

The free-fall of volunteer leaders in Australian grassroots associations

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Towards a
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for Volunteering**



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The free-fall of volunteer leaders in Australian grassroots associations

Christel Lorraine Mex PhD¹

Key insights

- It is estimated there are almost half a million grassroots associations (small groups of volunteers who come together for leisure and social connectedness) operating in Australia today.
- Leaders of grassroots associations create organisations or take up leadership roles out of a sense of community need and personal passion.
- Poor leadership has a negative effect on regular members' attitude, their commitment, and the recruitment and retention of future leaders.
- 90 per cent of respondents from grassroots associations in South Australia reported pursuing their interests and using their skills were the top reasons they joined committees, closely followed by being a crucial part of their social life and learning new things. Many also reported being on a committee gave them a sense of identity and helped them feel needed.
- The primary barrier to joining committees is the misuse of power and internal politics, followed by lack of time, red tape, and a lack of self-confidence.
- The data identified many incidences of the misuse of power in committees including personality clashes, bullying behaviours, internal politics, and governance malpractice. This outranked 'lack of time' as the largest barrier to joining committees, especially by regular members.
- Current availability of volunteer leaders for grassroots associations is probably declining. 67 per cent of respondents reported their associations were experiencing difficulty recruiting leaders, compared to 49 per cent from associations with paid staff.
- More investment is needed in training leaders to improve committees' collective skills.

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Summary

Society benefits significantly from small groups of volunteers who come together for leisure and social connectedness. Generally known as grassroots associations, it is estimated there are almost half a million of these groups operating in Australia today. These associations are small and are run solely by volunteer leaders without the benefit of paid staff. They are the backbone of society and crucial for community connectedness, especially in rural areas. Examples include sporting clubs, service clubs, community bands, painting circles and local tourism groups. Despite the importance of these associations in civil society, there is very little research on them in Australia.

This paper helps to fill this research gap by presenting data on grassroots associations in South Australia. Through a mixed-methods research approach, the study argues membership numbers of these associations are declining with fewer members willing to step up and become leaders. The paper also identifies why, or why not, members choose to nominate as leaders, with many research participants reporting disturbing experiences while serving on committees. At the conclusion, integrated policy solutions are recommended based on the evidence uncovered in the data. These solutions include reducing red tape imposed by governments and insurers, more accessibility to volunteering infrastructure and capacity building programs to enable positive and supportive cultures within grassroots associations. The paper is an abridged version of a book chapter published in *The Routledge Handbook of Volunteering in Events, Sport and Tourism*.²

Introduction

I love the club I belong to, and volunteering has given me so many great opportunities that I would never have dreamt of. However, if you don't have a good spine (committee), none of this can happen!! (survey respondent)

Most Australians are involved in or touched by a grassroots association.³ Whether to enjoy a hobby, sport or generally serve the community, these undertakings cannot occur without volunteer leaders who coordinate activities and lead others.

In their qualitative study of volunteer groups in Australia, Leonard and Onyx (2003, p. 195) found community organisations were a 'valuable source of both strong and loose ties' and provided members with opportunities to expand their networks.⁴ A leading scholar of grassroots associations, David Horton Smith defines them as:

... locally based, significantly autonomous, volunteer-run, formal nonprofit (i.e., voluntary) groups that manifest substantial voluntary altruism as groups and use the associational form of organization and, thus, have official memberships of volunteers who perform most, and often all, of the work/activity done in and by these nonprofits.⁵

A volunteer leader is defined as any member of a committee or board of a grassroots association who does not earn a salary or receive remuneration. Nesbit et al. described leaders of associations as 'providing shared vision, direction and strategy; focus on motivating and developing people without the use of formal reward' and 'may include board members and chairs, elected volunteer officers, committee chairs [and] informal leaders'.⁶ Regular members of grassroots groups, by contrast, are defined as individuals who join an association to participate in the activities of the association but do not partake in any leadership responsibilities.

In South Australia, grassroots associations have been experiencing a long-term decline of members since 1985⁷ and the participation rate of people who serve on committees has fallen from 17 per cent in 2006 to 14 per cent in 2016.⁸ Many grassroots organisations are struggling, especially with replenishing their management committees. According to the *General Social Survey* published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), volunteering rates have declined from 36.2 per cent in 2010 to 28.8 per cent in 2019.⁹ In

3 Mex, 2019

4 Leonard and Onyx, 2003, p. 195

5 Horton Smith, 2000, p. 7

6 Nesbit et al., 2017, pp. 915-6

7 Mex, 2019

8 Harrison Research, 2016a

9 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019

addition, the survey also found involvement in social groups had fallen significantly in the same period, from 62.5 per cent to 50 per cent.¹⁰ The decline of volunteering in Australia has been an ongoing trend, with participation dropping during periods of economic downturn, particularly in the 1990s, with service clubs, sport and social clubs, and youth organisations, such as scouts and guides, being significantly affected.¹¹

