

# Without leadership there is no volunteering: The importance of strategic investment in leadership development in Australia

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Towards a  
National Strategy  
for Volunteering



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The Volunteering Research Papers aim to capture evidence on a wide range of topics related to volunteering and outline key insights for policy and practice. The Volunteering Research Papers are peer reviewed, and insights will directly inform the development of the National Strategy for Volunteering.

The Volunteering Research Papers are an initiative of the National Strategy for Volunteering Research Working Group.

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# Without leadership there is no volunteering: The importance of strategic investment in leadership development in Australia

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## Key Insights

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- Effective leadership is a pre-requisite for volunteer satisfaction, performance, and retention.
- Leaders of Volunteers often have the necessary skills and competencies, but the competing demands of their role can force them to sacrifice relationship-building for administration, resulting in poorer outcomes for their volunteers, organisation, and the beneficiaries of their work.
- A good amount of leadership expertise already exists within the volunteering ecosystem, and this should be acknowledged and leveraged through an ongoing and substantial investment in leadership development.
- Volunteers and volunteer involving organisations are a workforce in their own right and it is critical that this is accordingly recognised and resourced by public policy.

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## Introduction

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Leadership plays a critical role in enabling a robust and sustainable volunteering ecosystem. Leaders of Volunteers<sup>5</sup> operate at the forefront of organisations, communities, and volunteers. Academic research offers evidence attesting to the importance and impact of leadership on volunteer motivation, retention, engagement, performance, satisfaction, and the overall sustainability of the volunteer workforce.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, dissatisfaction with leadership is often cited as a reason for volunteer turnover.<sup>7</sup>

Undoubtedly, leading volunteers is more challenging than leading a paid workforce. Volunteers are distinctly different from paid employees, as they are primarily driven by altruistic or affiliative motives; they have no contractual obligations to their organisation nor do they depend on it to make a living, and they have more flexibility in joining or withdrawing from an organisation.<sup>8</sup> Unsurprisingly, Leaders of Volunteers report difficulties in navigating the use of (legitimate) power<sup>9</sup> and must adapt their leadership style to meet volunteers' needs.<sup>10</sup>

Despite known evidence of the importance of effective leadership, this pivotal role is poorly understood and underestimated in the volunteering ecosystem. Leaders of Volunteers are primarily seen as *administrators*, which undermines the critical role they play in enabling effective volunteering, volunteer satisfaction, and retention. This mistaken view of the role has meant a lack of investment in leadership development, including the importance of skills such as communication, influence, motivation, engagement, and inclusion, among many others.

In this paper, we briefly review existing scholarly evidence on effective volunteer leadership. We consider key challenges faced by Leaders of Volunteers in Australia and the role volunteer leadership development can play in addressing these challenges. We conclude with policy implications, strongly advocating for strategic investment in volunteer leadership (including development) as critical to ensuring the sustainability of volunteering in Australia.

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5 We use term 'Leader of Volunteers' here to refer to any Manager/Coordinator/Program Manager that has responsibility for supporting volunteers in an organisation (whether they are paid or unpaid)

6 Benevene et al., 2018

7 Baxter-Tomkins & Wallace, 2009; Milbourn et al. 2019

8 Englert et al., 2020; Fallon & Rice, 2015

9 Jaeger et al., 2009; Studer, 2016

10 Posner, 2015

## Effective Volunteer Leadership

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Within a volunteering context, effective leadership involves many different functions. These include providing a welcoming and inclusive environment, ensuring volunteers find meaning in their work, acknowledging effort and contribution, remaining vigilant about volunteer mental health and wellbeing, ensuring interpersonal relationships are positive and enriching, ensuring outputs are aligned with organisational mission, recognising any simmering issues, engaging in difficult conversations when needed, matching the right volunteers to the right roles, providing training and development, and motivating continued engagement and commitment. Both ability and efficacy in undertaking these (and other) functions have a pronounced effect on volunteer motivation, performance, and retention (see Forner et al.'s Volunteering Research Paper, *The great (volunteer) resignation: An evidence-based strategy for retaining volunteers*, for an extensive discussion of predictors of volunteer retention).

Volunteers know they will not be paid, but they still expect some other exchange for their time.<sup>11</sup> Often implicitly, volunteers expect that their volunteering experience will somehow meet and fulfil their needs and motivations. But meeting volunteers' needs and motivations is not easy nor straightforward and leaders play a critical role in this.

