



Managing volunteers in the emergency services

A supporting resource for volunteer leaders in WA

Strategic Volunteers and Youth Program

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Resource development

This resource has been developed after extensive consultation with volunteers, volunteer leaders, and the DFES staff who work with them.

This included:

- ⚙ Reviewing over 3800 responses to four volunteer surveys
 - ⚙ Emergency Services Volunteering – Your First Year
 - ⚙ Emergency Services Volunteering – Exit Survey
 - ⚙ Emergency Services Volunteer Engagement Survey
 - ⚙ DFES relationship with volunteers and partners survey
- ⚙ Interviews with nine DFES staff
 - ⚙ Executives
 - ⚙ Superintendents
 - ⚙ District Officers
- ⚙ Discussions with representatives from four volunteer associations
- ⚙ Interviews with 11 volunteer leaders
 - ⚙ Representing at least one country and one metro BGU from each service
- ⚙ Interviews with 25 volunteers

The advice and guidance presented in this document is informed by the latest research and best practice in volunteer and emergency service management and leadership.



The role of a leader in the Emergency services

As the captain, commander, or local manager of your brigade, group, or unit, your responsibilities and duties are split across three main areas:

Administration

Operation

Managing and leading people

As a manager and leader of volunteers, your job is to:

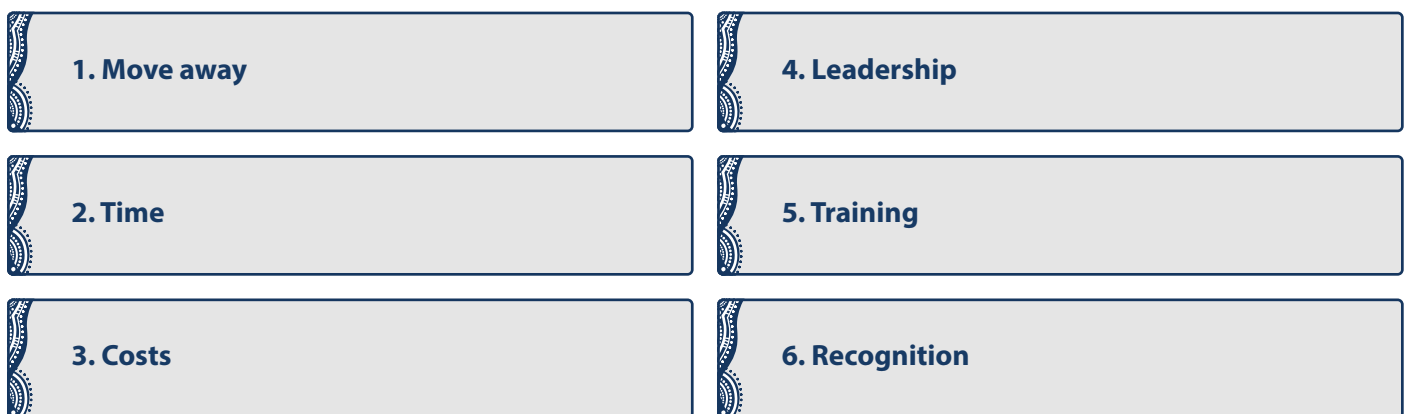
- Set and communicate objectives
- Encourage participation
- Monitor performance and provide feedback
- Provide training and development
- Provide necessary resources and information
- Recognise and reward contributions
- ... and ultimately to ensure that your BGU operates as effectively and safely as possible

According to current leaders, one of the most challenging aspects of your role is working with people. This resource aims to provide guidelines and strategies for managing volunteers that will help to ensure a good experience for your volunteers and assist you in maintaining some balance between your leadership responsibilities and your life outside your BGU.

Managing for retention: The Role of Motivation And Support

Volunteers are the backbone of the emergency services in WA. Training volunteers up to a stage where they can be deployed is expensive and time-consuming and many areas have a short supply of people willing and able to volunteer. Therefore, it is important that volunteer leaders make every effort to retain the valuable volunteers already in their BGUs.

