

Managing volunteers

Introduction

This paper covers some important aspects of managing volunteers, these include:

- level of control which may be exercised;
- styles of management;
- communications; and
- dispute and conflict resolution.

However, before discussing these issues I feel it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the New South Wales State Emergency Service (SES) for my comments to have some meaning and context.

The State Emergency Service is an emergency and rescue service which is the lead agency for dealing with floods and storms and also carries out the majority of the general rescue in the rural parts of the State. This includes road accident rescue, search and rescue and vertical rescue.

The SES was formed in 1955 after massive floods in which over 40 people lost their lives and millions of dollars worth of damage was done. The SES still puts a lot of effort into this flood role because floods are the most costly natural hazards and the SES is committed to preparing the community.

The SES has 243 units grouped into 18 Divisions with a total of 6,700 active members. There are no permanent staff at unit level. Units are based on local government Councils that are responsible for providing accommodation and it is expected that they assist with funding for vehicles and day to day unit running costs.

The SES has historically been under funded but that is finally improving. Unlike the fire services, which receive most of their funding via an insurance levy, virtually all of SES funding comes from the New South Wales State Government Treasury.

The SES operates under an Act of Parliament and the organisation is essentially a government department. It has 31 staff at the State Headquarters in Wollongong and 38 in the field in the 18 Divisional Headquarters.

Basic Needs

As an emergency service there are a number of basic needs which must be met if we are to be able to operate. Volunteer groups which are not emergency services may have slightly different requirements, although I

By Major General B W Howard AO MC,
Director General, NSW State Emergency
Service. A paper presented to the 4th
Annual Emergency Services Forum on
Volunteers in Emergency Services. July 22,
1999, Sydney Australia

suspect that most will be somewhat similar.

Clear Roles

The first need is for clear roles and tasks. These can be stated in legislation or official emergency plans, but they must be clear and unambiguous and there must be definite lines of responsibility. There is a tendency in the public safety industry for volunteer groups to spring up of their own accord and decide that they will carry out some form of rescue or support. I believe that this should not be allowed. Existing groups can also decide that they need to train and equip for tasks for which they perceive a need.

There must be a system to control these tendencies or we can spend most of our time 'fending off invaders'. Fortunately New South Wales is well served in this regard by a system of formal accreditation for the common forms of rescue, which prevents these splinter groups and different directions. It has proved to be a godsend.

Protection

The second framework requirement is adequate protection for individuals. Emergency services work is intrinsically unsafe so the level of personal protection must be high. The SES views protection to include:

- employment protection;
- personal effects insurance;
- insurance against accident, sickness or death;
- protection against legal action; and
- adequate personal and operational equipment and appropriate training.

Once again, New South Wales is well served although the last point, equipment and training, has not always been as good as it should have been within SES.

In meeting these two needs, the question of control is partly answered. If the roles are clear, the volunteers must be prepared to contribute to them or not join in the first place. Naturally not

everybody can turn out every time there is a call, but to remain effective the percentage that will respond needs to be above 50. The level of availability needs to be stated in organisational documents.

Communication

However, I regard the most important aspect of managing volunteers successfully is communication.

Volunteers, whose motivation is not financial, need a stake in their organisation. They not only want to know what is going on, they want to influence proceedings. I support both of these aspects very strongly.

Communication is a real challenge in a decentralised organisation, like the SES, where offices are not manned by staff on a regular basis. Nevertheless, effective communication is absolutely fundamental to the wellbeing of volunteers and the effectiveness of the organisation. We have our own web page which contains a reasonable amount of information that is designed for our own members rather than outsiders, and this has been a great help. We encourage inquiries from our volunteers and always answer them carefully.

The SES operates a quarterly newsletter which goes to all units. It is designed to provide information on current issues and is also well regarded. A copy is placed on the web page. During unit visits we make sure that we locate the last Newsletter and check that it is readily available to all volunteers. We have annual Conferences at Division level where current issues are discussed and problems aired. Invariably someone from State Headquarters is present.

But I suppose personal contact remains the most important means of communication and it cannot be replaced effectively by electronic or paper systems. There is no substitute for regular visits to units. Our Headquarters staff are very active in this regard and, amongst other reasons for visits, we conduct Operational Readiness Inspections on one third of our units each year. These are non-threatening because we are there to work with the local volunteers to fix problems, not just record them, and they are part of the wider system of creating opportunities to talk to the volunteers.

The organisation has a volunteer association which is growing in strength

and it is involved in the SES's organisational Performance Management System. This is a most important aspect of Volunteer Management and, in my experience, volunteers need consultation more often than do employees. There is no need to be nervous of this process as the vast majority will accept reasonable explanation. However, they are always coming up with ideas that need somewhere to go and that must be dealt with.

