THE EMERGENCY SERVICE VOLUNTEER FRAMEWORK: GUIDING GOOD MANAGEMENT IN BRIGADES, GROUPS AND UNITS

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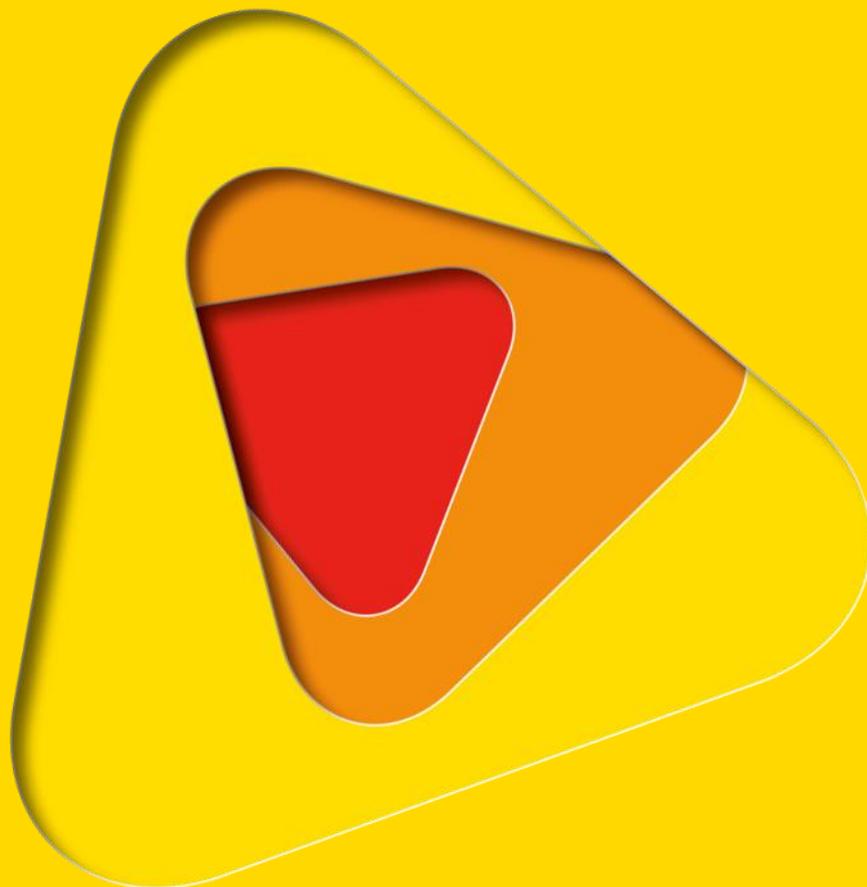**Perth, 5 – 8 September 2018**

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INTRODUCTION

Volunteers are the backbone WA's emergency services, providing support to keep the community safe on land or water, come rain, hail, or searing heat. Turnover rates among emergency services volunteers are high and each lost volunteer reflects a loss not only in terms of the financial investment from training and equipment, but also of valuable skills and experience. The Department of Fire and Emergency Services WA (DFES) has conducted extensive consultation with volunteers over the past five years in an effort to improve the volunteer experience and retention.

One of the concerns raised during consultation was around the preparedness of volunteer leaders to effectively manage their brigade, group, or unit (BGU) and the effect that this has on volunteer satisfaction and retention. Volunteer leaders are themselves volunteers and it is important that they are provided with the necessary training, support, and resources to do their jobs effectively. To address this concern, DFES partnered with researchers from the University of Western Australia (UWA) to investigate gaps in leadership capability and create a framework for managing volunteers across the emergency services that would provide concrete support and guidance for volunteer leaders.

RESEARCH APPROACH

Initial desktop research provided the background to best practice in volunteer and emergency services management. We simultaneously reviewed existing survey data around the volunteer experience that was captured by DFES over the past few years from over 3800 volunteers in order to identify stand-out issues around management and leadership.

