional work created by the change process itself (one interviewee said that “at least 50 percent of my time has been totally consumed [by managing the transition process]”) and in some cases was a reaction to downsizing, with people “trying to prove their value [and] keep their jobs”. While increased workload is often associated with organizational change,[4–7] it appeared to be particularly widespread, and particularly severe, in

the UN change processes of 2025/6. This was brought up by almost every interviewee. It was also – perhaps worryingly – often seen almost as a source of pride. Many interviewees were strongly attached to the idea of ”delivering on the mission” no matter what the effects were on them: Fewer interviewees recognized the danger that this level of work could lead to burnout and stress.

Inevitably, though, many interviewees found that however hard they worked, **the mission suffered**: “We stopped our programme [on the ground…] And why? Because we’re so focused on fixing our internal problems”; “Everything that I’ve delivered was related to the transition rather than really the work that we need to do”. For some of the people who participated in this study, this situation was a real source of frustration and anger.

In many cases, the challenge of dealing with more work was compounded by the difficulties of dealing with **new and unfamiliar work**. In teams which had experienced downsizing or mergers, people found themselves doing tasks that had formerly been undertaken by colleagues and for which they did not have experience or skills. In relocations (even where the relocation was theoretically a "lift and shift", and the team was meant to continue its work uninterrupted in a new location), the reality was often that working in a new context, in a different time-zone, and with new stakeholders, meant that the team had to get used to working in new ways. In some cases, the situation was made worse because it was not clear who was meant to be taking on which new tasks. The challenge of doing new and unfamiliar work and the difficulties and inefficiencies that this can create is frequently addressed in the change literature.[7–16] One element that the literature does not bring out particularly strongly, but which was highlighted in the interviews, is the psychological effect that this had on people who were used to being highly skilled in their jobs: Not knowing how to do a job well put people "far outside their comfort zone".

Another frequently mentioned consequence of the changes of 2025/6 on individual staff members was the **loss of social support systems**. Interviewees spoke about having to adjust to the loss of colleagues and friends they had worked with for many years. In relocation, this sense of loss was greatly amplified, as people – and their families – moved away from their entire social networks. Outside the United Nations, this dislocation comes out particularly strongly in the literature related to relocation,[7,17,18] although it is also mentioned in relation to downsizing.[19]

A number of interviewees felt that, although they had kept their jobs, the changes had **negative impacts on their current professional status or future career prospects**. As part of downsizing and merger exercises, some people were able to retain their jobs at the cost of taking roles at a lower professional grade, with negative impacts on their status in the organization and on their self-image. Several people (including those who had kept their former grade) felt that the changes had damaged their chances of future advancement – either because there would be fewer jobs (and so fewer promotions) available, or because by moving team or location they were "being pushed aside or out of sight". Again, these impacts are not specific to the United Nations but have been observed in a wide range of organizations – and specifically with relation to mergers.[6,12]

Uncertainty around future employment was a very common theme

While some interviewees were concerned about future promotions, more were worried about whether they would have a job in the United Nations at all by the same time next year. **Uncertainty around future employment** was a very common theme, with many interviewees echoing the sentiment that "perhaps it's not over, and the second round [of downsizing] is coming". A general feeling of uncertainty – about what was happening, what was expected, and what would happen in the near future – was a constant of many of the interviews (as it is in the literature[7,13,14,16,18,20–26]).

How people responded to these impacts

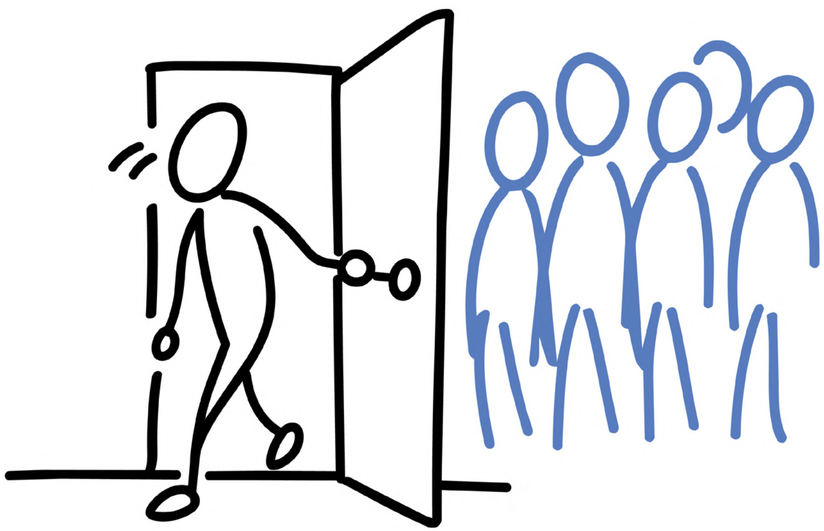
Decades of research on organizational change **has identified a range of (generally negative) emotional responses that are associated with change and transition**, as well as highlighting the differences in individual responses across this emotional spectrum.[27–30] The specific literature on downsizing, relocation and mergers identified many of the same emotional responses among staff experiencing these – often traumatic – types of change.[13,14,18,21,24] The interviews mirrored the literature. People spoke of:

- Shock and denial, demonstrated by colleagues failing to make any personal preparations for relocation
- Extreme anger
- Withdrawal and refusal to engage with colleagues
- Guilt that they had not lost their jobs when friends had (a key element of the reaction sometimes described as "survivor syndrome"[31])
- Loss of self-worth: "What do I do? I need to feel I'm useful".

A minority of interviewees felt some level of excitement at the possibilities for positive change that had been opened up by the financial crisis of 2025 although they also generally felt that the opportunity for transformational, systemic change had not been fully exploited.

Interviewees were also very clear that **people had responded to the same stress – to overwork and loss of colleagues, for example – in very different ways**: "Everyone sees the change differently"; "Some people are just better at these things than others." Among these individual differences, though, patterns emerged. Some interviewees suggested that staff in field locations tended to have more extreme reactions than staff in headquarters locations because they were closer to the work and more exposed to the impacts of changes on vulnerable populations. Similarly, some felt that nationally recruited staff, for whom the work might be (even) more personal, had stronger reactions than internationally recruited staff. Several interviewees pointed to generational divides, suggesting that older staff members had higher expectations of the United Nations, and stronger reactions when the organization behaved in unexpected ways. Personal circumstances – particularly the degree to which people had responsibility for dependents – were also often mentioned as influencing the nature and depth of an individual's response, as were personal experiences: Staff with private sector backgrounds were seen as being more accepting of downsizing, and staff with experience of working for rotational agencies were more accepting of relocation. Unsurprisingly, in a multinational organization like the United Nations, several interviewees also made a point of the importance of cultural differences around communication and the expression of emotion in determining how people responded to the changes.

