

Emergency volunteering: Leading engagement and retention

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Towards a
**National Strategy
for Volunteering**



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Emergency volunteering: Leading engagement and retention

Amber Tsai, Dr Toby Newstead, Dr Gemma Lewis¹

Key Insights

- Against the backdrop of increasing demand for well-trained, regular, and committed emergency response volunteers, organisations are struggling to sustain viable volunteer workforces.
- The significance and uniqueness of leading emergency response volunteers are gaining recognition, but more evidence-based strategies for developing the capability and effectiveness of leaders of emergency response volunteers are required.
- Leaders of volunteers play a crucial role in volunteer engagement and retention. However, being both a volunteer and a leader entails heavier workloads and more expectations. Greater attention should be paid to ensuring the infrastructure of organisations adequately support leaders of volunteers.
- Based on the existing research, leaders of volunteers may consider the following recommendations:
 - 1) Empower volunteers through effective delegation
 - 2) Identify the leadership potential of volunteers and create pathways for succession planning
 - 3) Promote teamwork in an inclusive manner
 - 4) Show support for the needs of volunteers
 - 5) Make time to listen to volunteers and communicate
 - 6) Represent the interest of volunteers and secure necessary resources.
- Recommendations for future research were made as follows:
 - 1) Identify the required, preferred, and actual leader behaviours from the perspectives of agency staff, volunteers, and volunteer leaders
 - 2) Identify enablers and barriers for volunteers to step up for leadership roles
 - 3) Conduct quasi-experiments.

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Background

When fires, floods, and other disasters strike, Australians around the country rely on the rapid, coordinated, and skilled services of emergency response organisations.² The network of emergency response organisations covering the nation is composed, predominantly, of volunteers. For instance, there are currently around 162 thousand firefighters in Australia and 90 per cent of them are volunteers.³ From road crash rescues, beach patrol, firefighting, and dealing with national disasters, emergency response volunteers show up on people's worst days and provide their unpaid, professional assistance. However, against the backdrop of the increasing demand for emergency services, in 2020, the Australian General Social Survey recorded the lowest volunteering rate on record.⁴ In addition, most emergency response organisations, are facing a worsening volunteer turnover rate.⁵ Concerns that sociodemographic changes such as work-family lifestyle, rural population decline, and preference for more flexible volunteer participation, seem to be coming to fruition and amplifying the problem.⁶

On a positive note, most emergency response organisations, scholars, and other stakeholders are aware of the challenges and continue working up possible solutions.⁷ But inevitably, tackling these challenges involves structural changes, which require comprehensive strategic planning that is long-term in nature.

Another way to ease the pressure in the short- to medium-term is to make sure that current emergency response volunteers do not resign from their roles for reasons that should be avoidable, such as poor leadership or negative atmosphere.⁸ According to Lantz's recent systematic review, leadership is a determining factor for improving the retention of volunteer firefighters.⁹ This is not surprising; effective leadership has long been linked with higher satisfaction, commitment, and the development of camaraderie between team members.¹⁰ Consequently, a common recommendation to ensure the sustainability of volunteer emergency response workforces is to provide leadership

2 The term is used to broadly categorise volunteer-involving emergency services organisations that provide primary disaster response and community safety such as fire, emergency, ambulance, and marine rescue services (McLennan, 2008). The terms emergency response volunteers and emergency response organisations are used due to the data relating to emergency and disaster relief and recovery organisations such as Red Cross, St John Ambulance and The Salvation Army.

3 Productivity Commission, 2022

4 ABS, 2021

5 McLennan, 2008; O'Halloran and Davies, 2020

6 Reinholdt, 1999; Parkin, 2008; Davies et al., 2018)

7 For example, Patch, 2021; Esmond, 2016; McLennan et al., 2021; McLennan et al., 2016

8 McLennan et al., 2008; Malinen and Mankkinen, 2018

9 Lantz, 2020

10 Fisher, 2009; Day et al., 2004

development programs to facilitate healthy group dynamics.¹¹ However, there is sparse research documenting the outcomes of these programs, and limited sources to help understand how existing leadership theories may be applied to the context of emergency response volunteering. In this paper, we synthesise research insights that may help develop the leadership capacity required to retain the volunteers that compose our essential emergency response organisations.