We conduct regular surveys on all kinds of issues in an attempt to be reasonably sure that we are meeting needs. Examples are uniforms, leader insignia, Code of Conduct, vehicles, funding and so on. We are currently looking at what the volunteers think we can do to improve our profile.

We know the community holds us in high regard but we also know that they don't know much about what we do. Within reason we are committed to acting on the findings of these surveys.

While a proper chain of command is essential in an emergency service, volunteers need access to the senior staff to air their views and put their suggestions. This puts a strain on those staff, but they must be available.

I don't pretend that we have been as successful as we could be in communicating, but we do try hard. Of all the methods I have described the most effective has been personal contact. I don't believe the other means can replace it.

Training

If effective communications is our biggest challenge, providing proper training comes next. It doesn't matter whether a rescuer is paid or not, that person must be trained properly.

With the wide range of skills required of SES volunteers, there is a real problem on our hands. In addition, volunteers demand credibility. Unfortunately there are still people who equate being a volunteer with being an amateur. Nothing could be farther from the truth, but we in volunteer management must work hard to make sure that our training will stand up to outside scrutiny.

Our approach has been to develop national competency standards for all skills and embrace competency based training. This has been something of a nightmare as many of the processes are extremely bureaucratic and the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) has a history of changing its mind and the system. However, despite their best efforts we are making progress.

Competency based training will ensure

our credibility in the public safety industry and see off the sceptics. It also suits our decentralised nature because self-paced learning is normal and formal course requirements are minimised.

The majority of the trainers and assessors will be volunteers themselves and we are training several hundred a year through a mixture of internal and external means.

There is no doubt that no matter what volunteers do, they must be credible both for their own self-esteem and, in our industry, for the safety of the community.

Recognition

The other high priority amongst our volunteers is their need for recognition. I believe that as a community we tend to undervalue volunteers and we do so at our peril.

Our volunteers are eligible for the National Medal and that is highly prized. We need to make sure we process nominations as soon as someone is eligible, not in due course in the good old public service fashion.

We also have internal long service awards and we award commendations for outstanding performance. I make sure I write to any unit that does something particularly well. I also write similar letters for our Minister to sign. All these simple acts contribute to morale.

Qualification Certificates are also very important to volunteers and they need to be issued as soon as humanly possible after the activity. Don't underestimate the importance of this seemingly minor point, failure to provide certificates promptly can cause people to leave.

We will shortly have our own award, the Australian Emergency Services Medal, which will supplement the odd award in the Order of Australia we are able to get.

Disputes and Grievances

One of the most important initiatives we have undertaken in recent years has been the development of a Code of Conduct. It is simple and non-threatening but very, very important. Our volunteers sign it as part of their induction program and its existence has provided a simple guide as to what sort of behaviour we expect of them.

The Code has been helpful in reducing conflict, particularly challenges to the authority of those in leadership positions. It is also the other half of the answer to how we exercise control. Remember the first half was clear roles and tasks.

As described, the Code of Conduct is the cornerstone of our method of exercising control and of dealing with

disputes and grievances. But we do have formal procedures for dealing with such problems. They are a simplification of the normal public service system, managed by either a senior volunteer or a staff member. We also provide training in negotiating skills, which works well. Transfers between units are available where practical when personality clashes occur, but occasionally we need to remove people. This is not common, but the option is available.

To pull all these pieces together, I will return to the original questions.

Management Styles: With communication being the main requirement, the style must be personal because people communicate more effectively in person than with pieces of paper. This doesn't mean that the head of the organisation is alone. All senior officers must participate.

A non-bureaucratic approach is fundamental to success; volunteers generally don't join an organisation to fill in heaps of forms, so find other means. We are fortunate that our Divisional Headquarters takes care of most of the paperwork for their units.

Level of Control: If the role of the organisation is clear, the contribution required by volunteers is clear, and if there is a Code of Conduct which is enforced with common sense, the volunteers will move mountains.

We in the SES have never had a problem getting enough volunteers for a call-out, and most times when someone doesn't do the right thing, other volunteers will sort out the problem.

Communication: I have already spoken at length about communication, but I would emphasise volunteer participation in decision-making as an essential element, not merely passing on decisions.

Conflict and Dispute Resolution: Prevention is always better than cure, so a Code of Conduct is essential supported by standard conflict and dispute resolution procedures. Senior volunteers need to be trained as well as permanent staff.

Conclusion

You have now heard how we manage volunteers within SES.

We know we could do better if we were more effective at communicating with them.

We know they want to be led well and managed effectively.

In our view, good communication equals good leadership and contributes significantly towards good management.