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Improving the retention of volunteers through the satisfaction of basic psychological needs

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Retention of staff is, and will continue to be, a critical issue in the sustainability of most organisations. When we consider retention in terms of volunteers, the issue becomes increasingly more complex as the volunteer workforce itself becomes a source of competition as not-for-profit organisations vie for the same scarce resource - volunteers. Organisations which intend to attract and retain a solid cadre of reliable volunteer labour must ensure they look within themselves to ensure they manage these staff well. Leadership is among the key management skills an organisation must hone to do this, and to do it well. This research looks at the development of a unique leadership program using Self Determination Theory (SDT) to train leaders to develop volunteer work environments which meet the three basic psychological needs that all humans have. The training program is discussed and its value is assessed through an experimental empirical research design. The findings show that leadership development which is focused towards SDT has strong benefits towards the retention of volunteers.

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Abstract

Retention of staff is, and will continue to be, a critical issue in the sustainability of most organisations. When we consider retention in terms of volunteers, the issue becomes increasingly more complex as the volunteer workforce itself becomes a source of competition as not-for-profit organisations vie for the same scarce resource – volunteers. Organisations which intend to attract and retain a solid cadre of reliable volunteer labour must ensure they look within themselves to ensure they manage these staff well. Leadership is among the key management skills an organisation must hone to do this, and to do it well.

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Keywords: Self Determination Theory (SDT); Leadership; Retention; Volunteers, Volunteering

Introduction

Leadership is a critical factor for the success of any organisation. Leadership is more than just guiding the direction of an organisation – the proverbial ‘rudder’. Importantly, effective leaders help to create positive functional and social experiences which are meaningful; effective leaders look within their staff to harness, refine and develop mutually beneficial skills; effective leaders also build trust, bolster competence and share responsibility through delegation (Eisner et al. 2009; Goleman, Boyatzis, and

McKee 2002). In organisations where there is defective or absent leadership, a paid employee may be willing to trade labour for income, and in so doing, will submit to authority. This is not the case in organisations where people volunteer their time. In this case, the exchange is much more precarious, and tolerance for poor leadership does not endure. When the exchange of labour does not yield elements of personal satisfaction, the volunteer is likely to leave the organisation for better pickings elsewhere.

The Australian emergency service landscape is on the cusp of change. On the one hand the frequency and impact of natural disasters is on the increase, while on the other hand the volunteer workforce who are available and able to assist communities during these crises is reducing.

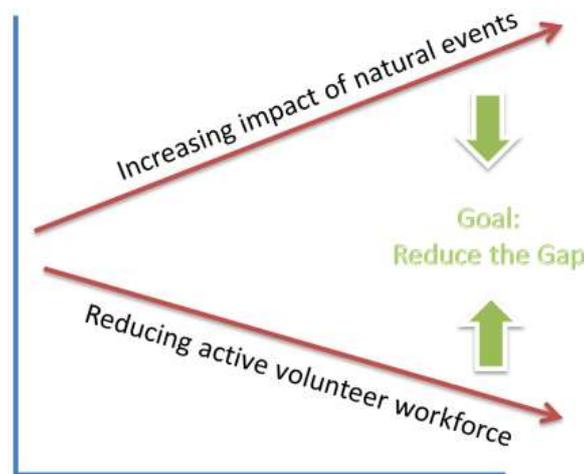


Figure 1. an illustration of the problem facing emergency services today

A large part of the problem in retaining volunteers has been identified with poor volunteer leadership. Volunteers are far less tolerant of poor leadership than they would be in paid occupations. Focus must be placed on developing effective leadership programmes that improve the people management skills of unit and brigade leaders. The element which is most at risk in regard to leaders and their development is the engagement of their subordinates.

Interest and investment in leadership development continues to grow, yet the content taught in many leadership programs often lacks a theoretical foundation and empirical support. This paper presents a study of a leadership development program which, based on Self Determination Theory (SDT), was developed and piloted in an emergency volunteer organisation.