Why volunteers leave their BGU:




One effective way to improve volunteer retention involves adopting a motivational approach to running your BGU. In order to effectively motivate people, it is important to provide support in three areas of need:



By increasing a volunteer's sense of autonomy, belonging, and competence, you can improve engagement, satisfaction, and retention at your BGU.

The following sections of this resource provide guidelines on how to support a volunteer's autonomy, competence, and belonging through each of the following:

- 
- ☀ Influence tactics
 - ☀ Information sharing
 - ☀ Delegation
 - ☀ Including and involving volunteers
 - ☀ Recognition
 - ☀ Feedback
 - ☀ Conflict management
 - ☀ Adjusting your management style

Influencing volunteers

The techniques you use to influence volunteers to do what you want or need them to do can have a strong influence on performance outcomes, resistance, and commitment.

Explaining why things need to be done or done in a certain way and linking these activities to a volunteer's values helps them to find more meaning in their volunteer work at the BGU. Involving volunteers in decision-making (see Including and Involving Volunteers on page 11) helps them to better understand the reasoning behind a decision and increases their likelihood of accepting it.

The following strategies have been shown to be the most effective for reducing resistance and getting volunteers on board with your decisions.

Strategies to use to influence volunteers	
Consultation	Seeking the volunteer's participation in planning an activity for which their support is needed
Rational persuasion	Using logical arguments and explanations
Inspirational appeal	Appeal to volunteer's values and ideals Boost volunteer's confidence in their ability to do the task

On the contrary, if you simply give an order, without explanation and without consultation, volunteers are less likely to understand and link the demand to their values and why they are volunteering. Not finding meaning in their volunteer work is one of the most important causes of volunteer turnover.

Strategies to avoid when influencing volunteers	
Pressure	The use of demand, threats, continual checking, and repeated reminders
Coalition	Using other people to influence someone to do something
Legitimizing	Appealing to official policies or to your position in the hierarchy



Need more tools?

See the *Influencing Volunteers* tip sheet.

Sharing knowledge and Information

Sharing knowledge and information with your BGU is important for several reasons, but deciding what to share can be challenging. Volunteer leaders across the emergency services reported the following motives for sharing information with their volunteers:



Working out what information to share and how to share it

With any information sharing, you run the risk of oversharing. This could mean either sharing information that causes uncertainty or overwhelms volunteers with too much, so that they end up simply ignoring everything they receive. To find the right balance, it is best to talk to your volunteers about what and how much information they want from you.

When sharing information with your BGU, think about:

- ⚙ What is the best time and medium to use (in person, email, phone)?
- ⚙ What do they need to know and how much time do they have to process it?
- ⚙ How are my volunteers reacting to this information? Encourage a dialogue with volunteers after sharing information and address reactions or concerns immediately.

Knowledge sharing between volunteers

Knowledge sharing between older and newer or younger volunteers is also incredibly valuable for enhancing belonging and competence, building rapport and a sense of community, mentoring volunteers into new roles, and ensuring that valuable knowledge and information stays within the BGU once older volunteers leave.



**Have experienced
volunteers train newer
volunteers**



**Run training exercises that
involve communication and
collaboration**



**Tell volunteers that they
have valuable knowledge
to share**



**Acknowledge and reward
collaborative and sharing
behaviours**



**Act as a role model (share
information yourself)**



Need more tools?
See the *Knowledge Sharing* tip sheet.

Sharing responsibilities

Running a BGU involves a significant commitment in terms of time and effort and volunteer leaders run a high risk of turning their role into a second full-time job or burning out if they don't share the load. Making use of the wide variety of skills and interests among all of your volunteers (not just the leadership team) will help to ensure that things get done while increasing volunteer autonomy, belonging, and competence.

What to delegate

Delegating specific, one-off tasks is just the first step. In order to truly share the load, take the pressure off yourself, and give your volunteers the opportunity to step up and experience responsibility, you can put people in charge of an ongoing duty (eg. social media, rostering, specific equipment maintenance, community events, gardening, IT). As well as reducing your workload and giving volunteers a sense of ownership over their tasks and BGU, such opportunities are also beneficial for helping you to identify and develop future leaders or to manage a volunteer's career as they transition from active to support roles (see Succession Planning and Developing the Next Generation).