Research also suggests that, in addition to the usual set of emotional responses to organizational change, **there are a set of specific emotional responses that are commonly experienced during downsizing, mergers and relocations, arising from the relationship that the individual has to the organization**. These responses are based on "affective commitment" – the emotional attachment and identification that people have with the organization: a sense of belonging, and of being part of something which forms an important part of your identity. Affective commitment is, unsurprisingly, often felt very strongly in values-based organizations such as the United Nations[32] and is a key driver of performance.[10,33]



In organizations experiencing downsizing or relocation, individuals often feel that the implicit contract that they had with the organization – that they will work hard and in return will be rewarded – has been broken.[5,11,34] This leads people to reconsider their identification with the organization, decreasing affective commitment, motivation and performance.[5,7,10,17] All of this was amply demonstrated in the United Nations over 2025/6. Prior to the crisis, many people had extremely high levels of affective commitment to their organizations – "I would lie down in the mud for [the organization]" – and to the work that the organization did: "It was not just another job". At the same time, they felt that they had an implicit contract with the organization: "Because we give so much, I think there's an expectation that, rightly or wrongly, we'll be [...] protected [and...] supported." Consequently, the speed and scale of staff separations, and the number of relocations, left many feeling that the organization was "breaking the contract". As one interviewee put it: "We thought the UN was our family – but you don't get fired by your family."

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In situations where organizations or parts of organizations are merging, the situation is a little different. Here, the affective commitment that people have to their old team or organization remains and can prevent them from fully engaging with the new team.[13,23,35–39] This is partly because the loss of the old team is experienced as a loss of personal and professional identity.[6,13,24,26,40] While this study considered fewer cases of mergers than of downsizing, the process outlined in the literature seemed, at least in part, to have happened in the United Nations: People moving teams experienced an “identity crisis” and had “difficulty letting go of their [old] identity.”

Overall, interviewees outlined emotional responses to the crisis which were profound and powerful. **These emotional responses had a clear and direct effect on organizational performance**, again, much as the literature would have predicted. There was some overt resistance to the changes themselves – people refusing or failing to provide handover notes or communicating more with their old teams than their new teams.[8,9,11,21,40–42] Motivation and productivity suffered, and some interviewees noticed increased absenteeism,[24,42,43] increased conflict in teams, and an increase in people looking for other work.[13,14,23,36]

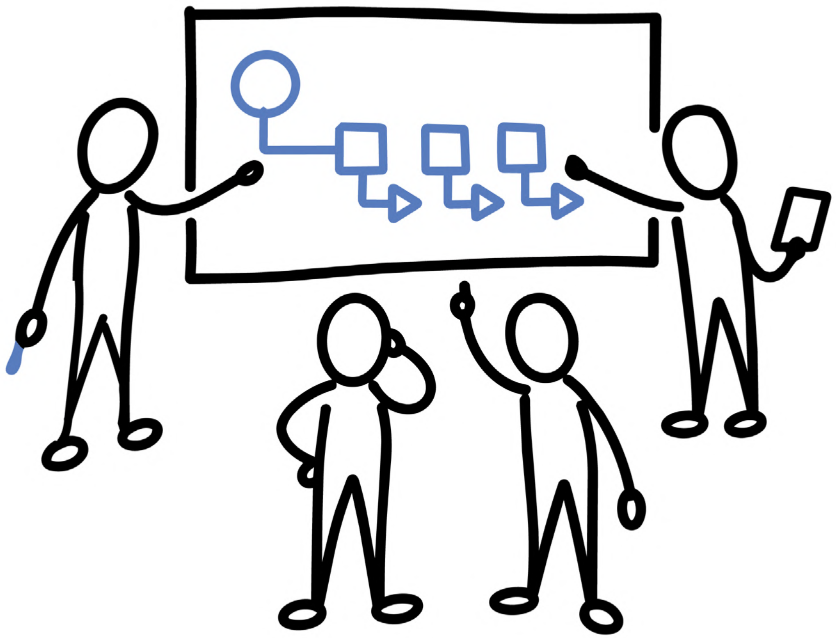
How effectively did UN organizations respond to the funding crisis?

Both the literature review and interviews make clear that it would be impossible to conduct a perfectly smooth and effective downsizing, merger or relocation exercise. Even where the goals of the transformation are clear and explicit, research shows that they are often not met: In particular, changes tend to be more expensive than expected,[14,42,44] take longer than scheduled and have negative effects on morale and productivity[5,14,45]: “You can’t please everyone”. At the same time, there are several ways in which organizations can decrease the impacts of these changes.[13,14,16,32,33,46] The list of ”what works” is remarkably consistent across research literature and the experiences of interviewees, and although these approaches have been discussed in previous work by the UN System Staff College they are worth repeating here, to show how the presence or absence of these approaches affected the experience of UN staff and managers during the crisis of 2025.

[Organizations should] take a strategic, rather than reactive, approach to change

The first – and possibly most important – of these approaches is to take a **strategic, rather than purely reactive, approach to the change**. Even where downsizing, merger or relocation are driven primarily by financial requirements, the leadership should provide a clear rationale for the changes and identify how the smaller/relocated organization is going to fulfil its mandate in the future: the activities it will prioritize and the structure and skills that will be required to conduct these activities.[8,9,11,23,40,41,47–50] Interviewees were clear that this approach had often been followed in previous organizational change exercises, and had been extremely helpful – and that, where it was used in 2025, it made the changes easier and more effective. But many interviewees felt that, in 2025, "We were slashing and burning, rather than following a strategy" (a point made, less dramatically, in external reviews[2]).