The uniqueness of leading emergency response volunteers

Volunteer leadership research offers some consensus on the differences between leading and managing volunteers versus paid employees. Essentially, volunteer leaders have less legitimate power or rewards to leverage volunteers to work toward organisational goals.¹² With the free will of volunteers to leave at any time, leaders of volunteers must be especially nuanced in demonstrating their leadership while meeting collective objectives.¹³ The absence of remuneration inarguably changes the nature of leader-follower relations within the volunteering context. While the need to respond to the uniqueness of leading and managing volunteers has been recognised, there is currently limited research on the topic.¹⁴

Emergency response volunteering again stands out from the other forms of volunteering, in which the reasons derived mainly from the substantial time commitment and high-risk volunteer activities involved.¹⁵ The skills and knowledge required to deal with emergencies in a safe and competent manner do not come effortlessly; most emergency volunteers are required to attend regular (weekly or monthly) training and to pass assessments to assure their readiness to provide emergency services.¹⁶ This represents a substantial amount of volunteer time and effort in and above any actual response services; and the equally significant costs for organisations to develop each volunteer.¹⁷ In addition, the configuration of leadership within emergency response organisations tends to be distinct from other grassroots volunteer involving organisations, with a prevalence of hierarchical, military-like ranking traditions.¹⁸

Emergency response volunteering tends to entail long-term engagement, substantial time investment, and high-risk activities – all of which contribute to higher expectations of and

11 For example, Esmond, 2009; Baxter-Tomkins and Wallace, 2009

12 Vieira Da Cunha and Antunes, 2022; Posner, 2015

13 Newstead and Lewis, 2021; Aitken, 2000

14 Studer, 2016; Almas et al., 2020

15 Mcnamee and Peterson, 2016

16 Esmond, 2016

17 McLennan, 2008

18 McLennan, 2010

additional constraints on emergency response organisations. Additionally, the contextual differences between urban and rural areas among volunteer-involving emergency agencies require extra attention in making plans for leadership development.¹⁹ Put simply, the issue of developing the leadership capacity required to mitigate declining volunteer numbers and retain emergency response volunteers across Australia is a complex task. This is a significant problem and an area where future research can make a major contribution.

Current efforts in volunteer leadership development

Research has an important role to play in facilitating the sustainability of emergency response volunteering. Australian scholars are stepping into leading roles in the academic field and their commitment to supporting the sector in practice.²⁰ Since McLennan and colleagues identified leadership as a key area for improvement through a series of studies on volunteer firefighters across Australia, subsequent efforts in developing the leadership skills of volunteer leaders are evident.²¹ For example, the Inspire Retain Engage program delivered by the University of Wollongong offers practical lessons for volunteer leaders from the fire and state emergency services to understand their potential to keep volunteers engaged and motivated, and was done alongside a PhD program that fills a gap from practice to science (Forner et al., 2020; Jones and Berry, 2017).²² The Recruitment and Retention Toolkit (www.bnhcrc.com.au/driving-change/tools) produced by the partnership between Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC, Curtin University, and the University of Western Australia for emergency volunteer leaders is another example of research supporting the development of volunteer leaders.²³

Supporting leaders of volunteers

The commitment and passion of volunteer leaders are invaluable for emergency response organisations in maintaining a viable volunteer workforce. While the existing research offers some clues for volunteer leaders in their efforts in driving volunteer engagement and retention, careful attention should also be paid to the fact that volunteer leaders are often both leaders and volunteers themselves. Volunteer leaders can be carrying a heavy load of expectations coming from their volunteers, organisations, and communities. But currently, little is known about how volunteer leaders, especially within

19 Davies et al., 2018; Aitken, 2000

20 Lantz and Runefors, 2020; Jones and Berry, 2017

21 McLennan et al., 2008

22 Forner et al., 2020; Jones and Berry, 2017

23 Patch, 2021

emergency volunteering, juggle the expectations and what motivates them to take on the extra workload involved in their roles.

