

The Emergency Service Volunteer Management Framework

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Current high turnover rates among emergency services volunteers are concerning given the pivotal role they play in emergency services organisations. Each 'lost' volunteer reflects a loss of valuable skills and experience on top of the financial loss associated with training.

Over the last five years, the Department of Fire and Emergency Services (DFES) in Western Australia has investigated ways to improve the volunteer experience and retention. One significant concern arose around the preparedness of volunteer leaders to effectively manage their brigade, group, or unit (BGU). To address this, DFES partnered with the University of Western Australia to investigate gaps in leadership capability to create a framework to manage volunteers that would provide concrete support for volunteer leaders.

Development of the framework was informed by a review of evidence-based best practice in volunteer and emergency services management, survey data from over 3800 volunteers and consultation involving interviews with DFES staff, volunteers, volunteer leaders and volunteer associations. Consultation revealed that, while volunteer leaders were operationally capable, many struggled with managing and leading people. Leaders reported being overwhelmed with the amount of work their role entailed (some spent up to 40 hours per week running their BGU on top of full-time work), struggling to deal with conflict and difficult personalities and having no succession plans. Reports from volunteers highlighted factionalism within BGUs, concerns about knowledge 'hoarding', ineffective or insufficient feedback and inflexible leadership styles.

The content of the framework was based on areas where volunteer leaders needed support as well as evidence-based recommendations around the leader behaviours that affect volunteer satisfaction. The management practices described in the framework are designed to help volunteers feel more competent, have ownership over their work and feel like they belong. Research shows that providing support in these three areas leads to improvements in volunteer motivation, satisfaction and retention. The framework was designed for use by volunteer leaders and is tailored to volunteers and emergency services workforces.

The Volunteer Management Framework and accompanying resources provide leaders with guidance in ten areas of volunteer management:

- Effective and ineffective influence tactics to use with volunteers.
- Sharing knowledge and information with volunteers and creating a knowledge-sharing culture.
- Effective delegation of both tasks and responsibilities, including a three-step process of delegation and tips for making it work.
- Including and involving all volunteers in BGU activities, seeking volunteer input and considering what to do before involving volunteers.
- Recognising and rewarding volunteer contributions through informal and more tangible means.
- Guidelines for providing good constructive feedback with specific examples.
- Tips to encourage and effectively use upwards feedback from volunteers.
- Conflict prevention, management and resolution strategies.
- Succession planning, both in managing volunteers' careers as they become less physically able and developing future leaders.
- Different leadership styles applicable to the emergency services and how to adapt leadership approaches to different situations and audiences.

The framework is available online to all volunteer leaders and DFES staff. Other volunteer-based and emergency services organisations wishing to use these resources can contact DFES for copies.

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