This had three particularly negative effects on teams and team leaders. The first was that **managers struggled to justify the changes** – and specifically to explain how the changes would effectively address the challenges the organization faced: "For people to accept that their post is cut […] they need to be told a story"; "I couldn't build a narrative". This further damaged the implicit contract that people believed that they had with the organization, because it felt as if they, or their colleagues, were being made to experience disruption when there was no clear reason for doing so. The second negative effect was more practical. **Managers often had to make decisions** on which functions to retain and which functions to cut or merge, and, **without strategic guidance**, this was almost impossible to do in a rational way. One interviewee described multiple (ultimately futile) attempts to obtain strategic direction from their organization: "I was trying to understand […] our programmatic vision for this area […] so I would know how I could [make decisions] properly." The third negative effect was related to workload. In the **absence of strategic prioritization of activities**, "We didn't really stop any process […] We couldn't drop anything". This led to the (often repeated) mantra of "doing more with less" – but the reality is that "You can't have 50 different priorities".



Beyond the direct impacts on teams, this lack of strategic guidance (or perceived lack of guidance, as in some cases it may have existed but had not been effectively communicated to team leaders) was seen as a missed opportunity to make agencies more sustainable and better adapted to the world of the 2020s. At the same time, **interviewees recognized how difficult it would have been for their agencies to take a strategic approach in a situation where such large financial cuts were being implemented over such a short period**; in agencies with complex funding structures that combined core funding with high proportions of project funding from multiple donors; and in agencies that were operating in a highly politicized situation where different stakeholders were pushing in very different directions.

The second approach to transformation that is recommended by both previous research and interviews is to have **a clear plan that covers both making the change effectively and maintaining business continuity while the change is taking place.**

Where the change process was well planned, this "played a huge positive role"

This plan should be adequately resourced, and overseen by a transition team.[8,9,23,26,46,51–53] Again, interviewees were clear that this had been a core part of previous transformations, and in some organizations – or divisions within organizations – this was also the case in 2025: "Planning was meticulous and the transition was well executed […] By the time that my team was transitioned, everybody knew exactly what they needed to do." **Where the change process was well planned, this "played a huge positive role"**. But, as we have seen, this was not always the case. A common complaint (even for relocation activities, where planning tended to have been more thorough) was that **organizations didn't provide the additional human resources required to manage the transition, and that, as a result, many people, particularly managers, found that they were so busy with the transition that they had to virtually abandon their day-to-day work**. Interviewees also said that, even where plans were in place, they were "inoperable" because they did not fit with existing policies and guidance.

In particular, deadlines in the plans were often missed because financial and HR policies and processes worked too slowly: "The system was *so* not functioning […] We need to rethink the tools. The tools that are at our disposal to grow or to decrease staffing, projects, budget and so on […] I think none of those systems are adapted [to the current realities]". Managers also found it difficult to implement plans because they didn't have specific guidance on how to put them into effect: "We don't really have guidance...we have policies and procedures on everything except how to downsize".

Where plans were in place, they were sometimes "inoperable" because they did not fit with existing policies and guidance

The main impact of these challenges around planning was, again, to increase the workload on staff. But it also greatly increased the uncertainty that staff were feeling, leading to heightened emotional responses, and in some cases decreasing their sense of trust in the competence of their organization, damaging their sense of affective commitment.

An important element of any plan for downsizing, merger or relocation is that it is **perceived to be fair – there are clear, objective criteria for who is affected, and these criteria are followed consistently**. In the literature on the topic, this is called "procedural justice."[4,11,13,32,47] In 2025, agencies recognized this and generally tried to make the process as fair as possible. Some interviewees said that "Everybody I talk to considered it fair," but others had "no confidence" and described "a veil of secrecy" over how decisions were made. In many cases, the situation wasn't helped by the lack of strategic clarity around the transformation, as described earlier. There was no clear and consistent organizational rationale for why one function was cut and another retained, and so these decisions – left to team leaders and other middle managers – could, as a result, appear arbitrary. Some interviewees also discussed examples where the rules were clear but were not followed: "Part of what I have to manage, which is very difficult, is the perception of people getting special treatment." This perception of special treatment often related to well-connected or higher-grade staff: "The big chiefs at the global level, at headquarters [...] maintain their positions". Beyond these problems, there was also the frequent challenge that while fairness might be a good idea in principle, it can be very hard to implement in practice. Different people had different opinions on what was fair (for example, many people objected strenuously to interviewing for their own jobs or conducting a skills assessment that they felt did not adequately capture important elements of a role). Creating a fair and objective process is difficult in the best of times, let alone in the confused and time-pressured context of 2025.

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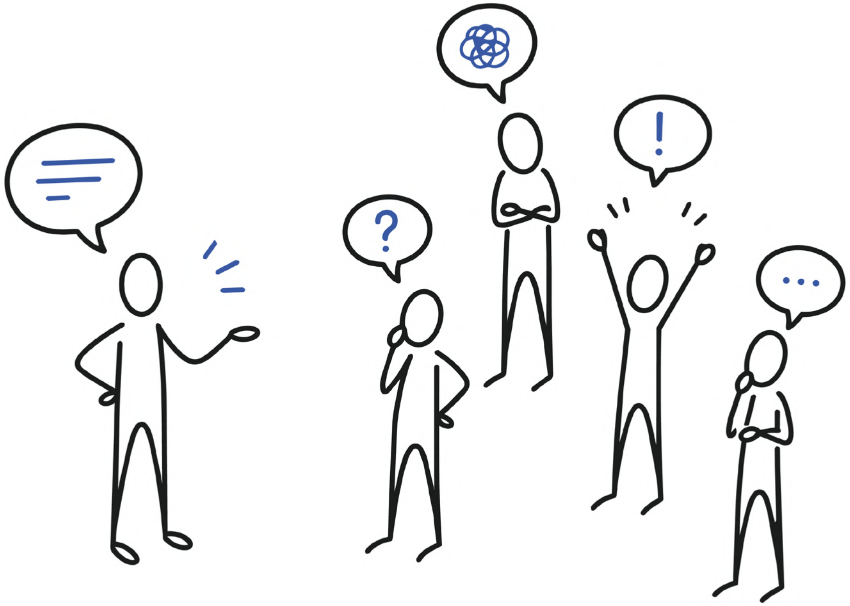