Three steps to delegation:

1. Assign responsibility

Choose a person based on their skills or potential to learn, and explain duties.

2. Grant authority to act

To take necessary actions to complete tasks.

3. Create accountability

Person takes on responsibility for the task or role.

Tips for effective delegation

Choose the person carefully

Define the task clearly

Agree on standards and timeline

Provide support and feedback as needed

Show trust in the person

Recognise progress



Need more tools?

See the *Sharing Responsibilities* tip sheet.

Including and involving Volunteers

One of the greatest ways to enhance a sense of belonging is to ensure that you create an inclusive environment for all volunteers at your BGU.

Volunteers feel included when their leader...

- ☀ Treats all volunteers equally
- ☀ Communicates clearly and openly
- ☀ Is approachable
- ☀ Creates a fun and informal atmosphere
- ☀ Asks for their input in decision-making
- ☀ Makes their jobs manageable

Involving volunteers in BGU decision-making

Asking volunteers to participate in decisions that affect them helps to improve both belonging and autonomy, while increasing the likelihood that they will accept the decision and put more effort into its implementation. Your volunteers are also likely to come up with ideas you may not have thought about that could make the BGU function more effectively. Potential areas where you could seek volunteer input include:

Training activities

Social events

Community engagement

Role and task allocation

Reward and recognition systems

BGU systems and processes

When deciding whether you should involve volunteers in decisions, consider the following:

- ☀ Do my volunteers have enough knowledge to help make good decisions?
- ☀ Do we have the time it will require to involve volunteers in decision making?
- ☀ Will my volunteers work well together to make a good decision?



If the answer is YES to these questions, it is well worth taking the time to involve volunteers. When doing so, ensure that you establish a safe and respectful space for sharing so that volunteers feel comfortable contributing.

Giving volunteers freedom to make decisions

You can further improve autonomy by giving volunteers some choice in how and when they complete tasks. While this strategy is not always possible (for example, in an emergency), for less urgent tasks around the BGU that can be done in different ways, this can be a valuable tool for ensuring volunteers feel some ownership over their tasks.

Recognising achievements and contributions

Most volunteers don't join the emergency services for any reward, but acknowledgement and recognition are important tools for enhancing commitment and satisfaction and ensuring that volunteers feel appreciated.

Some ideas are provided below:

Informal and verbal recognition

- Say 'thank you' regularly
- Mention achievements and contributions at monthly meetings
- Give regular praise
- Shout-outs on social media
- Recognition in emails and newsletters
- Share positive feedback from the community

Tangible recognition


- Awards night
- Novelty awards
- Certificates
- Provide refreshments at or after training and emergencies
- Follow up on DFES reward and recognition program
- Contact local news agencies to promote volunteer achievements
- Provide references if requested

Make sure your volunteers know that all of their efforts are appreciated, from responding to an emergency to providing sandwiches for those at a job. Every contribution is essential to BGU functioning.

Providing feedback

Good feedback is a crucial tool for improving team and individual performance. It is also a valuable way of supporting a volunteer's need for competence and belonging. Make sure you find opportunities for both positive and negative feedback and that any negative feedback you give is delivered in a constructive manner.

Guidelines for providing constructive feedback:



Focus on specific behaviours that can be changed



Keep feedback impersonal
(don't target individuals)




Focus on what to improve and how to improve it



Turn feedback into a conversation, rather than imposing it on someone



Don't discipline an individual in front of others



Feedback should be timely
(choose your moment)



Don't provide too much information at once (give feedback in small doses)



Need more tools?

See the ***Providing Feedback*** tip sheet.

Receiving and using feedback from volunteers

Feedback does not just go in one direction (from leaders to volunteers). Upwards feedback (from volunteers to leaders) can be just as valuable and important. Seeking feedback not only gives you invaluable information to lead your BGU, but it also motivates your volunteers. It makes them feel heard and valued. In other words, it can increase your volunteers' sense of autonomy, competence and belonging.