The evidence from both the literature and data uncovered in this study suggests that fewer people are nominating to join volunteer committees in Australia. This reflects similar patterns overseas.¹² If the leadership ranks of Australia's grassroots organisations are in free-fall, can these organisations survive? Was Robert Putnam right to imply this type of volunteering will die out with the 'long civic generation', along with the 'civic torchbearers' of civil society?¹³ Or as others believe, it could be merely a case of the natural 'wax and wane' of group evolution, with people volunteering in different ways and other group settings?¹⁴

Review of the literature

There is little academic research on grassroots associations, and even less on their leaders.¹⁵ Most of the studies are written from the perspective of nonprofit associations that employ staff and engage volunteers through formal volunteer programs.¹⁶ Brudney and Meijs maintained that poor volunteering experiences could damage the reputation of volunteer involving associations across communities and reduce the pool of people willing to volunteer.¹⁷ As Posner observed in his study of sporting associations in the USA, volunteer leaders' poor behaviour is a significant problem due to the vast numbers of volunteers who are influenced by these leaders.¹⁸ Grassroot associations are becoming increasingly important worldwide, and there is a considerable lack of research on the characteristics and criteria for selecting their leaders.¹⁹ This, in turn, makes it more challenging for them to recruit leaders and build internal positive relationships within their associations.²⁰

10 *ibid*

11 Lyons, 2001

12 Nesbit, Rimes, et al., 2017; Posner, 2015

13 Putnam, 2000; Goss, 1999

14 Wuthnow, 1998; Rotolo & Wilson, 2004; Fischer, 2005

15 Schneider, SK & George 2011; Soteri-Proctor et al., 2017

16 Kunreuther & Edwards, 2011; Oppenheimer & Warburton, 2014; Posner, 2015

17 Brudney and Meijs, 2009

18 Posner, 2015

19 Nesbit, Rimes, et al., 2017

20 Hoye, 2006

Leaders of grassroots associations create organisations or take up leadership roles out of a sense of community need and personal passion.²¹ Many do not understand the extent of accountability and governance required upon incorporation. As Rochester pointed out, 'Management concepts such as control and supervision are alien to these kinds of organizations, which operate on the basis of teamwork and personal leadership'.²² In her in-depth case study of a Canadian softball league, Sharpe concluded that professionalism was a significant factor in the decline of its membership.²³ Volunteer leaders, who lead other association members, operate with restricted authority, especially since they are not paid employees and do not function under a command and control system.²⁴

While governance obligations and regulations may appear to be necessary and protect individuals, it introduces red tape for leaders and committee members of small associations.²⁵ This has been cited as the reason some people leave volunteering and leadership positions.²⁶

Despite the challenges, some grassroots leaders stay in leadership roles to keep their associations going. In the sport volunteer sector, Nichols called these leaders 'stalwarts', with their main motivations being a combination of altruism, recreation, and self-development, while detecting numbers declined due to over-work.²⁷ In some cases, committee members of grassroots associations gradually become entrenched and develop into what Huxley dubbed 'village Napoleons', managing their organisations in an undemocratic and dictatorial fashion.²⁸

The most demanding roles in grassroots groups involve leadership and coordination. Holmes et al. proposed organisations are better placed to convert people to volunteering when they recognise the barriers to volunteering and identify interventions that could help potential volunteers become more willing, capable, and available to volunteer.²⁹ It can be surmised from the literature that recent complexities of committee work have flow-on consequences to the quality of leadership in grassroots associations. Poor leadership has a negative effect on regular members' attitude, their commitment, and the recruitment and retention of future leaders.

21 Posner, 2015

22 Rochester, 1999, p. 18

23 Sharpe, 2003

24 Bowers, 2012

25 Hutchison & Ockenden, 2008; King, 2017; Pearce, 1993

26 Brueckner, Holmes & Pick, 2017; Kreutzer & Jager, 2011

27 Nichols, 2005

28 Huxley 1962, p. 152

29 Holmes et al., 2015

Methods

This study aimed to identify motivations and barriers to volunteer leadership in grassroots associations and explore potential recruitment strategies. A mixed-methods research approach was implemented with 12 focus groups, which informed a later survey of association members in South Australia. Focus group participants were from diverse interest areas including sport, arts, civic associations, recreation clubs, health services, emergency services and environmental groups. The survey was delivered through an email invitation to a list of 5000 associations in South Australia. A little over 1500 people responded to the survey, with 75 per cent of the respondents from grassroots associations.

Demographically, most of the respondents were from older age segments of the population which mirrored the profile of volunteers in South Australia.³⁰ Just over half of the returned sample were female at 55 per cent, which is also a similar ratio to all of South Australian volunteers.³¹ Most respondents were frequent volunteers, serving or participating in their association at least once a week. Most respondents volunteered with groups that were quite small, with 65 per cent having less than 100 members. There were over 5000 written comments within the survey which added rich qualitative data.