People are motivated to commence and remain volunteering for a variety of reasons, and each motive suggests a different suite of corresponding leader behaviours that may be appropriate to trigger and sustain volunteer motivation.<sup>12</sup> Further to this, volunteer motivations and needs continue to evolve over time.<sup>13</sup> The *diversity of volunteer motivations* necessitates nuanced leadership, with research evidence offering some clues as to leadership effectiveness in this context.

One theory that has been extensively studied in relation to volunteer needs and leadership is self-determination theory (SDT).<sup>14</sup> Briefly, SDT suggests the satisfaction of basic psychological needs – autonomy, belongingness, and competence – are essential to growth and wellbeing. These factors also have a strong influence on a range of volunteer behaviours, including intention to leave<sup>15</sup> (see Stukas and Wilson's Volunteering Research Paper, *Understanding motivations to volunteer*, for an extensive discussion of volunteer motivations and self-determination theory). SDT informs the autonomy-supportive leadership style, which involves behaviours that aim to address

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11 Kappelides, 2017; Wang & Yu, 2015

12 Kim et al., 2018

13 Kragt & Holtrop, 2019

14 Deci & Ryan, 2000

15 cf. Haivas et al., 2013; Oostlander et al., 2014

volunteers' psychological needs, such as encouraging personal initiative, offering choice, supporting people's competence, providing optional challenges, and fostering meaningful relationships between volunteers.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, evidence suggests the perception of personal importance and needs satisfaction are more salient in a volunteering context.<sup>17</sup> This means Leaders of Volunteers need to do more to make volunteers *feel important* and *meet their needs* than do leaders of paid employees. Effective Leaders of Volunteers commonly exhibit transformational leader behaviours, high socialisation, and a humanistic orientation. Transformational leadership is another established leadership theory most applied within volunteer leadership research.<sup>18</sup> This style of leadership involves several key behaviours, such as considering individual needs, inspiring and motivating, and influencing through focusing on a common goal.<sup>19</sup> Transformational leadership has been consistently shown to be positively correlated with volunteer retention, engagement, commitment, and satisfaction.

Other leadership styles and approaches, such as inclusiveness, are also vital within the volunteering context. Leaders of Volunteers are tasked with overcoming and navigating the barriers, negative attitudes, and lack of *inclusion* regarding volunteers with disability<sup>20</sup> or any other marker of diversity, such as race, gender, ethnicity, or language. Inclusion is a whole of organisation issue; at a strategic level it sits with the top leaders such as the Board and Executive Team (or equivalent) of a volunteer involving organisation (VIO), and at the coalface, it sits with the daily actions and interactions of Leaders of Volunteers. Inclusion is a fundamental component of effective volunteering programs, and it constitutes another consideration and demand on Leaders of Volunteers.

## Key Issues in Volunteer Leadership

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Whilst research on leadership of volunteers is scant, one study of volunteer firefighters found that over a third stopped volunteering due to poor leadership.<sup>21</sup> Unsurprisingly, government bodies,<sup>22</sup> volunteer involving organisations,<sup>23</sup> and academic researchers have all called for increased focus on training and developing Leaders of Volunteers. From

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16 Gagné, 2003, Forner et al, 2021

17 McCormick & Donohue, 2019

18 Almas et al., 2020; Catano et al., 2001; Chan, 2020; do Nascimento et al., 2018; Rowold & Rohmann, 2009

19 Bass & Riggio, 2006

20 Kappelides & Spoor, 2019

21 McLennan et al., 2009

22 Auditor General NSW, 2014; Office of the Auditor General Western Australia, 2015

23 Victoria Emergency Service Association, 2016

the perspective of Leaders of Volunteers there are three key challenges that impact their ability to effectively undertake their leadership role: resourcing, identity, and training.

First, Leaders of Volunteers are overextended and under-resourced. Nationally, 51 per cent of charities operate without paid staff and for every employee in small charities there is an average of 26 volunteers.<sup>24</sup> Leaders of Volunteers are usually expected to manage a significant number of volunteers, whilst juggling multiple other responsibilities.<sup>25</sup> Unsurprisingly, Leaders of Volunteers consistently report a tension between leadership and administration. Whilst they recognise the criticality of leadership, they report the substantial investment required to foster relationships with volunteers is inhibited by the administrative burden. From a human resourcing (HR) perspective, it can take many volunteers to deliver one full-time equivalent position and each volunteer requires the same individual onboarding, support, and recognition.<sup>26</sup> Along this vein, the HR requirements of administering a volunteering program can substantially exceed those in a comparable employment context, yet Leaders of Volunteers are regularly required to perform this function with little resourcing or support.