This same criticism – that the theory is easier than the practice – is true of two other elements that are often described as central to an effective transition: **the engagement of staff in the design of the change process**[4,10,11,13,25,46,49,54] and **clear organizational communication around the process.**[4,7,10,11,13,32–34,41,46,47,51,52,54] While all interviewees agreed in principle that these were important parts of a successful transition, in practice their experiences were more nuanced. Engagement and consultation were positive: They provided team members with a sense of agency, decreased uncertainty and bolstered feelings of self-worth, and so directly addressed some of the negative emotional impacts of the process. In some cases, engaging staff in decision-making – on future priorities and, particularly, on how to conduct the transition process – led to better decisions by providing information on how different options might impact work on the ground. But set against this, interviewees described how consultation could raise false hopes and lead to factionalism and ”ganging up” within teams. One manager who had been involved in a series of change initiatives concluded, “It’s better to have some consultation than none. You know, having experienced all the extremes of it.” Others concurred and highlighted the importance of setting clear limits around consultation in terms of time (“Short consultation works better”) and expectations (“Although it’s consultative, it’s not going to be consensus”). The message was that where engagement had happened (and this differed greatly across agencies) it was not a magic bullet and was not easy to do well.

Engagement of staff in the design and clear communication around the change process are central

Interviewees had nuanced feelings around the issue of organizational communication during the 2025 crisis. The majority of interviewees agreed that communication was extremely important: “During this uncertainty, communication is really key”; “[It] helps a lot for people to manage their anxiety”. Where the organization had communicated effectively, it was seen to have made a real difference – “That’s what enabled everything to work out in the end” – and where communication was not done, or done badly, it “poison[ed] the working environment”. Interviewees explained how **communication decreased uncertainty, and helped people to address shock and denial, to express and better understand their emotional responses, and to create a stronger sense of team identity and mutual support**. All of this, of course, required team leaders to go beyond ”broadcast” communication (where they simply relayed information from the organization) and engage in real two-way communication, by facilitation of group meetings and making time for one-on-one discussions. Interviewees said that it was important for the organization to ensure that managers were communicating common messages, and that these messages came from multiple levels in the organization (different organizations did this to different degrees).

But **the fact that communication was important did not make it easy to do in practice**. In particular, team leaders were often challenged by being asked to provide information that they didn’t have, or information about decisions that hadn’t been made. In the highly-charged atmosphere of 2025, saying that they didn’t have the information sometimes led to mistrust and rumours. Problems also occurred when team leaders communicated information on timelines or other elements of the process that was correct at the time, but which later changed. And some interviewees found that constantly communicating bad news was “choking” – it further damaged morale and, in some cases, created panic. In essence, while communication was important, it was not straightforward: **There was no single right way to communicate, and even skilled communicators could get it wrong**.

In the provision of HR support, …UN agencies have performed well

The final approach to making transitions as painless and effective as possible is the **provision of HR support**, in the form of contracts and entitlements that cushion the shock of the transition, and also in the form of direct support, such as counselling and personalized support in finding new employment.[11,15,17,41] This was an area where, generally, interviewees felt that UN agencies had performed well. Entitlements were seen by many interviewees to be generous, and agencies often used as much flexibility as possible around contractual processes to decrease the impact of the crisis on individual staff members (prioritizing voluntary separations; rehiring staff as consultants; regrading posts with reduced salaries; and even amending rules to make it easier for staff to be rehired). Several agencies also provided services such as career counselling and job search assistance, although these could be harder to access outside of headquarters. Some interviewees, in fact, felt that the entitlements to separated or relocated staff were “very generous” or even “extraordinary”, and that the main problem here was that staff members had unrealistic expectations of what the organization could, or should, provide.

How did managers respond to the effects of the funding crisis on their teams?

Every organization took a different approach to the financial crisis, and so the role of team leaders in the process differed from one organization to another. At the same time, there were many similarities across the interviews, both in what team leaders experienced, and in what worked when they tried to shield staff from the worst effects of the organizational changes.

One thing that all of the team leaders had in common was the fact that they were the link between decisions that were made by leadership and the implementation of these decisions by staff. This was not specific to the changes of 2025. It is generally the case that team leaders bear much of the responsibility for explaining the change plan to the team and putting it into effect. Therefore, **even in the best designed transformation programme, interviewees felt that "the most difficult position in the change is... middle management"**.

Team leaders were doing the change and going through the change at the same time

The specific context of the funding crisis made the team leader role more difficult for a number of reasons. In the first place, **many team leaders were also personally affected – losing their jobs, being relocated, or joining merged teams** (in some cases, with a loss of authority and responsibility): "You're doing the change and going through the change at the same time". This meant that team leaders had to oversee and support their teams, even as they experienced the same emotional responses of shock, anger, uncertainty and diminished trust in the organization: "The organization is expecting us to solve all these problems as we are being pushed out."

Often, particularly in downsizing exercises, **team leaders were expected to make very difficult decisions around which positions in their teams or offices should be abolished**. In the absence of overall strategic guidance (as described above), middle management was told that they needed to decrease budget or headcount by a certain percentage without guidance on which areas should be retained and which let go: “We needed to restructure the organization to fit within a specific envelope. So each office needed to work towards fitting into that envelope. And the decision was sort of left up to us”. One interviewee was more succinct: “This thing was dumped on us”.

One overarching theme was the importance of recognizing the human, emotional element of the change process

In many cases, **gaps in the organization’s planning of the change process also made the job of the team leader much more difficult**, as team leaders were left to plug these gaps. In particular, team leaders regularly identified the same organizational issues: poor communication around the process, which left them unable to answer questions from team members; a lack of guidance on contractual options and on how to make decisions around downsizing; and unwieldy policies and processes that were not well adjusted to the need to move quickly, and which left team leaders feeling that they were “fighting the system” that they were trying to save.

In the face of these difficulties, some managers withdrew or gave up. Some of the literature suggests that, in periods of transition, middle managers can become emotionally distant, or take a very rigid, rule-oriented posture, or become consistently angry and aggressive, all as ways of avoiding the uncomfortable emotional reality of their situation. Interviewees noticed these reactions in colleagues and, in some instances, in themselves. A common theme across many interviews was regret: “Not everything is perfect. Not everything is exactly in line with what we would like.” But it is important to recognize – particularly for high-achieving managers who are used to overcoming challenges and fixing difficult situations – that “so much of this is beyond your control” and you can’t fully make up, as an individual, for systemic or organizational gaps. Perfection was never an option.