It is important to ensure that your volunteers know that they can provide upwards feedback, feel comfortable doing so, and understand which channels are most appropriate.

Common channels for upwards feedback:

Open door policy

(approach leader directly via email, phone, or in person)

Following the chain of command

Nominating a person to represent the interests of the volunteers

(eg. Unit Representatives in SES units)

Using open questions to encourage feedback

You can encourage feedback from volunteers by asking open ended questions. It's been observed that 6% of conversations are in the form of a question, but that 60% of conversations are triggered by these questions!

Asking questions in an effective manner means:

- ☼ Asking a question that invites an open answer (not simply "yes" or "no"; no right or wrong answer)
- ☼ Actively and genuinely listening for the answer and taking the volunteer's perspective into account (putting yourself in their shoes).
- ☼ Using non-verbal signs to show your willingness to get an elaborate and honest answer (eye contact, nodding).



Need more tools?

See the *Receiving and Using Feedback* tip sheet.

Dealing with conflict

Conflict management is an important part of any leader's role. Some degree of conflict can be productive, for example when the conflict is about how to get a task done in the most effective way, as it can lead to constructive discussion, problem solving, and new ideas.

However, when conflict is more about personality clashes, escalates, or is not dealt with appropriately, it can impact volunteer performance, satisfaction, and intention to stay, and disrupt team and BGU functioning.

Some common causes of conflict include:

Personality clashes	Competition for resources	Unequal contributions	Stress
Role ambiguity	Power push	Differences over method	Conflicting goals

Preventing conflict from impacting BGU functioning

- ☀ Be aware of the common causes of conflict and address any that may be an issue at your BGU. Discuss these with your volunteers as they arise.
- ☀ Foster open and safe communication between all volunteers
- ☀ Try to keep BGU and personal lives as separate possible.
- ☀ Step in early to de-escalate potential interpersonal conflicts.



Addressing conflict

True conflict resolution eliminates the cause of the conflict so that it can't happen again. When addressing a conflict between people, keep the following tips in mind:

Focus on specific behaviours that can be changed

Keep feedback impersonal
(don't target individuals)

Focus on what to improve and how to improve it

Turn feedback into a conversation, rather than imposing it on someone

Don't discipline an individual in front of others

Feedback should be timely
(choose your moment)

Conflict resolution strategies

Once you have identified the root cause of a conflict in your team, the following strategies may be useful for resolving the conflict:

Appeal to a common goal
(remind volunteers why they are there)

Make more resources available

Restructure teams
(move people around)

Alter the physical environment
(rearrange facilities or workflows)

Change the reward system

Change policies and procedures

Interpersonal skill training

Clarify volunteer roles and task goals

Record everything

One of the most important things to keep in mind when dealing with any conflict or complaints at your BGU is to record everything (conversations, incidents, social media posts, meetings etc.). This will allow you to keep track of what has happened and the actions you have taken both for your own risk management and in case the matter is escalated to DFES.

Important things to record include:

- ☀ Who was involved
- ☀ When the incident occurred
- ☀ When the discussion happened
- ☀ What happened
- ☀ What was discussed
- ☀ What action was taken
- ☀ What further actions need to be taken
- ☀ If the matter was escalated or needs to be escalated



Since this is often sensitive information, make sure it is stored in a secure place that only you can access.



Need more tools?

See the *Dealing with Conflict* tip sheet.

Succession planning and developing the next generation

Developing the next generation is a vital part of ensuring that your BGU continues to grow and perform for years to come. There are two important aspects to this:

- ✿ Managing a volunteer's career as they get older
- ✿ Developing future leaders

Managing a volunteer's career

Later in their volunteering careers, volunteers may become less suited to the more active roles at their BGU. However, they still have valuable knowledge and experience that they can use to support the BGU and teach younger volunteers, who are often keen to put their training into practice and experience the action.