Second, self-identification as a leader is critical to leadership behaviour and effectiveness,<sup>27</sup> yet many Leaders of Volunteers do not identify as leaders as evidenced in a 2019 study of Tasmanian Volunteer Coordinators. When asked how they identify, 100 per cent of participants selected 'manager' over 'leader'.<sup>28</sup> Lack of leadership identity means individuals are less likely to develop a practice of leadership and less likely to cultivate leadership in others. Lack of professional identity and standards and lack of executive support and understanding are commonly cited challenges experienced by Leaders of Volunteers.<sup>29</sup> These challenges further undermine their role, exacerbating lack of leader identity within organisations.

Third, training and development for Leaders of Volunteers receive inadequate funding and resources. This limits organisational capacity building and the long-term viability of volunteering. Leadership training and development are essential, yet Leaders of Volunteers lament the shortage of specialised training opportunities for their profession.<sup>24</sup> Leaders of Volunteers consistently report being time-poor, detracting from their ability to engage in learning and self-development, yet this trade-off results in poorer outcomes for volunteers and volunteering programs.

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24 ACNC, 2021

25 Kappelides & Johnson, 2020

26 Newstead & Lewis, 2019

27 Kragt & Day, 2020

28 Newstead & Lewis, 2019

29 Kappelides & Johnson, 2020

Furthermore, there are several major limitations with leadership training and development practices in Australian volunteer involving organisations. Leadership development is inhibited due to lack of access, funding, and/or resources. Available courses tend to focus on the operational aspects of management, rather than building interpersonal and relational capabilities. Existing programs are also rarely adapted to the unique volunteering context. Generic, off-the shelf leadership programs from a paid employment context may not be relevant, suitable, or reflect the nuances of engaging and supporting volunteers.

Finally, the typical approach to volunteer leadership succession tends to be reactive, filling vacant leadership positions with whoever is available internally, without assessing whether they have the appropriate skills and motivations. Another common approach to leadership succession is promoting the most 'senior' person to the role rather than deliberately identifying and recruiting the right fit based on the organisation's needs. These tendencies exacerbate the leadership challenges experienced by and within organisations and underscore the need for proactive succession planning.

## Leadership Development in the Volunteering Context

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Strategic investment in leadership training and development is necessary to address key issues and challenges with volunteer leadership in Australia. Effective training programs and development pathways are required to equip leaders with the skills and knowledge to better support their volunteers and communities. Professional development of Leaders of Volunteers will elevate their role and importance through recognition of the unique function they play in the volunteering ecosystem. Leadership development also contributes to the development of leader identity and leadership effectiveness.<sup>30</sup> Finally, development opportunities will help to attract and retain more volunteers.<sup>31</sup>

### Theoretical Frameworks

A strong theoretical foundation for evidence-based content is a critical component of effective leadership training.<sup>32</sup> To achieve the greatest impact and return on training investment, the leadership model or framework being taught must be underpinned by research and have sufficient evidence for impact and relevance in the volunteering context. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has substantial utility for leadership education because it provides an empirical framework for understanding effective volunteer leadership. Consequently, SDT is increasingly being used as an evidence-based

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30 Kragt & Day, 2020

31 Newton et al., 2014

32 Avolio et al., 2009



framework to guide and inform leadership development strategies in Australia.<sup>33</sup>

Despite a large body of research on effective leadership development and training,<sup>34</sup> studies in volunteer involving organisations are rare. One study investigated the impact of an interpersonal leadership training program for Leaders of Volunteers in emergency service agencies across New South Wales, Victoria, and Queensland. The nine-week SDT-based program comprised a blended approach to learning, application, and sharing. The program was found to be effective in improving leaders' interpersonal approach and enduring changes remained one year later.<sup>35</sup> Other established leadership theories, such as transformational leadership<sup>36</sup> or adaptive leadership<sup>37</sup> also show promise for a theoretical framework to inform evidence-based volunteer leadership development. However, overall, there is currently limited research into the effectiveness of any training and development interventions for Leaders of Volunteers.