Perfection was never an option

Despite these regrets, there was consensus among many interviewees around what worked in helping to make the impact of the changes less damaging.

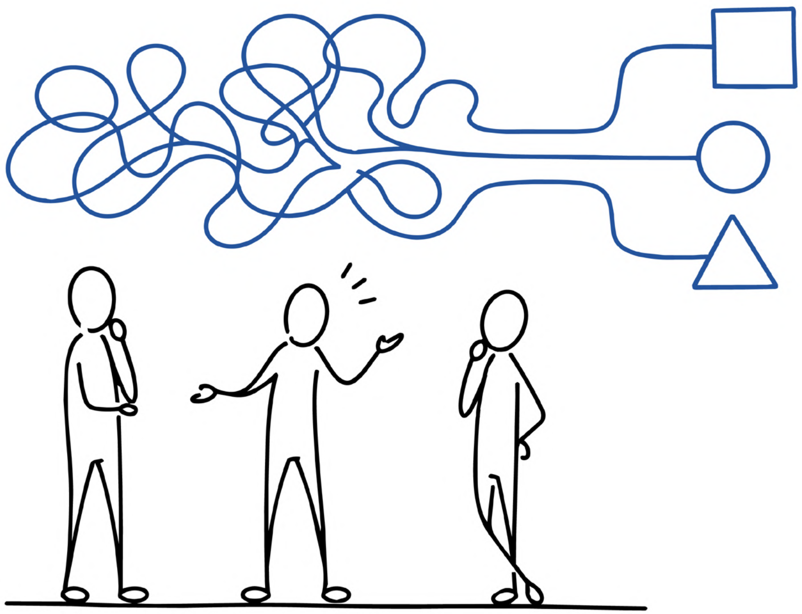
One overarching theme was the importance of **recognizing the human, emotional element of the change process**: expecting and being open to strong emotional and behavioural reactions among the team.[12,18,20,40] This was described variously as “empathy”, “a human perspective”, “kindness” and “having a human heart”. While this may seem obvious to some readers, interviewees pointed out that it could be difficult for UN managers: “The UN doesn’t hire managers for this sort of thing”. It also required managers to give significant time, and sometimes exercise significant self-control, at a time when they themselves were stressed or unhappy: “Sometimes staff just needed to vent, and I was the punching bag. And that was fine, you know, I tried...”.

Several interviewees suggested that the fact that they were experiencing a similar situation, and similar emotions, gave them more legitimacy to have more personal or “authentic” conversations with their team, and also helped them to better understand the situation of team members. As with all these effective managerial behaviours, though, this required a high degree of judgement, and a balance had to be made. On the one hand, “It would be wrong on my part to try to repress my desire to share”, but on the other, “Whatever I was feeling, I had to [...] be more focused on supporting my team to get through that transition”. The most effective team leaders were probably those who most often got this balance right.

A related, and important, theme was to **recognize, and work with, team members as individuals**. As noted above, many interviewees were clear that different team members responded to the same situation in very different ways, depending on experience, cultural background, expectations and personal circumstances. Successful team leaders recognized that “there isn’t a one size fits all approach” and spent “a lot of time understanding individuals” – “What gets them engaged? What gets them excited?” This meant making time for one-on-one meetings (often in informal settings such as having coffee or lunch together); asking team members individually what they needed from the team leader; and ensuring that people received recognition for their contributions to the team and to the organization during this difficult period. This was particularly important where team members were made redundant: Personal recognition may have helped the staff members who were leaving, and it also helped the remaining team to retain a level of affective commitment because they saw the organization treating people as individuals who mattered.

it was important to look at solutions, and not only at problems

Many interviewees talked about the **importance of injecting energy and agency into conversations** that could otherwise be negative and fatalistic. They thought it was important to look at solutions, and not only at problems and – particularly in situations where people had held expectations of long-term security inside the United Nations and were panicked by the prospect of leaving the organization – “thinking and realizing that there are other options out there”. This seems to have been most effective when a positive tone and orientation were supported by practical activities. For example, team leaders actively looked for information on job opportunities, conducted interview practice sessions, and encouraged team members to review one another’s CVs and cover letters when applying for new roles.



Recognizing the importance of their careers to many staff, and how they were affected by the idea that these careers were under threat, team leaders also **linked the changes to future career progression**. In downsizing exercises, this could mean reminding team members how their attitude and activities during the downsizing process might influence their future chance of being re-employed, and underlining how the experience of the process could become "a really good story of resilience and strength" that "makes you marketable outside". In relocations, some team leaders looked for career development opportunities – training or stretch assignments – that would help team members 'make up for' disruptions to their careers. In mergers, team leaders emphasized that the new team "brought a wealth of experience and knowledge together for one common purpose" and created opportunities for team members to "display and showcase" their skills, (re) building confidence in their ability to succeed in the future.

In the absence of any coherent message from organizations around future strategy and priorities, **team leaders found themselves rationalizing the changes to team members in ways that aligned with their values and made the changes easier to accept**. Team leaders suggested – and took some personal satisfaction from the fact – that the loss of their jobs was necessary for "the salvation of the UN" and "the continuation of the work of the organization". This helped, to a degree, to make the changes feel meaningful to those who had to leave and to those who remained. Similarly, managers leading teams through relocation underlined and discussed the "connection with the mission": that the relocation would allow their organization's work to be more impactful by working with new groups of stakeholders.

Team leaders suggested that the loss of their jobs was necessary for the continuation of the work of the organization.

Team leaders also **created opportunities for team members to support one another, building or maintaining the cohesiveness of the team**. This is, of course, important when a merger creates a new team,[6,23,55] but it can also be critical in downsizing and relocations, which the literature suggests can lead to less mutual support and higher levels of conflict within teams.[1,7,24] This often meant giving time and opportunities for teams to acknowledge and discuss the reality of their situation: "teams [that had…] more space to discuss and to talk, where leaders allocated [that] space… people felt calmer". It could also involve putting in place mechanisms where team members could learn from one another: interview techniques (in downsizing); new skills (in mergers); or practical tips for their new duty station (in relocation). Some team leaders also suggested that looking back and reviewing the experience could be a good way of bringing the team together.

