



Improving Leadership to Retain Volunteers in Emergency Services Organisations

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Quality leadership is essential to retain volunteers and ensure the future sustainability of Australia's Volunteer Emergency Services sector. Effective leadership education and training programs are needed to equip leaders with the skills and knowledge to inspire, retain and engage volunteers.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Australia's Volunteer Emergency Service sector is experiencing unsustainably high, and worsening, volunteer turnover¹. Research, industry and government enquiries have highlighted leadership problems as primary reason volunteers leave. Providing a solution to this problem, our research aimed to formulate and test an evidence-based approach for improving leadership to retain volunteer in Emergency Service Agencies.

What did we do?

A Leadership Program, Inspire Retain Engage, was developed by a team at University of Wollongong and implemented across four Emergency Services Agencies

What were the results?

- The leadership program was successful at improving leaders interpersonal approach.
- Leadership improvements were sustained. Beneficial effects of the program were still evident one year later.
- The leadership approaches taught in the program were shown to predict significantly higher job satisfaction and lower turnover intention amongst emergency service members

INSPIRE RETAIN ENGAGE PROGRAM

Inspire Retain Engage is a development program for people who lead and manage volunteers.

The focus is on developing interpersonal skills, focusing on how to interact with volunteers in a way that supports their needs and provides a positive leadership experience.

The nine-week programs combines face to face (2days), action learning, mentoring and practical experience to provide an optimal learning experience and have the greatest impact on improving leadership outcomes

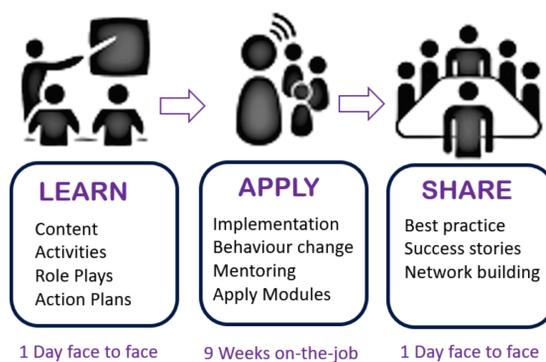


Figure 1: Inspire Retain Engage 9 week program structure.

Utilization: Implementation Ready.

This research, which is now complete, offers volunteer organisations an empirically verified leadership program that can develop leadership skills required to support and retain volunteers.

For more information about the program and how you can implement it in your organization contact Vivien Forner, University of Wollongong vivienf@uow.edu.au

THE RESEARCH

355 members, comprising of 165 leaders and 190 followers, across VICSES, QFES, NSWSES and NSWRFs took part in the study. Leader's leadership style and their followers perceptions were measured before and after the program. Follow-up data was also collected one year later.

Evidence-based training content

Development of training content should consider how the leadership model being learned by participants is linked to specific volunteer participation outcomes, to have the greatest impact.

Using structural equation modelling the research distinguished a) leadership behaviours/approach that influence volunteer turnover intention in emergency service agencies and b) the inner motivational processes through which volunteer's experience with their leader comes to influence their decision to stay with the organisation.

Improved interpersonal leadership style

Participating in the leadership program was shown to improve leaders' interpersonal approach.

A quasi-experimental test compared leaders who took part in the program to those in a control group. The findings showed the program elicited positive changes in leaders' interpersonal style. The program was especially effective for inexperienced volunteer-leaders. The improvements in leadership were sustained one year later.

¹ Office of the Auditor General Western Australia (2015). Support and Preparedness of Fire and Emergency Services Volunteers Western Australian Auditor General's Report. Perth., Auditor General NSW (2014). Management of Volunteers: NSW State Emergency Service. Audit Office of NSW, Sydney.