Discussions with DFES staff (executives, Superintendents, and District Officers) provided further insights around the emerging survey themes and other areas where leaders struggle.

Following this, we conducted a series of interviews with 25 volunteers and 11 Volunteer leaders. These interviewees represented all five emergency services from both country and metropolitan areas. We also interviewed Volunteer Association representatives, who were able to provide insight into the standout leadership issues that affect their volunteers.

The investigation revealed key areas where leaders appeared to need more support and guidance. Based on these gaps and recommendations from the literature around the behaviours that impact volunteer satisfaction and retention, ten areas of management and leadership were chosen to form the basis of the framework.

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FRAMEWORK OVERVIEW

Self-determination theory (SDT) served as the backdrop to all of the guidance provided in the resources. Research shows that providing support in the three pillars of SDT (autonomy, belonging, and competence) leads to improvements in volunteer motivation, satisfaction, and retention. Each section of the framework provides concrete guidance on best practice for that area of management tailored to a volunteer and emergency services workforce and explains how doing this properly helps volunteers to feel more competent, have more ownership over their work, and feel like they belong in their BGU. A suite of additional supporting resources provides further information for leaders struggling in particular areas.

The Volunteer Management Framework covers the following ten areas of management:

Influence tactics

This refers to the techniques leaders use to influence volunteers to do something. Consultation revealed evidence of inconsistent or poor leadership style and discrepancies between volunteer and leader perceptions of tactics used. The framework describes the most and least effective tactics, different sources of leader power, and how to establish these.

Knowledge sharing

Survey data indicated that knowledge hoarding is a concern for many volunteers. The framework outlines the benefits of sharing knowledge and information, guidelines for deciding what to share and how to share it, and strategies for promoting knowledge sharing among volunteers.

Delegation

While most leaders delegated to some degree, many were still overwhelmed and could spend up to 40 hours a week running their BGU. The framework illustrates the benefits and importance of delegating responsibilities, describes the steps involved, and provides tips for effective delegation.

Including and involving

Concerns about favouritism and factionalism were raised during consultation and appear to be recurring issues. The framework provides strategies for creating an inclusive environment and discusses the importance and benefits of including volunteers in decision-making.

Recognition and reward

While most volunteers are intrinsically motivated, recognition plays an important role in making them feel appreciated and valued. The framework provides ideas for tangible and intangible recognition.

Feedback provision

Inconsistent and ineffective feedback were common themes in the investigation. Since good feedback supports volunteer competence, the framework offers guidelines and worked examples around giving constructive feedback.

Receiving and using upwards feedback

Seeking and using feedback from volunteers is a key way for leaders to improve communication and BGU functioning. The framework outlines channels for upwards feedback and provides guidance on using open communication to make sure volunteers feel comfortable providing feedback.

Conflict management

Conflict management is an inevitable and difficult part of any leader's role and something with which many struggle. The framework outlines the common causes of conflict, provides tips for conflict prevention, and strategies for managing and resolving conflict.

Succession planning

Succession planning is vital for maintaining an effective volunteer workforce into the future yet was identified as one of the areas where leaders have consistent difficulties. This section of the framework discusses two aspects of succession planning: 1) managing a volunteer's career as they become less physically able and 2) developing future leaders.

Adjusting leadership style

Leadership style has a significant impact on volunteer satisfaction and performance and the most effective leaders are those who adapt their approach to different people and situations. This section discusses the differences between emergency and non-emergency situations, introduces two leadership styles that are applicable to the emergency services, and provides guidelines around when to use each.

CONCLUSION

The final framework and resources are due to be released in May 2018, in conjunction with a complementary suite of resources around volunteer onboarding and socialisation that were developed concurrently. The resources will be available online for all volunteer leaders and DFES staff to access. Because DFES wish to contribute to a community of practice around volunteer workforce management, the resources will also be available upon request to any other volunteer or emergency services organisations wishing to use and adapt them.