Finally, team leaders **mentioned the importance of looking after themselves physically and mentally** over the course of the change process. Unfortunately, this was often a reflection on what they wished they had done, rather than a reflection on what they actually did. A common theme was the importance of taking some time and space to "step back, put things in proportion", and to recognize the limits of what they, as an individual, could achieve. Similarly, several interviewees mentioned the importance of putting energy into family relationships and friendships – and felt that they had overlooked these relationships at the time.

Suggestions for action

The financial crisis that the UN experienced in 2025 was sudden, deep and – for many – unexpected. Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that many organizations were not prepared to take radical action and in some cases struggled to follow change management good practice. Until the situation occurred, it would arguably have been difficult to justify spending time or resources to prepare for this type of shock, when there were more immediate problems at hand.

The United Nations needs to be ready to respond quickly and effectively to sudden and destabilizing changes.

This is not the case now. A key lesson of 2025 (and of the COVID-19 pandemic before it) is that the United Nations is not insulated from the pull of larger political, economic, technological, ecological and cultural currents; in fact, given the nature of its role, it is particularly exposed to them. This means that the United Nations needs to be ready to respond quickly and effectively to sudden and destabilizing changes.

On the basis of the experience of 2025, the following suggestions may help in preparing the United Nations to face a rapidly changing, uncertain future. At the very least, it is hoped that they might form the start of conversations within and between UN entities on how to prepare for an increasingly turbulent environment. The suggestions are grouped into four categories: For organizational leadership; HR departments; change managers; and managers/team leaders.

Suggestions for organizational leadership

Leaders in UN entities could consider:

- Creating in advance an **organizational strategy** – or series of options – **outlining how the organization will fulfil its core mandate with fewer resources**. This would involve prioritizing key functions that need to be preserved and identifying potential options for reductions, redesign (including use of AI), or handover to other stakeholders for other functions. Overall, it is important that these prioritized areas can be realistically achieved with a reduced budget.
- Establishing, in advance, **structures and mechanisms to allow for staff engagement** in:
  - The identification of organizational strategic options and priorities (above)
  - A design of the transition process that will allow the organization to meet these priorities.

  These engagement structures could also be designed to provide direct input from staff to leadership during a transition process to allow for immediate feedback and course correction.
- **Strengthening internal change management capacity at all levels** of the organization (executive office, leadership team, HR, internal communications and line managers), putting a focus on the capacities required to help the organization become more adaptive overall, rather than purely on managing individual (planned) change projects. Consideration should also be given to **how leadership can ensure overall coordination of change management and transition efforts**.
- When planning for and implementing responses to shocks, **looking for and using internal change management resources before outsourcing** to commercial companies that may not have as good a knowledge of the United Nations' unique political and cultural environment.
- When planning to respond to shocks, **considering how the organization will be able to continue to operate as effectively as possible while the transition plan is taking place**. In particular, consideration needs to be given to the allocation of human and financial resources to support the

process (allowing staff and managers to continue to focus on their work), and the need to continue core business when designing the timeline of the process.

- **Clarifying and clearly communicating who is accountable for which decisions** around the transition process.
- Recognizing that trust in the organization and its leadership is an important organizational asset and **considering how to maintain this trust over the course of the transition**. Some possible approaches include:
    - Reviewing decisions on the downsizing, merger or relocation to ensure that they align with the overall strategy and priorities for the future organization, and that they affect senior staff as well as more junior staff
    - Retaining high levels of visibility to, and communication with, staff during the transition process
    - Demonstrating that the organization learns from any transition process – by documenting leadership decisions over the course of the process, conducting after action reviews after the process, and sharing the results with staff.

Suggestions for HR departments

HR departments could consider:

- Creating a plan and deadline (through HR network) for completion of the **downsizing/ transition playbook that is being designed for use by HR professionals and managers**. The playbook could combine practical learning and experience from different agencies in 2025 and be easily customizable to the specific organizational conditions of different UN entities.
- Working at the interagency level to more closely **align HR policies and capacities between agencies**. As a first step, agencies might develop common multi-agency rosters to allow for more effective staff redeployment between agencies. They might also develop mechanisms for providing peer support across HR functions in situations of transition.
- Reviewing the experience of 2025 to **identify any policies and procedures which impeded the transformation process and considering how to adapt** these policies and procedures to allow for greater flexibility.
- **Aligning the organization’s workforce planning activities with the strategic vision** of the organization developed by organizational leadership (see the organizational leadership section above).
- Recognizing the difference between management skills and technical skills more clearly in **recruitment** and career development processes.

- Refining **performance management** processes to include the competencies required by managers and staff members to support organizational agility and manage rapid organizational change. Existing performance management process could be used during transitions to support the change process (by ensuring that performance conversations include space for discussions around shifting priorities and goals, for example).
- Developing and implementing training and **capacity-building around key skills and competencies required to support agile and adaptive approaches and successful rapid transformation**.
- Establishing mechanisms to monitor the impact of change on staff during and after the change process – for example in the form of pulse checks or surveys.

Suggestions for change managers

Change managers could consider:

- **Facilitating the development of a guiding coalition** within the organization to review and potentially implement the suggestions outlined in this section.
- **Building internal capacity** (in the change function and across the organization) to support both continual adaptation (an agile organizational approach) and rapid transformation in response to shocks.
- **Conducting continuous environment-scanning**, providing the results to leadership, and supporting leadership to plan scenarios on the basis of potential or emerging conditions.
- Facilitating **after-action-reviews** after periods of disruption and transition.
- **Contributing to the UNLOCK network** of change practitioners to learn across UN entities and organizations.

Suggestions for managers/team leaders

Managers/team leaders could consider:

- **Paying attention to the emotional and practical needs** of team members during transitions – both those who are leaving and those who remain. Recognising the situation and its impacts, time should be set aside for one-on-one conversations, and for developing activities that allow the team to communicate with one another.
- During transitions, **communicating** as much information as possible about what is happening, when and why. Consideration should also be given to when and how to communicate this information in order to prevent further damaging team morale.
- Practicing **managing upwards** and ensuring regular upward communication to ensure that all of

the information the team needs is at hand and that senior management is aware of team capacity and ability to take on extra work. Consideration should also be given to building these relationships and ways of communicating before a crisis occurs.

