VALUING VOLUNTEERS

Reconciling volunteer expectations & experiences in Australian emergency services

Bill Calcutt PSM
School of Management, Operations & Marketing
Faculty of Business
University of Wollongong
wgc447@ouwmail.edu.au

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Volunteer choices

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Bill Calcutt - Valuing Volunteers study

Introduction

- I am a volunteer member of the NSW SES, and several weeks ago during a severe storm in Sydney I received an SMS at 3 am that advised "crew urgently required for tree job".

- My name is Bill Calcutt and my research, titled Valuing Volunteers, aims to provide new and valuable insights on what motivates people to get out of bed at 3 am during a storm to go and help others.

Context

- Australian emergency services face a range of contemporary challenges, and one of these is the ongoing availability of a skilled volunteer workforce.

- An unsustainable level of turnover amongst some sections of the volunteer workforce has significant capability and financial implications.
  (Comment: A recent audit of one emergency service reported an annual turnover rate exceeding 25%, with an average volunteer commitment of less than 2 years).

Research focus

- The specific focus of my research is emergency services volunteer motivation.

- Volunteers are the lifeblood of emergency services and constitute a highly unique workforce.

- However, a growing number of studies have reported a generational shift in the patterns of volunteering from altruistic/collective to egoistic/reflexive, with major implications for sustained commitment.

Research aims

- My research aims to identify the dominant values of the volunteer workforce.

- Values are the enduring principles and beliefs that guide and motivate personal and group attitudes and behaviours. Values play a vital role in motivating a range of pro-social activities including volunteering, and conflicting or poorly-defined values can weaken social participation.

- The first stage of my study will utilise a well-established values evaluation framework to identify the dominant personal and shared values that motivate volunteer participation in emergency services, and to explore the potential for conflict between different values sets.

- SES members across NSW will be asked to complete a paper-based anonymous survey called the Portrait Values Questionnaire that provides descriptions of 40 different types of people and asks respondents to rate "how much like you is this person?" The responses provide a guide to the individual's dominant values.
  (Comment: Each of the survey descriptions represents one of ten basic human values from the Schwartz basic values framework (self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power, security, conformity, tradition, benevolence and universalism). These values are incorporated into a circular motivational continuum that represents the relationship between different values sets).

- The second stage of my study will involve participatory action research interventions in several units with the aim of developing practical local strategies to address values misalignments identified in stage 1.

Key propositions

- The key propositions that drive this research are, firstly, that Australian emergency services volunteers constitute a highly unique workforce.
  (Comment: Australian emergency services volunteers are called upon to provide a vital public service in times of crisis. Unlike paid employees who are obliged to deploy, volunteers can and do choose not to respond at any time. Nonetheless emergency services volunteers consistently choose to deploy in inconvenient, uncomfortable, arduous, demanding and sometimes hazardous emergency situations, seemingly reflecting an ongoing commitment to serve without expectations of financial or personal benefit).

- Secondly, that emergency services volunteers are predominantly motivated by a distinctive set of traditional values.

- Thirdly, that a misalignment of values between the individual, group and organisation is a major contributor to volunteer dissatisfaction and turnover.

Conclusion

- A better understanding of the dominant values of the emergency services volunteer workforce will provide new insights on the dynamics of the workforce-organisation relationship, with implications for volunteer recruitment, training, teamwork, leadership, recognition and different modes of community participation.
  (Comment: Insights offered by an audit of volunteer values could include: the primary reasons why people volunteer for emergency services roles; the dominant shared values of the emergency services workforce as a whole; the dominant values of (recognising the distinctive needs of) volunteer sub-groups by gender, age and region; and the degree of alignment of volunteer and organisational values).