SDT offers an empirically based model of the conditions, such as a manager's interpersonal approach and the workplace climate, that facilitate employee wellbeing and optimal motivation. Previous studies have consistently shown autonomy-supportive managerial approaches and work conditions that support employees needs for autonomy, relatedness and competence are associated with employee engagement and dedication to work, favourable appraisals of work life, optimal motivation and healthy psychological functioning. In the current research a SDT based leadership development program was created to address leadership and retention issues. The training program aimed to teach an SDT based approach to leaders, providing them support in applying the theory within their own volunteer workforce. The research tested whether or not training intervention would help managers develop a

more constructive motivating style towards volunteers and also tests the effects of the practices being taught in the program on volunteer’ job satisfaction and intention to stay.

Self Determination Theory

SDT is a widely acclaimed framework for understanding and building motivation and performance in individuals (Deci and Ryan 1985; Gagné and Deci 2005; Ryan and Deci 2000). SDT works on the premise that each of us has three basic psychological needs: we each have a need to have control over what we do – this is a need for autonomy; we each need to feel a degree of mastery in the things we undertake – this is a need for competence; and, we each need to feel that we belong within our organisation, social group or partnership – this is a need for relatedness (Deci and Ryan 1985; Niemiec and Ryan 2009). Deci and Ryan (2000) explain that the behaviours people apply to activities like work and volunteering – for example work ethic, motivation and engagement – are contingent on the extent to which these three needs are satisfied within their environment.

On extension, workplaces which are cognisant of these needs, and which actively foster leadership that supports subordinate need satisfaction by creating a work environment which promotes autonomy, builds competence and enhances individual relatedness experiences will be better placed to increase engagement and retention. In terms of our target workforce, SDT will result in greater volunteer workforce cohesion and motivation, and ultimately will positively impact workforce turnover.

Method

The research procedure was based on an experimental design with randomly selected control (A) and treatment (B) groups (50% of participants (leaders) to each group). Figure 2, below, depicts these groups and the research process. Both groups undertake SDT leadership training. However, the control group is surveyed – to establish a norm – nine weeks prior to the first day of training. Training is the intervention medium and it occurs at week 9 with face-to-face workshops, and at week 18, again with face-to-face workshops. A sequence of three on-line activities are held in the nine weeks between the face-to-face workshops. Only the leaders undertake the training. The online surveys completed by the leaders provides an understanding of the changes they undergo in regard to their adoption of SDT principles. The leader’s subordinates were also surveyed. Analysis of this information shows the penetration of the leader’s influence in regard to the SDT training and the satisfaction of the three SDT needs in the subordinates and leaders.

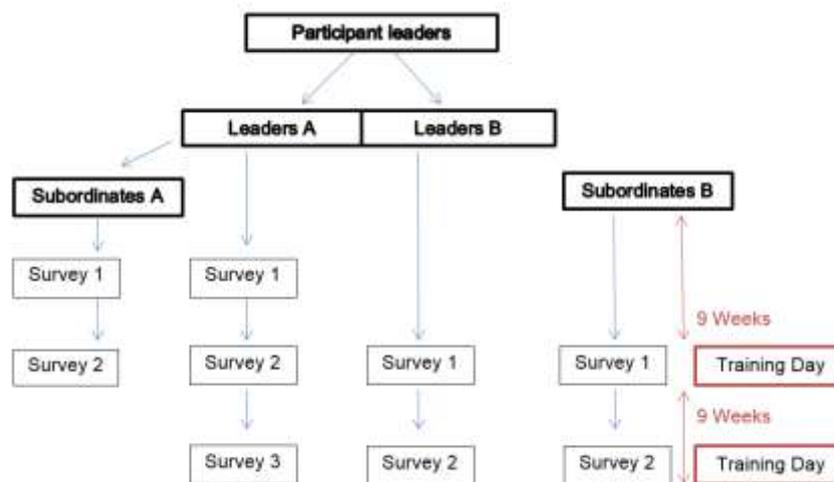


Figure 2. Overview of the research design

The intervention

The intervention was based on the SDT Leadership Development Programme (LDP). It comprised five stages of contact and training with periods of reflection and practical application in between. The first and last stage (stage 1 and 5) were face-to-face workshops where leaders were taught the principles of SDT-based leadership. During these workshops leaders started to engage with the concepts and 'workshop' them on each other. The intermediate stages (stages 2, 3 and 4) were based on online instruction with practical exercises guiding leaders in their application of the theory. Leaders were also emailed weekly with small 'factoids' relating to SDT, this was designed to maintain a connection between SDT and their practical leadership focus.