The development of effective leadership takes time and the right resources in all contexts.²⁴ The infrastructure of organisations, such as administrative and decision-making structures, human resource management, and training systems, are paramount to supporting volunteer leaders.²⁵ A good start can be for the head of emergency services to establish good connections with their volunteer-based emergency agencies, such as examining who is responsible for guiding volunteer leaders, setting up short-term goals, and providing timely support and recognition.²⁶ Likewise, understanding that it can be particularly challenging for volunteer leaders to navigate the 'red tape' while learning how to lead and manage a potentially diverse cohort of people.²⁷ As suggested by Esmond, the head of agencies should acquire the perspectives of volunteers and ensure that the bureaucratic requirements are not working against collective goals.²⁸

Selected recommendations for leaders of volunteers

Leadership is often used to describe a process whereby an individual influences a group of people towards the achievement of a common goal.²⁹ Although the term leadership is rarely explicitly defined in the context of emergency response volunteering, the focus seems to be on what those with formal leadership positions should do to address group needs.

The following recommendations are derived from industry reports and research regarding the engagement and retention of emergency response volunteers.³⁰ Considering leadership is seldom the sole focus of such sources, insights from leadership literature are also drawn.³¹ It is important to note that most of the sources are focused on fire and state emergency services, and may require adaptation to make them more relevant to other emergency disaster relief and recovery organisations.

#1 Empower volunteers through effective delegation. Delegation is the process of assigning tasks to others and giving them the autonomy to complete those tasks. When done effectively, delegation can help volunteers feel valued and become more connected

24 Fischer et al., 2017

25 Ockenden and Hutin, 2008

26 Joseph and Carolissen, 2022; Ockenden and Hutin, 2008

27 Esmond, 2016

28 *ibid*

29 Yukl, 2013

30 For example, McLennan, 2010; Dwyer et al., 2020; Esmond, 2016; Aitken, 2000; Mayr, 2017

31 Yukl, 2012; Riggio et al., 2004; Waldman and Bowen, 2016

to the organisation. However, caution needs to be taken to ensure the volunteers are not overburdened with tasks and that delegated tasks are well-aligned to the individual strengths and abilities of the volunteer(s).

#2 Identify the leadership potential of volunteers and create pathways for succession planning. This could be done through conversations with volunteers about their experiences and skills and aligning this with their expertise and record of training and engagement. In addition to motivating the individual, it also helps to ensure the organisation has a pool of volunteers who can be ready to take on leadership roles when needed. However, caution needs to be taken to ensure that the work of paid employees does not get shunted onto the shoulders of volunteers.

#3 Promote teamwork in an inclusive manner. Factionalism or favouritism can be an issue for retaining new volunteers. Leaders are often the driver of camaraderie between members and create a sense of belonging, which can be important when volunteers are potentially 'burnt out' and feel like quitting. The awareness of gender, generational, and ethnic inclusiveness is also important to create a space in which all volunteers feel comfortable and respected. However, caution needs to be taken to avoid tokenism.

#4 Show support for the needs of volunteers. At different times, individual volunteers may experience barriers to maintaining their commitment to their organisation(s), such as time constraints, personal issues, or the stress associated with a traumatic incident. Leaders can encourage their volunteers to express concerns, and then make accommodations for a volunteer's situation in such times. By doing so, it can help to foster a more supportive work environment and encourage the volunteer to return when their situation permits.