Results

Regarding the motivations for joining committees, the focus group participants agreed the most significant reason was to have fun and meet new people. One committee member said, 'we have a really good group of people who I've met through doing this ... and I get a buzz out of it'. Enjoyment was followed closely by self-satisfaction as a significant benefit of committee membership. 'You're helping other people who need help and I think that's most important', said a committee member. Several of the participants mentioned they could influence outcomes for the association by being on the committee and making things happen. As a young committee member said, 'I was frustrated with the governance and the structure in place, and rather than complaining about it ... I got involved'.

The survey respondents had similar views, but 90 per cent reported pursuing their interests and using their skills were the top reasons they joined committees, closely followed by being a crucial part of their social life and learning new things. Many also

30 Harrison Research, 2016a

31 *ibid*

reported being on a committee gave them a sense of identity and helped them feel needed. This concurs with Chetkovich and Kunreuther's findings that those who felt strongly about an issue, or express themselves in meaningful ways, often volunteered to lead associations.³²

In both the focus group and survey, regular members of associations were asked why they do not join committees, and committee members were questioned why they believed members did not participate. Focus group participants from both cohorts reported the primary barrier to joining committees was the misuse of power and internal politics, followed by lack of time, red tape, and a lack of self-confidence. Research in Australia identified workplace bullying as an issue for volunteers and paid employees,³³ and negative volunteer experiences are a barrier to future volunteering.³⁴ The mental anguish participants experienced through committee work was quite disturbing, as a regular member from a focus group reported:

... the politics can be so draining and I'm just shying away from it now. I want to be able to sleep at night without worry, worry, worry', and 'people who lie and backstab, they are poisonous on committees – and they tend to gravitate towards positions they see as powerful too.

The survey data revealed the current availability of volunteer leaders for grassroots associations is probably declining. 67 per cent of respondents reported their associations were experiencing difficulty recruiting leaders, compared to 49 per cent from associations with paid staff. Also, 78 per cent of respondents from grassroots associations reported minimal turnover in leadership, compared to 66 per cent from larger nonprofits. When asked what the main barriers were for people joining committees, the fear of responsibility was a leading factor, followed closely by the lack of time, perceived lack of skills, and disliking committee politics and personality conflicts were reported.

Another significant barrier to joining committees was the phenomena of 'red tape'. Red tape has also been well documented in the literature as a major barrier to volunteering in general.³⁵ The evidence of red tape raised in the focus groups ranged from macro-level regulations of state and local governments to self-imposed antiquated committee procedures embedded in constitutions. Survey participants elaborated on red tape over 200 times in open-ended comments, reporting that it made their work too complicated, took too much time and was a significant impediment. A focus group participant said, 'by the time you've done the health hazards, the food handling, risk assessments, you're snowed under with the red tape'.

32 Chetkovich and Kunreuther, 2006

33 Paull & Omari, 2015

34 Brudney & Meijs, 2013; Warburton & Paynter, 2006

35 Haski-Leventhal, Meijs & Hustinx, 2009; Obar, Zube & Lampe, 2012

The increasing complexity of leading grassroots associations, brought on by increased awareness of risk management and legal issues, requires a continuous updating of skills. Perhaps without these skills, leaders of grassroots associations become too rule-bound and fall back on command and control methods they experienced as employees. Focus group participants confirmed that the culture of committees could be too formal. As two regular members said, 'You can't just slip in a random comment about something, you have to always put it on the agenda beforehand' and, 'it was all so officious and rule-bound'. Whether these rules and regulations come from an external government authority or are imposed by the committee themselves, they need to be recognised as a significant barrier to committee work.

Another barrier reported, especially by regular members, was a lack of self-confidence to nominate for committees which stemmed from a sense of alienation and 'not feeling good enough'. 167 survey respondents provided comments regarding the issue, with one committee member commenting '[some people] feel they are inadequate to the task', and 'a lack of confidence and self-belief is a significant factor'. Nine focus group participants were 45 years of age or under. While often mentioning this feeling of alienation, they were also exasperated by what was perceived as old-fashioned and boring meeting procedures. Two young people from these focus groups said of attending meetings, 'it's a little bit daunting', and 'it's a bit of a spectacle ... ridged, alienating and separatist'. The presence of over-formality in meeting procedures seemed to increase the young regular members' feelings that they did not have the skills to be leaders.

