

Volunteer Leadership Skills Matrix

A skills pathway for managers and leaders of volunteers | Final version following sector consultation | August 2026

About this matrix

This matrix describes the skills a manager of volunteers uses, from their first day in the role through to leading volunteering across an organisation and the sector. It builds on Volunteering New Zealand's Competencies for Managers of Volunteers (2013), the Best Practice Guidelines, the LeadMe self-assessment, and interviews with volunteer managers across Aotearoa. Managers and leaders of volunteers work in a wide range of contexts: in small community groups and in large organisations, with a handful of volunteers or with hundreds, across a single programme or many, and as paid staff or as volunteers themselves. Where this matrix refers to the team, the programme or the organisation, read those words as whatever they mean in your own setting. They are not meant to be limiting.

It is a development tool, not a test. Most managers of volunteers sit at different levels for different skills – strong in some, growing in others. That is normal, and it is how the matrix is meant to be used: to find your strengths, and to choose where to grow next. Context matters as well as skill. Authority, resourcing and the size of an organisation can all affect how far someone is able to operate at level 4, however capable they are.

How to read it

Read each row left to right. Every row follows one skill along the same pathway: at level 1 you know the basics and do them, at level 2 you do them confidently and consistently, at level 3 you adapt and improve how they are done, and at level 4 you lead them strategically.

The levels build on each other. Each cell describes what is new at that level – it assumes you can already do everything to its left.

The rows are grouped into four themes: managing people (the volunteer journey), managing within the organisation, leadership within the organisation, and leadership of volunteering in the community and sector. Five capabilities – communication, cultural capability, Te Tiriti and Māori capability, self-management and wellbeing, and digital and future capability – run through every theme, so they are mapped separately at the end. Practitioners told us these are the difference between getting by and doing the role well.

The pathway at a glance

1. Base Knowledge Starting out	2. Base Knowledge Applied Practising with confidence	3. Adaptive Leadership Leading and adapting	4. Strategic Leadership Strategic and sector
Knows the basics of good volunteer management and puts them into practice with guidance.	Applies that knowledge confidently and consistently in everyday practice.	Adapts and improves practice, using data, feedback and reflection, to meet the changing needs of people and the organisation.	Leads volunteering strategically within the organisation, the community and the sector.
<i>Who is here: a coordinator, or a new or part-time manager of volunteers (persona Aroha).</i>	<i>Who is here: a practitioner growing in confidence and range (persona Mark).</i>	<i>Who is here: a manager leading and adapting a programme or team of any size (persona Mark, extending).</i>	<i>Who is here: an organisational leader (persona Sandra).</i>

Managing and Leading volunteers

Managers of volunteers recruit, support and develop team members, paid and volunteer, across the whole volunteer lifecycle.

Skill	1. Base Knowledge Starting out	2. Base Knowledge Applied Practising with confidence	3. Adaptive Leadership Leading and adapting	4. Strategic Leadership Strategic and sector
Recruit and engage	Writes clear role descriptions and recruits through one or two familiar channels.	Recruits through varied channels and matches people's skills and motivations to roles, not just filling gaps.	Plans recruitment ahead of need, building a team that is diverse and accessible, and removing barriers for disabled and neurodivergent volunteers.	Ties recruitment to organisational goals, shaping the team to reflect the community it serves. Innovates in response to emerging trends, drawing on demographic and economic shifts and on national and international research.
Welcome and onboard	Gives every new volunteer a basic induction covering agreements, privacy, health and safety, and vetting, and asks each person what they need in order to take part fully.	Runs a structured induction with a buddy or mentor, attending to how people feel as well as what they need to know.	Extends induction beyond their own team, with check-ins while volunteers find their feet.	Improves onboarding continuously, using feedback and retention data to shape the experience.

Skill	1. Base Knowledge Starting out	2. Base Knowledge Applied Practising with confidence	3. Adaptive Leadership Leading and adapting	4. Strategic Leadership Strategic and sector
Support and supervise	Keeps in regular contact and is available when volunteers need support.	Holds two-way conversations and flexes support to fit volunteers' availability and needs.	Makes sure support reaches every volunteer, whatever the size or spread of the team, whether directly or through team leads and regular communication, and helps them shape their own roles.	Embeds volunteer wellbeing and sustainable workloads across the whole programme.
Train and grow	Makes sure new volunteers complete their required training.	Offers development options and coaches volunteers to grow into their roles.	Plans development with each volunteer and creates pathways that match their interests and skills.	Creates new roles around volunteers' growing skills, and champions development by example.
Lead and develop performance and conduct	Knows the standards and the lines in the sand (privacy, conduct) and names them clearly.	Addresses specific behaviours early, staying calm in difficult conversations.	Handles performance issues and conflict consistently, and coaches others to do the same.	Builds a culture and processes that prevent issues and resolves conflicts across the organisation.
Recognise and celebrate	Thanks volunteers regularly and understands why recognition matters.	Plans recognition through the year and tailors it to what motivates each volunteer.	Finds fresh ways to celebrate volunteers and their achievements.	Shows volunteers the real impact of their work and embeds recognition organisation-wide.
Exit and transition	Closes out each volunteer's involvement respectfully, with records, returns and thanks.	Holds mana-enhancing exit conversations and gathers honest feedback.	Uses what leavers say to improve the volunteer experience and retention.	Plans for succession so knowledge and relationships stay when people move on.

Managing within the organisation

Managers of volunteers build and run the systems, data, policy and resources that make volunteering work.