#5 Make time to listen to volunteers and communicate. Effective communication is critical for establishing trust and accountability between volunteers and leaders. Actively listening to volunteers and including their opinions when making decisions will help volunteers feel a part of collective objectives. Clear instructions and open communication are also seen as crucial when different agencies are working together in an emergency. Caution must be taken to ensure communication is two-way, where the volunteers receive relevant information in a timely manner, and that volunteer voices are also heard and responded to.

#6 Represent the interest of volunteers and secure necessary resources. To maintain an effective operation and ensure sufficient resources are provided to volunteers, leaders are often expected to represent the concerns and perspectives of their volunteer teams in meetings with the management of organisations or other stakeholders. This could also require leaders to be proactive in learning both internal and external issues and keeping volunteers informed.

Recommendations for future research

Government agencies, research institutions, communities, organisations, and individual volunteers and leaders all have a role to play in ensuring the sustainability of volunteer-involving emergency response organisations. While volunteers fulfil the functions of disaster prevention, preparedness, response, recovery, and other year-round incidents, scholars can play their part by recognising the significance of emergency volunteering and conducting research that helps to facilitate the sustainability of the sector.

Leading volunteers is distinctive from leading paid employees,³² and emergency response volunteering may not be lumped together with other forms of volunteering, as the roles played by emergency response volunteers cannot be easily replaced by short-term volunteers.³³ The significance and uniqueness of leading emergency response volunteers present several opportunities for leadership research. Likewise, volunteer scholars should not shy away from leadership theories, since effective leadership mostly involves triggering the intrinsic motivations of others beyond financial rewards.³⁴ The following recommendations for future research are devised based on the gap between the two fields of research.

Identify the required, preferred, and actual leader behaviours from the perspectives of agency staff, volunteers, and volunteer leaders. Predefined leadership styles or qualifications of technical skills may not represent volunteers' ideal leadership and the required managerial behaviours. The importance of identifying volunteers' expectations and motives has long been recognised for improving volunteer engagement, but very little research has explored directly how volunteers would like to be led.³⁵ Comparisons can also be made between different organisations and demographic cohorts.³⁶

Identify enablers and barriers for volunteers to step up for leadership roles. While anecdotal evidence assumes those with leadership potential naturally find their way to the position,³⁷ it does not imply that some volunteers care less about helping their team to improve.³⁸ Little is known about how to encourage competent volunteers to step up or the possibility of allowing them to share the responsibilities with their leaders. Future work may also examine if the hierarchical nature of leadership in emergency response agencies and bureaucracy red tape can decrease volunteers' willingness to consider

32 Jaeger et al., 2009

33 Mcnamee and Peterson, 2016; O'Halloran and Davies, 2020)

34 Posner, 2015

35 Stukas et al., 2009; Phillips and Phillips, 2011

36 Boatwright and Forrest, 2000

37 Aitken, 2000

38 Ockenden and Hutin, 2008; Aitken, 2000

leadership positions.³⁹

Conduct quasi-experiments. Researchers may seek cooperation with organisations to document pre- and post-leadership development programs to examine changes in volunteers' attitudes and leaders' behaviours.⁴⁰ The findings can be valuable not only from an academic standpoint but also from a practical perspective, as the scientific rigour may ultimately inform policymakers on the effective ways of supporting volunteer leaders.⁴¹

Conclusion

On their worst days, Australians rely on the response of skilled emergency response volunteers, but volunteer numbers continue to decline. Structural changes at the national and regional levels may help mitigate this attrition, but they will take time. In the more immediate term, leadership represents a powerful tool to inspire the continued engagement and commitment of emergency response volunteers. However, to be engaging and to foster commitment, leaders of volunteers need to lead well. Leading volunteers well requires organisational support and increased awareness of the ways volunteers want to be led. By distilling specific leader behaviours and practices that might trigger volunteers' motivations to remain engaged and committed, future research can help ensure the sustainability of the vital emergency response volunteers our nation depends on.

39 Mex, 2018; McLennan, 2010

40 Podsakoff and Podsakoff, 2019

41 Davies, 2009

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