- During transitions, **helping team members to prioritize work**, linking priorities to a vision of how the team can best meet its objectives.
- Where teams are merged, taking time to **get to know new team members** and their work, and clarifying individual roles and responsibilities as soon as possible.
- **Building individual resilience** by blockingtime for physical, relational and/or spiritual activities. Again, this is best done over time, before a shock occurs.

Conclusion

The financial crisis in the United Nations in 2025 led to profound and rapid changes, including downsizing, internal mergers and staff relocations. While some people found the changes energizing, many staff members experienced a strong sense of dislocation and a variety of (generally negative) emotional responses.

Many team leaders found this extremely difficult, but their efforts mattered.

Middle management, and particularly team leaders, found themselves (as the name suggests) in the middle – trying to implement an organizational process while dealing with the impacts of this process on team members, and, at the same time, trying to keep the work of the team going. Many team leaders found this extremely difficult, but those interviewed for this study also showed great resilience, creativity and humanity as they attempted to navigate the situation. Their efforts mattered. At the same time, the report underlines that individual managers cannot compensate fully for gaps in organizational planning, communication, resourcing or strategic direction. Effective change requires attention not only to individual leadership behaviours, but also to the enabling conditions that allow managers and teams to navigate disruption well.

Effective change requires attention not only to individual leadership behaviours, but also to the enabling conditions that allow managers and teams to navigate disruption well.

Eighteen months from the beginning of the financial crisis, the effects are still being felt in UN offices around the world. This is perhaps most visible in high – and probably unsustainable – levels of overwork in many offices. The effects on morale, and on people's sense of attachment to the organization, are less visible but may be every bit as damaging.

Hopefully, this difficult period in the United Nations' history will provide lessons that help this unique and important organization to better respond to future crises. The experience of 2025 suggests that UN entities could usefully reflect on the experience of the past eighteen months and decide on how to prepare for similar events in the future. This will not be easy, and there are unlikely to be any simple answers. UN entities face significant operational pressures and multiple competing priorities, which they are addressing with reduced resources. They are generally designed for quality and consistency, rather than flexibility. They have complex governance arrangements and stakeholder relationships, and often rely on multiple and diverse programme- or location-specific funding sources. All of these factors affect the space and ability for transformation. At the same time, UN entities differ significantly from one another and face different constraints – and opportunities. Each organization will need its own path to becoming more adaptive and fit for rapid external change.

Recognizing these difficulties, this report provides some suggestions for how UN entities might build their adaptiveness and ability to respond to future crises. It is hoped that these suggestions can serve as a jumping-off point for change, and can be discussed, improved and prioritized according to the needs of each organization. For some, these suggestions might seem to be eighteen months too late. So the last word should go to one of the team leaders who took part in this study:

"It's important for people to start embracing that there is going to be a lot of change in the world in general [...] because of the pace of change of the world as a whole, its not going to be the last time we have to makes these types of changes."

Annex: Methodology, constraints and limitations

Methodology

The study used a structured literature review and key informant interviews to answer the two research questions:

1. How do downsizing, relocation and mergers affect teams, team leaders and team members in the United Nations and related organizations?
2. What effective approaches can be used to address the negative impacts of downsizing, relocation and mergers?

A literature review was conducted to provide preliminary responses to these questions. The aim of this review was to provide hypotheses that would help to develop the semi-structured interviews, and to provide information that could be used to triangulate interviews.

The literature review utilized a planning form with four core concepts (“context”; ”disruptive events”; ”team impacts”; and ”mitigation”). Each concept had a set of associated search terms (for example, the search terms for ”context” were “United Nations”, “multilateral organization”, “public sector”, and “NGO”).

A search was conducted using these terms across the databases Google Scholar, Business Source Premier and Psychinfo. Documents were returned where they were associated with at least one term for each of the four concepts. The search returned 2 results from Business Source Premier, 597 results from Psychinfo, and 23,800 results from Google Scholar. The abstracts of resources from Business Source Premier, and (ranked by citation) from the other two databases, were then reviewed against exclusion criteria:

- Duplicated resources (occurring in more than one database) were excluded
- Resources that did not describe situations of downsizing, relocations or mergers were excluded
- Resources that did not describe either the impacts of downsizing, relocations or mergers on organizational performance, teams or individuals or effective actions that managers or organizations took to mitigate these impacts were excluded.

This first review was conducted until 300 resources – 100 each for the three types of disruptive event (downsizing, relocations and mergers) were identified. From each list of 100, the reviewers then prioritized 20 resources (to give a total of 60) using the criteria of research quality and relevance. Systematic reviews were given first priority, with peer-reviewed articles receiving second priority and other document types third priority. For relevance, articles about the United Nations were given highest priority, and articles about commercial / private sector organizations lowest priority.

Separately, the reviewers conducted a review of UN documents that considered: three recent documents produced by UNSSC; UN Office of Internal Oversight Services evaluation reports from 2016 to date; and UN Joint Inspection Unit reports from 2016 to date. This review used the same exclusion criteria as the literature review and provided six documents for coding. In addition, a small number of documents describing the financial conditions of the United Nations and of agencies were consulted.

The shortlist was then manually coded using MAXQDA in a two-stage methodology, beginning with a pilot coding phase of three "anchor" documents for the two researchers to align and agree upon the analytical framework. Highest-level coding categories were: "Context: what happens and why"; "Immediate Impact", "Secondary Impact", and "Effective Responses". This resulted in 2,883 coded segments from 66 documents.

The second phase of the research involved interviews with UN managers. This was conducted using two groups of interviewees: a purposive sample of 11 team leaders in the UN and other intergovernmental organizations; and a convenience sample of a further 34 team leaders. All participants engaged on condition of anonymity. The 11 key informants were identified by members of the UNLOCK change management network, a community of practice involving change, organization development and HR professionals from across the UN. Selected UNLOCK members were asked to identify key informants in their organizations who: had been personally involved in downsizing, relocation or internal mergers during 2025; were involved in processes that were largely complete; and had been able to navigate these transformations with some success. Eleven key informants were identified from six organizations. * Of these, three discussed the transformations from the perspective of HR managers who had designed and implemented organizational responses to the situations, seven discussed them from the point of view of managers who had led teams (size between approximately 10 and 50+ members) during the period, and one discussed a historical case from before 2025. Informants participated in a semi-structured interview around a common interview format, lasting from 50 minutes to one hour.