Focus group participants cited good leadership as the most essential success factor for retaining committee members. They mentioned several attributes of good leaders, including conflict resolution skills, seeing the big picture and not getting bogged in minutiae and practical chairing skills. Other characteristics included the ability to delegate and motivate others, set direction, organise tasks and create a good culture by 'selling the vision ... to be part of something'. Some young committee members across the focus groups concurred and saw good leadership as being flexible and enabling. They cited examples of where they introduced changes such as specific working groups, breaking down roles, dealing with strong personalities and 'leading from behind'. This concurs with Boehm and Staples qualitative study, which found that successful leaders of grassroots associations were visionary, had good relationships with followers and emphasised collaboration.³⁶

Other reasons given for committee difficulties were a general declining of association membership and an ageing membership. These two are related as many participants observed young people are not joining associations, which gradually reduces the total

36 Boehm and Staples, 2006

number of association memberships, making the general pool of willing committee members much smaller. This pattern supports Putnam's argument about the decline of the 'long civic generation'.³⁷ One committee member in a focus group said, 'Our club was a very big club back 32 years ago, it's now down to about 45 members'. Other committee members had the same concerns stating, 'Committees haven't got new blood, younger blood, coming through', and, 'I think that what exercises all of our minds in every group I've been involved in, is how to get younger people involved and I don't know what the answer is'. The survey showed similar results, with 78 per cent of grassroots association respondents agreeing that their associations have mostly the same individuals serve on their committee's year after year. There were several comments made by survey respondents regarding oligarchic behaviours, such as 'it's hard to change a culture when the same people have done things the same way for years'. Many of the above reasons for committee difficulties are interrelated and can lead to barriers to committee participation. It poses the question, if improved governance and leadership could address these barriers, can more regular members be recruited to be leaders of grassroots associations?

Discussion

Unlike larger non-government organisations, these small groups do not have the support of human resource managers and access to training opportunities to build the capacity of volunteer leaders. Associations with paid staff often provide training in leadership practices to develop the capacity of leaders. The findings from this study indicated grassroots associations would benefit from this training. However, leaders of these organisations are operating on their own without support in an increasingly volatile and changing environment.

The data identified many incidences of the misuse of power in committees including personality clashes, bullying behaviours, internal politics, and governance malpractice. This outranked 'lack of time' as the largest barrier to joining committees, especially by regular members. This finding is related to the primary motivations for people joining committees in the first place. Individuals agreed to take up committee positions for personal satisfaction, enjoyment and making new friends. Suppose major barriers are not addressed, such as misuse of power and poor governance. In that case, it is logical to expect people will not join committees experiencing these problems as they are seeking a positive experience from their volunteering. Most grassroots associations operate at a local level, and it does not take long for word-of-mouth to publicise committee problems across a community. It can be assumed that many committees are unaware of their

37 Putnam, 2000

reputations due to the 'group think' that comes with oligarchic behaviours. Hence the significant barrier of misuse of power could go un-noticed in grassroot committees. As Posner found in his study of sporting clubs, the attitude of regular members of associations was heavily impacted by their leaders' behaviour.³⁸

When discussing barriers to join committees and committee difficulties, participants and respondents often talked as though they were one and the same. This was the case regarding 'red tape', which is both a barrier and a difficulty and can be imposed from outside or created by outdated internal governance procedures. Conversely, the reasons why people served on committees were often factors for success, such as enjoyment and a sense of satisfaction which help give organisations a good reputation and high membership levels.

Learnings for the data and literature indicate improving committee culture and policies should remove some of the barriers to serving on volunteer committees. Grassroot associations facing difficulties could consider improving their leadership practices, which may also increase membership numbers. This, in turn, would increase the recruitment pool for new committee members. For this to happen, more support needs to be available for volunteer leaders to improve their leadership practices so they can prepare for inevitable changes that are impacting grassroot associations. As Baggetta, Han and Andrews observed, more investment is needed in training leaders to improve committees' collective skills.³⁹

38 Posner, 2015

39 Baggetta, Han and Andrews, 2013

Conclusion

The biggest challenge for grassroots associations facing a decline of members and leader nominations is to recognise there is a problem and that the root of the problem might be poor organisational culture and negative behaviours. Trzcinski and Sobeck found associations who were willing to change and listen to their members were more likely to succeed and even grow.⁴⁰ As Barnes and Nelson remind us, ‘by looking ahead and breaking with tradition when necessary, associations can cultivate membership growth and engagement’.⁴¹ The importance of grassroots association should be more acknowledged by all levels of government and the volunteering infrastructure. Without the thousands of small sporting clubs, craft groups, resident groups, men’s sheds, service clubs, advocacy and self-help groups, many Australians would be living in isolation, with consequences for mental and physical health. Our democracy would also be weakened as fewer people are engaged in civic society. The leaders of grassroots associations, who are vital to civil society, need capacity building and access to support. This assistance, in the form of education, training and policy improvements, will help their organisations become more sustainable for the long-term benefit of Australian society.

40 Trzcinski and Sobeck, 2012

41 Barnes and Nelson, 2014, p. 15

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