Tips for transitioning volunteers

- ✿ Create and define specific support roles that your BGU needs
- ✿ Identify volunteer strengths and interests
- ✿ Have a discussion with the volunteer about their volunteering intentions and which non-active roles they are able or willing to take on
- ✿ Emphasise the value of their knowledge and experience
- ✿ To the extent that it is possible, try to ensure that there is always a newer volunteer on each call-out (with sufficient support from experienced volunteers)
- ✿ Establish a buddy system between older and younger volunteers

Developing future leaders

Mentoring is not only useful for newcomers. It is also a valuable tool for developing the next generation of leaders at your BGU. This is not just for the role of Captain, Commander, or Local Manager. It is important to identify and develop people for all of your leadership roles.

To ensure a smooth transition between leaders, it is important to seek out and identify potential future leaders and provide the conditions and training for them to develop their full potential.

Tips for developing and mentoring future leaders

- ✿ Identify volunteers with leadership potential and interest
- ✿ Create a plan with them to ensure they receive the training, skills, and experience they require to move up through the ranks
- ✿ Provide opportunities for them to put leadership skills into practice
- ✿ Act as a mentor for young leaders:
 - ✿ Offer your knowledge, experience, constructive feedback, and advice
 - ✿ Share your experiences, hard-learned lessons, and insights
 - ✿ Be a positive role model and demonstrate good leadership practices
 - ✿ Listen, support, and guide your mentee

Adjusting your leadership and management style

The approaches you use to managing and leading volunteers can have a significant impact on their experience and performance. There are many different styles that leaders can adopt and no single style is suitable to every person and every situation. The most effective leaders are those who adapt their style depending on the person, task, or situation they are faced with.

There are many different styles of leadership, but this section outlines two that are most applicable to the emergency services:

Participating/supporting	
What it looks like	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Team are involved in routine decision-making Leader facilitates decisions (but still has the final say) More two-way communication Slower decision-making More creativity
When to use it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When an issue is complex and you could benefit from additional knowledge and ideas Decisions are task-focused and not critical There is no time pressure

Telling/directing	
What it looks like	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decisions made by the leader Roles and tasks defined and closely supervised by the leader Mainly one-way communication Quicker decision-making Less creativity
When to use it	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When the leader is the expert Team is inexperienced No margin for error Time is short

Why you should adjust your leadership style

Using a directive style can be beneficial, particularly during emergencies or training drills, as it provides direction, reassures volunteers, and keeps a team together. However, if you use this style exclusively and without providing support:

- ✿ Morale will suffer
- ✿ The team can't perform in your absence

On the other hand, if you are able to alternate between a directive and a more participative or supportive leadership style as often as possible, you will find that you:

- ✿ Build trust, cooperation, and morale
- ✿ Make your volunteers and BGU feel empowered
- ✿ Give your BGU the skills to perform in your absence

The differences between emergency and non-emergency situations

It is important to acknowledge and recognise the differences between emergencies and peacetime. While there is no hard and fast rule for which leadership style to use and when (you may find it necessary to be both directive and participative at emergencies and at training nights depending on who you are working with and what you are trying to achieve), having an understanding of the situational differences will help you to adjust your leadership style effectively.

In an emergency...

- ✿ Critical decisions need to be made quickly by knowledgeable and experienced people
- ✿ The outcomes can mean life or death

Around your BGU on a casual night...

- ✿ Decisions are less critical or time sensitive
- ✿ Receiving additional input from volunteers may be beneficial (see Including and Involving Volunteers).

Managing expectations

Just as it is important to adjust your leadership and management style depending on the person or situation you are dealing with, it is equally important to prepare your volunteers for the fact that you will have to change your approach from time to time.

For a new, young volunteer who has no prior experience in the emergency services, having their previously friendly, mild-mannered leader suddenly switch to a directive and authoritative mode at an emergency with no prior warning could be off-putting and may discourage them from staying at the BGU.

There are two things you can do to help manage your volunteers' expectations:

When new volunteers start and before they go out to their first incident, explain to them that you and/or their team leaders will have to be directive and authoritative at times and why that is the case.

Use training exercises to practice using a directive leadership style and debrief with new volunteers afterwards to gauge their reactions and address any concerns.





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