The 34 UN staff formed a convenience sample based on participants from 10 UN or intergovernmental organizations (these 10 included the 6 organizations that had provided key informants).** They were identified through a call, distributed to UNLOCK members, for people currently leading teams through processes of merger, downsizing or relocation who might be interested in participating in peer coaching – "an opportunity to 'take a breath' and, with the support of their peers, consider their situation and that of their team, and how they can most effectively move forward." The peer-coaching exercise was designed to allow participants to describe a specific challenge that they were encountering, and to receive coaching and support from peers from other organizations who may be in a similar situation and who could use their own experience of what works to inform the conversation. It was made clear to participants that the primary objective of the peer coaching was to provide them with support to address challenges that they were facing, but that the conversations would be recorded, and the transcripts of the recordings would be coded as part of the research process. Participants were not given any instructions on the nature of the challenge that they should present, but all challenges were either specifically related to downsizing, mergers or relocations, or were exacerbated by these situations.

The transcripts of both groups were then coded, using a mixture of deductive coding (whereby interview themes were coded using the structure from the literature review) and inductive coding (where new themes emerged that had not been identified during the literature review). These interviews produced a total of 1,151 coded segments.

It is important to note that this research was conducted using qualitative, not quantitative, methods. This was partly a response to the research questions: As the nature of the effects under consideration was largely emotional and psychological (and so highly subjective), a method based on description – which gave interviewees the opportunity to describe the situation in some detail, and the interviewers to interrogate responses and so determine the degree to which constructs (such as “stress” or “effective communication”) correlated across interviews – was determined to be better suited to answering the questions than a method requiring the use of objective criteria and categories. It was also a practical response to the difficulties of ensuring a statistically representative sample of managers across the United Nations, given the twin challenges of delineating the universe of the research and constructing a sampling frame, and of ensuring effective rates of participation.

The two approaches to research use different methods to establish confidence in their findings. For quantitative research, it is especially important to ensure that the sample of people responding to the question is statistically representative of the entire population under consideration. This increases the confidence of the researcher and reader that patterns observed in the sample reflect those present in the population as a whole. Generally, this requires a large – sometimes extremely large – sample. For qualitative research, on the other hand, confidence in findings comes primarily from data saturation (ensuring that the sample has addressed all of the main themes related to the topic, by continuing interviews until no new themes emerge), purposive sampling (ensuring that interviewees possess relevant experience) and triangulation (cross-checking interviews against one another and against relevant literature). Here the size of the sample will tend to be much smaller, with emphasis put on selecting individuals and on triangulating responses.

In answering the questions for this research, both saturation and triangulation were used extensively. Saturation was fully achieved for the topic of downsizing (although see below, constraints and limitations, for the topics of relocation and mergers). The key points made in the report were extensively triangulated. Key points in the sections “How did staff experience organizational changes?” and “How effectively did UN organizations respond to the funding crisis?” were those where there was significant agreement between interviewees, and between interviewees and the literature. Where a point was contested – where interviewees disagreed with one another, or where they disagreed with the consensus view of the literature – this is noted in the text. Key points in the section "How did managers respond to the effects of the funding crisis on their teams?" relied mainly on triangulation between interviewees, as the literature review did not produce much information on this topic (most answers to the question related to effective approaches referred to organizational approaches, rather than to approaches taken by middle managers). In all cases, any quotes produced by interviewees were checked to ensure that they could not be associated with a particular individual and organization before being used in the text.

The final phase of the research was to produce suggestions for future action. Some suggestions were made explicitly by interviewees, or followed on from what interviewees said (essentially, suggestions to do more of what works). However, the semi-structured interviews were not designed to explicitly ask for recommendations. Instead, the authors invited an additional 15 key informants to an online meeting to make additional suggestions. These key informants were managers who had participated in the study and UN change practitioners who are UNLOCK network members. They received a draft copy of the report in advance and, at the start of the meeting, were also given a 20-minute presentation of key findings. They were then asked, in small groups, to make suggestions that would assist the United Nations to respond effectively to external shocks. Participants were asked to make separate suggestions for: organizational/ executive leadership, middle management and team leaders; HR; and change managers. Suggestions were made on an online board, and each participant then voted on the suggestions they thought would be most impactful. Those suggestions which received the highest numbers of votes, or which received slightly lower numbers of votes but aligned with interviewee suggestions, are presented here.

** IOM, UNICEF, UNHCR, UN Secretariat, UN Women, World Bank.*
*** Additional organizations were: The Global Fund, UNDP, UNODC, WFP.*

Constraints and limitations

The study encountered a number of constraints and limitations. With respect to the literature review, there proved to be very little relevant literature related to the United Nations or to other intergovernmental bodies. Consequently, much of the review considered literature based on national public sector organizations, which may not be entirely comparable.

One further consequence of this national (rather than international) focus was that the literature related to relocation often considered the effects of relocation between cities rather than between countries. This might be expected to have different, and perhaps more limited, effects. The literature on relocation also often considered the relocation of individual staff members, and not of whole teams or sections. Similarly, the literature on mergers often considered mergers between two organizations (inter-organizational) rather than between teams in a single organization (intra-organizational). As such, the applicability of concepts gained from the literature needed to be treated with caution, and concepts were only used where they clearly triangulated with the interviews.

With respect to the interviews, in many cases it proved difficult to differentiate between the separate impacts of downsizing, relocation and mergers, as interviewees were encountering these conditions at the same time. Overall, however, among the interviewees who spoke about only one of these situations, responses across the three situations were unexpectedly similar with respect to their effects and to what worked (the effects of relocation were similar to those of downsizing in many ways, as were effective responses). Where there were responses that were clearly related to one situation, and which differed from the others (for example, responses that related only to relocation), this has been noted in the text. A second constraint was the relatively smaller number of interviewees who spoke about relocation and mergers compared to downsizing: around two thirds of interviews or peer coaching discussions were primarily about downsizing. As a result, the study may not have achieved full saturation around the two topics of relocation and merger, although this is mitigated to a degree by the high degree of correlation between interviews on these topics and those on downsizing.

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