

Better brigade leadership enhances retention of volunteers. What is better leadership?

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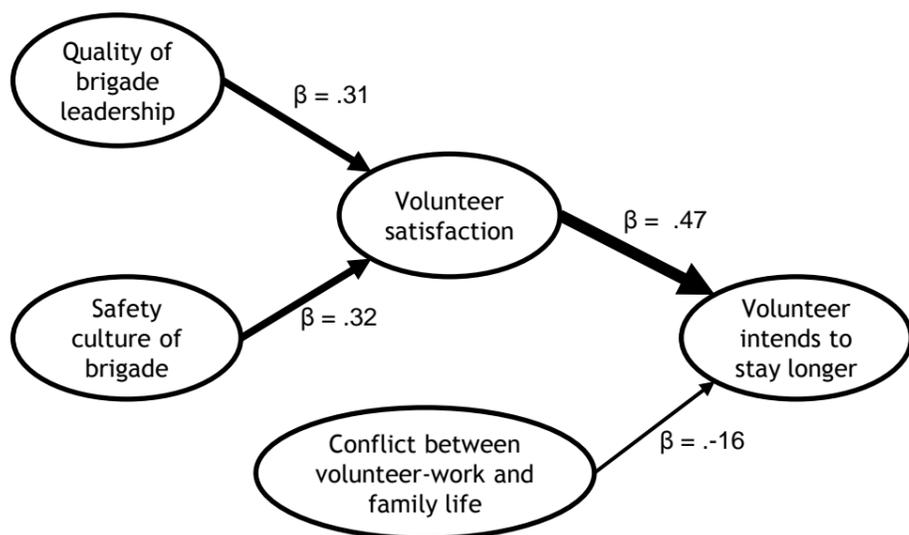
Australia's volunteer-based fire agencies are concerned to ensure that they have adequate numbers of volunteer fire fighters now and in the future. They report turnover rates of 6-10% per annum, and about one third of volunteers have less than 5 years experience. Retaining existing volunteers for longer will increase overall numbers and improve the average length of experience of volunteers.

We explored the potential role of brigade leadership in keeping volunteers longer, and the views of volunteers, fire agency managers and current brigade leaders on what constitutes a good brigade leader.

The role of leadership in improving retention

Analyses of data from several of our studies suggest that volunteers who report higher levels of satisfaction with brigade life, also tend to report stronger intentions to remain a member for longer.

Structural Equation Modelling Analyses of data from a large survey of volunteers confirms that reported "satisfaction" is moderately associated with reported intention to remain with a brigade for longer. The analyses further show that higher perceptions of both (a) the quality of brigade leadership, and (b) the safety culture in a brigade, moderately determine "satisfaction". Conflict between volunteer-work and family life had a weak negative impact on reported intention to stay.



What volunteers think

All the skills and behaviours listed below were rated important, but some more so than others.

Important skills

Higher-rated

- Promoting teamwork
- Helping new members to mix with others
- Keeping members informed

Lower-rated

- Disciplining members
- Managing discontent and factionalism
- Holding members accountable for their actions

Important behaviours

Higher-rated

- Honesty & trustworthiness
- Fairness and equity
- Leadership by example ("walk the walk")

Mid-rated

- Keeping skills & knowledge up to date
- Listening to people's concerns
- Balancing the demands on volunteers with family & work

Lower-rated

- Promoting brigade interests to Region or outside organisations
- Developing a vision for the brigade

What constitutes good brigade leadership?

What managerial career staff think

Good brigade leaders:

- Engage members
- Delegate tasks
- Act to resolve conflict early
- Have good interpersonal skills

Charismatic local identities rarely make good brigade leaders!

What current brigade leaders think

Volunteers are often hard to find or hard to keep.

Some leaders find it challenging to maintain standards or manage conflict because they feel they cannot afford to upset anyone. They find the workload of managing people and managing paperwork burdensome.

They see fire fighting as "a serious business" and worry about people who seek leadership positions through popularity.

They want more training in communication and people skills and better access to impartial, skilled personnel to assist with conflict resolution when it cannot be managed locally.

Conclusions

Volunteer-based fire agencies may be able to encourage many volunteers to remain for longer by enhancing satisfaction with the volunteering experience. Volunteers' perceptions of the quality of brigade leadership and the sense of safety culture in the brigade and agency both contribute to a sense of satisfaction.

Brigade leaders report many different challenges in maintaining an effective brigade with adequate numbers of volunteers. They worry about colleagues who use popularity to maintain political support. They want help developing their own interpersonal communication skills and ready access to impartial mediators to help with conflict in brigades when it cannot be managed locally.

Volunteers prefer leaders who exercise good governance, promote the team aspects of a brigade, and maintain their fire fighting skills.