## Training Design

Training design plays an important role in ensuring the effectiveness of leadership development. A meta-analysis of more than 300 leadership training studies has identified several key dimensions for training design.<sup>38</sup> Formal training methods, where the focus is on presenting information (e.g., lectures, presentations, text-based training material), are not effective on their own. Leadership programs that incorporate a blend of learning activities and delivery methods (e.g., mentoring, self-reflection, role plays, simulations) are significantly more effective in achieving learning and behavioural change outcomes. Experiential learning and practice-based training methods, where leaders have opportunities to apply and practice their new skills and knowledge, have the most significant influence on leadership development outcomes. Finally, leadership training programs that span multiple sessions have significantly greater effects on training transfer than those delivered as one massed program.<sup>38</sup>

## Training Evaluation

Given the lack of research into optimal leadership development for Leaders of Volunteers, future programs should incorporate robust evaluation to measure efficacy. Ongoing data collection that supplements the standard practice of obtaining post-training feedback from participants is important for measurement and evaluation. Evaluation should measure the impact of leadership training and development on Leaders of Volunteers, volunteers, the

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33 e.g., Muhammad Farid et al., 2020

34 Lacerenza et al., 2017

35 Forner, 2019

36 Almas et al., 2020

37 Owen et al., 2015

38 Lacerenza et al. 2017

broader organisation, and the communities they serve.

## Recognising, Valuing, and Leveraging Lived Experience

Exceptional Leaders of Volunteers are everywhere, and their extensive experience is under-recognised and under-valued. They are dynamic, creative, and passionate, and their commitment exemplifies the importance of their profession. They have a crucial role to play in mentoring, developing, and supporting the next generation of leaders and they are best positioned to provide stewardship of meaningful leadership development.

## Policy and Practice Implications

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Although there is a scarcity of fit-for-purpose leadership training in the volunteering ecosystem, we do have a plethora of knowledge and experience amongst volunteering professionals. Leaders of Volunteers already demonstrate many of the skills targeted by leadership development: how to be inclusive, how to motivate and inspire others, how to use resources creatively, and how to help people understand the impact of their contribution.

Future investment in purpose-built leadership development activities must recognise the criticality of reflecting best-practice volunteer involvement. Embedding lived experience in leadership training design<sup>39</sup> will both improve its relevance and efficacy and strengthen leader identity in those who contribute. Finally, the voice of volunteers cannot be forgotten in any attempts to strengthen leadership capabilities in the volunteering ecosystem. Volunteers are ultimately the ‘beneficiary’ of leadership, and their input should be considered an essential pillar of training design.

The volunteering ecosystem should consider leadership training and development as central pillars of sustainability. Government grants and tenders should account for the true cost of involving volunteers, including an overhead for professional development. Volunteer involving organisations should ensure annual budgets have provisions for leadership development and training, such as training for emergent leaders and succession planning. This includes providing leaders and emerging leaders with time to develop and practice their skills.

From a policy perspective, it is critical that we advocate for the importance of leadership development in volunteer involving organisations, including grassroots associations and community groups. The volunteering ecosystem is a workforce, no different to any other industry where professional development is implicitly valued, planned, and budgeted

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39 For example, Forner et al., 2021

for. This includes proactively identifying future leaders and embedding leadership development in succession planning.

## Conclusion

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The Australian volunteering ecosystem does not have a leadership development strategy in place. There is no nationally consistent approach to building effective volunteer leadership through training, leadership pathways, or ongoing development. Given quality leadership is critical for creating a positive volunteering experience, where volunteers are satisfied, have improved wellbeing, are committed, and have pathways to create meaningful change, it is crucial that volunteer involving organisations, governments, and funders prioritise investment in developing Leaders of Volunteers.

This investment should start with recognition that leading volunteers requires an exceptional amount of talent and skill. Experienced Leaders of Volunteers should be empowered to co-design solutions based on their expertise and encouraged to play an active role in developing leadership capabilities in others. Likewise, volunteers, as the beneficiary of leadership, should play an active role in shaping what good leadership looks like and how it can enable and empower them to undertake their role. Strategic investment in re-designing training and development activities for Leaders of Volunteers will have a demonstrable impact on volunteers and the beneficiaries of their work, which is a pivotal element of creating vibrant, inclusive, and liveable communities and creating meaningful social change.

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