Skill	1. Base Knowledge Starting out	2. Base Knowledge Applied Practising with confidence	3. Adaptive Leadership Leading and adapting	4. Strategic Leadership Strategic and sector
Systems and processes	Uses the organisation's systems and processes as they stand.	Uses whatever system the organisation has for records, rosters and hours, and improves the processes around it.	Reviews systems and processes with the team and redesigns them for future needs.	Makes sure systems and processes scale, stay fit for purpose, and shows they are working.
Data, reporting and impact	Keeps accurate records of hours, contacts and consents, and handles personal and sensitive information with care.	Reports on volunteer activity in ways each audience understands and knows the difference between activity and outcomes.	Measures what the programme changes and what it costs, and reports on it without being asked.	Connects volunteer contribution to organisational strategy, and tailors reporting to each stakeholder group.
Policy, risk and safeguarding	Knows and follows the key policies: privacy, child protection, code of conduct, health and safety, vetting.	Writes and updates volunteering policies and manages risk in everyday activities and events.	Develops policy so it reflects how the programme really works and keeps it current.	Sets the risk and safeguarding framework and protects the purpose of volunteering across the organisation.
Resources and funding	Works within the resources available and knows what is needed.	Plans and shifts resources to better meet the programme's goals.	Shows what the programme needs and costs, and advocates for enough resourcing.	Leads funding cases, manages budgets, and works to diversify funding.

Leadership within the organisation

Managers of volunteers carry the organisation's vision and goals, and influence people, paid and volunteer, to achieve them.

Skill	1. Base Knowledge Starting out	2. Base Knowledge Applied Practising with confidence	3. Adaptive Leadership Leading and adapting	4. Strategic Leadership Strategic and sector
Vision and alignment	Understands the organisation's vision and goals.	Shows volunteers how their work helps achieve the vision and aligns tasks to goals.	Aligns current and future volunteer activity to the vision, reviewing it with the team.	Leads strategic planning with paid and volunteer staff, ambitious yet achievable.
Influence and collaboration	Explains the value of the volunteer programme to colleagues and knows who they work with across teams.	Advocates enthusiastically with paid staff and senior management and works collaboratively across teams.	Negotiates for support and resources and involves paid staff in shaping new volunteer roles and projects.	Influences at board level, engages paid staff in direct responsibility for volunteering, and trusts others to lead.
Culture, motivation and team	Knows every volunteer has their own reasons for volunteering, and that these differ across cultures.	Motivates people in ways that fit them and celebrates the diversity of the team.	Builds a team that reflects the community and keeps motivation strong through change.	Builds an inclusive culture across the organisation, sustaining motivation and belonging at scale.

Leadership of volunteering (sector and community)

Managers of volunteers advocate for, educate about, and connect the value of volunteering beyond their own organisation.

Skill	1. Base Knowledge Starting out	2. Base Knowledge Applied Practising with confidence	3. Adaptive Leadership Leading and adapting	4. Strategic Leadership Strategic and sector
Advocacy and profile of volunteering	Explains why volunteers are involved and what their work achieves.	Attends network events and educates others in the organisation about volunteering's role.	Creates opportunities to raise volunteering's profile and deepens their own knowledge of volunteering in Aotearoa.	Advocates publicly, through forums, conferences and writing, and joins community and national initiatives.
Sector and community connections	Knows who the key stakeholders are and where to find sector support.	Builds relationships with stakeholders, Volunteer Centres and similar organisations.	Stays current with research, policy and statistics, and shares stories of volunteering with external audiences.	Brings community and partner voices into plans and supports other managers of volunteers across the sector.

Underpinning capabilities

These five capabilities are not a separate stage. They are woven through every theme and grow at every level.

Skill	1. Base Knowledge Starting out	2. Base Knowledge Applied Practising with confidence	3. Adaptive Leadership Leading and adapting	4. Strategic Leadership Strategic and sector
Communication	Communicates clearly, listens well, and explains roles and expectations simply.	Adapts style to each person, actively listens, and reflects back what they hear.	Reads the room, negotiates with diplomacy, and communicates value in each audience's language.	Translates vision and direction into words that land with governance, staff, volunteers and community.
Cultural capability	Treats everyone with manaakitanga, and understands that volunteering means different things across cultures and communities.	Adapts practice for diverse volunteers (e.g. ESL speakers, newcomers, disabled and neurodivergent people), and recruits and inducts inclusively.	Builds a team and practice that reflect and respond to the community, with mana-enhancing and accessible processes throughout.	Leads culturally responsive and accessible practice across the organisation and the sector.
Te Tiriti and Māori capability	Knows their organisation's responsibilities under Te Tiriti o Waitangi and what these mean for volunteering.	Applies Te Tiriti principles in everyday practice, and welcomes and supports Māori volunteers in ways that are tika.	Builds tikanga and te reo Māori into how the programme works, and grows relationships with local hapū, iwi and Māori communities.	Leads genuine partnership with Māori, engaging te ao Māori meaningfully across the organisation and the sector.
Self-management and wellbeing	Is aware of their own development needs and asks for support or supervision.	Manages their own reactions, knows what pushes their buttons, and sets boundaries.	Says no with reason, protects their own and volunteers' wellbeing, and learns from mistakes.	Models sustainable workload and resilience, keeps a professional development plan, and mentors others.
Digital and future capability	Uses the core digital tools and records the role needs.	Works confidently with the organisation's digital tools and channels, mindful that volunteers' digital confidence varies.	Uses technology to join up data and processes and helps bridge the digital divide.	Adopts emerging technologies thoughtfully and within limits, and plans the programme's future digital capability.

Sources

Volunteering New Zealand, Competencies for Managers of Volunteers (2013). Best Practice Guidelines / Te Anga Whaitake. LeadMe self-assessment. Sector interviews conducted May–June 2026. *Reviewed through sector consultation in July and August 2026. This version incorporates feedback from managers and leaders of volunteers across Aotearoa.*