Findings

Findings: Subordinates

A total of 57 NSWSES/RFS volunteers were recruited from around New South Wales. 45 of the subordinate participants completed the survey on at least one occasion. The survey measured the extent to which their three needs were being satisfied in their volunteer job, turnover intention, job satisfaction and the extent to which their manager provides autonomy supportive leadership. The following are general findings related to the data obtained from the volunteers (cross sectional). Only 9 volunteers completed the survey on more than one occasion. As a result, a pre/post comparison could not determine whether the program had an impact on the direct reports – this is discussed in the limitations section below.

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationships between need satisfaction, autonomy supportive leadership, job satisfaction and turnover intention among SES volunteers. Findings are as follows:

1. When volunteer's three needs are being met they are more satisfied with their volunteering job.
There is a significant positive relationship between job satisfaction and fulfilment of the need for autonomy ($r=.77, p<.001$), relatedness ($r=.75, p<.001$) and competence ($r=.43, p<.01$).
2. When volunteer's three needs are being met they are less likely to want to leave their volunteering job with the SES/RFS. Autonomy (the ability to exercise choice and make decisions) and relatedness (sense of belonging) have the strongest impact on volunteer's intention to stay.
There is a significant negative relationship between turnover intention and fulfilment of the need for autonomy ($r= -.76, p, p<.001$), relatedness ($r=-.72, p<.001$) and competence ($r= -.29, p<.05$).
3. Volunteers whose leaders adopt autonomy supportive, rather than coercive/command and control, approaches to managing are more satisfied with their volunteer job.
There is a significant positive relationship between managerial autonomy support and job satisfaction ($r=.59, p<.001$).
4. Volunteers whose leaders adopt autonomy supportive, rather than coercive/command and control, approaches to managing are less likely to want to leave their volunteering job with the SES.
There is a significant negative relationship between managerial autonomy support and turnover intention ($r=.53, p<.001$).

Summary: When volunteer's needs are satisfied (competence, relatedness and autonomy) and when their leaders adopt an autonomy supportive (vs controlling) approach, they will be more satisfied with their volunteering job and are less likely to want to leave.

Findings: Leaders

A total of 34 leader volunteers from the NSWSES/RFS were invited to participate in the study. 31 of these actually participated in the beginning and this dropped to 23 at the time of the last workshop. Of these leaders 18 completed the survey both before and after the training. As discussed above, there were insufficient numbers of leaders across both control and treatment to provide a control/treatment comparison. Instead a pre/post comparison was run across both groups to measure the change in leaders after completing the training.

A correlated groups t-test compared leaders orientation towards autonomy supportive or controlling leadership before the program to that after they had completed the program.

After completing the program, leaders were more autonomy supportive and less controlling. This suggests that the program can successfully teach leaders to adopt more autonomy supportive approaches towards leading their volunteers. In doing so these leaders can now manage their unit/brigade in a way that better supports motivation, job satisfaction and retention of volunteers.

There was a significant increase in leaders overall ability to adopt autonomy supportive leadership approaches after completing the training $t(17) = -3.73, p < .01$. Following the training leaders are reporting significantly less controlling leadership approaches and significantly more autonomy supportive behaviours.

Summary: Through attending the program leaders learnt to adopt autonomy supportive over coercive approaches to leading their volunteers. The leadership skills of NSW RFS and NSW SES leaders successfully improved after attending the program.

Conclusion, limitations and recommendations

This research has shown empirically, that the SDT approach, and the LDP design adopted, has a significant impact on improving engagement and reducing turnover intentions. More research is needed to test the long-term impacts of this programme. This research was also limited to only two agencies – NSW RFS and NSW SES – it would be beneficial to extend the range of participants to include a broader community of participants across multiple agencies.

The low response rate to the online surveys severely impacted data collection for this study. (All surveys were done online). Further studies should explore alternate methods of collection like face-to-face, mail-out, and phone.

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