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Leadership, Perceptions, and Turnover at Fire and Emergency New Zealand

Abstract

Fire and Emergency New Zealand experiences voluntary turnover at local volunteer fire brigades. The purpose of the quantitative component of this sequential explanatory study was to examine the relationship between volunteer chief fire officers' leadership styles, perceptions of organizational support, and voluntary firefighter turnover; the purpose of the qualitative component was to explore strategies that volunteer chief fire officers used to reduce volunteer firefighter turnover. The population for the quantitative study was 21 volunteer chief fire officers, and the population for the qualitative study was 6 volunteer firefighters. The theoretical frameworks that grounded this study were transformational leadership theory (TL) and organizational support theory (OST). The data collection process for the quantitative component was 2 surveys, and the data analysis process was Pearson's correlation. The data collection process for the qualitative component was face-to-face, semistructured interviews, and the data analysis process was thematic analysis. The quantitative results showed a significant statistical relationship between OST and turnover ($p < .001$), and no significant relationship between TL and turnover ($p > .001$). The qualitative results yielded 5 themes for strategies that reduce firefighter turnover: family acknowledgment and involvement, a positive culture and satisfaction, robust vetting and induction processes, flexibility in training, and communication and recognition. The implications for positive social change included the identification of strategies for FENZ leaders to use in promoting the worth, dignity, and development of volunteers, to foster unity and enhance safety within communities.

Brief Overview of Supporting Literature

Employee turnover has been a focus of interest to scholars for decades and continues to be an area of interest. The literature review provided a synthesis of research as it relates to the topic of volunteer turnover. The complete literature review of this study included the following themes of voluntary turnover, volunteerism, contrasts between paid employees and volunteers, generational factors, barriers to retention, strategies to reduce volunteer turnover, and alternative theories.

Volunteerism in New Zealand

New Zealand is a leading nation in the contribution of time made by volunteers per capita and this unpaid workforce plays a vital role in the country's nonprofit sector. A 2008 study of the sector estimated volunteers comprise two-thirds of the nonprofit sector

workforce in the country. In 2015, Volunteering New Zealand carried out a national survey on the state of volunteering in New Zealand and found that the trend of volunteer-involving organizations facing more complex challenges with retention is increasing.

Strategies to Reduce Volunteer Turnover

For both male and female volunteers, work-life balance is critically important for social, emotional, and physical health. Organizational leaders can reduce the challenges their volunteers face with work-life balance, by developing the desired culture through creating policies and strategies that foster a family-friendly environment. Volunteer firefighters who have their family and friends welcomed into a brigade, and who therefore receive higher levels of support and encouragement from family and friends to be involved in the FENZ, have their risk of burn-out reduced. The reduction of burn-out has positive implications for FENZ, the brigade, the individual's family unit, and the wider community.

Examples of efforts that successful organizational leaders have used to engage with family for volunteer retention were to host social events that were family-friendly and inclusive; create new orientation programs that included family members; highlight non-wage benefits and programs that directly benefit the family, and; distribute satisfaction surveys to volunteers' partners to identify areas of challenge, success, and opportunity. It is the family unit of a volunteer that influences future career and voluntary decisions, through encouragement or discouragement. Such an influence from a family can be positively encouraged if organizational leaders make a concerted effort to acknowledge and value the importance of a volunteer's family unit, and understand the positive outcomes that can be generated.

Organizational Support and Transformational Leadership Theories

Organizational support theory (OST) is defined as a worker's global beliefs about the extent to which the organization values their contribution and cares about their well-being. The central construct within OST is perceived organizational support (POS), and refers to the degree to which workers believe their work-organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being. Higher-levels of organizational support may lead to workers perceiving themselves to be a better fit with the organization, and the more likely workers are to be retained in their organization. OST is consistent with the strategy and intention of Fire and Emergency leaders to further value volunteers as a crucially important workforce within the organization.

Whereas organizational support theory focusses on the volunteer/follower, transformational leadership theory focusses on the manager/leader. A transformational leader focuses on encouraging and motivating followers to look beyond that of their own self-interest, to the interests of the group for a collective, shared, and meaningful purpose. Leaders who are transformational, promote the behaviors of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.

Research Methods and Data Analysis

Determining a research method and design are key aspects of the research process. Because this study required both qualitative and quantitative data collection, I used a mixed

methods methodology. The single-phase timing of the quantitative and qualitative data gathering of this study was the reason I chose the sequential explanatory design. With the participant selection criteria driving the selection of the sample, I used non-probability purposive sampling.

Data collection for the quantitative component of this study was two-fold. In order to examine volunteer chief fire officers' leadership styles, I chose to use the multi-factor leadership questionnaire (MLQ), a quantitative instrument for data collection. To examine the volunteer chief fire officers' perceptions of organizational support, I chose to use the survey of perceived organizational support for data collection. As the primary qualitative data collection instrument for this study, I conducted semistructured interviews and used my own skills for data quality improvement. Five interview questions were asked of six local volunteer firefighters who had a transformational volunteer chief fire officer, providing data to answer the main, qualitative research question. The Pearson correlation coefficient was used to analyze the quantitative data, and thematic analysis and NVivo were used to analyze the qualitative data.

Quantitative Results

The purpose of the quantitative component of this study was to examine the relationship between (a) volunteer chief fire officers' leadership styles, and (b) volunteer chief fire officers' perceptions of organizational support, and voluntary firefighter turnover. The conclusions from my analyses were that POS has a statistically significant relationship to voluntary turnover, whereas leadership style does not have a statistically significant relationship to voluntary turnover.

Findings for Hypothesis 1: Leadership Styles and Voluntary Turnover

From the data, no significant correlations existed between any of the transformational leadership constructs and turnover. Of the significance scores, the most significant relationship existed between inspirational motivation and turnover.

The theory of transformational leadership is comprised of four key constructs: idealized influence (which can be divided into attitudinal and behavioral), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Theorists found that leaders who portray idealized influence, gained followers' respect and trust through emphasizing commitment and collective purpose; increased workers' performance through providing a clear vision and mission-related goals, and; lowered turnover rates and rates of turnover intention through positively influencing followers' commitment to the leader, and to the organization.

Senior leaders within organizations should invest in transformational leadership training to link desired organizational goals to specific behaviors and outcomes. Leaders who exhibit the leadership construct of intellectual stimulation provide an environment where followers are able to solve problems with diverse thinking processes and feedback appropriate challenge toward organizational guidelines.

Transformational leaders who projected the individualized consideration construct toward followers, produced workers who felt valued, were developed to their own strengths, and had lower intentions to leave the organization. Researchers have found that a significant

and positive relationship exists between turnover and job performance, and satisfaction, commitment, and trust in leadership. Understanding these relationships between turnover and the identified precursors, assisted leaders in the attraction and retention of workers.

Findings for Hypothesis 2: Perceptions of Organizational Support and Voluntary Turnover

The average score from the 8 item perceptions of organizational support survey was 4.18 which represents a collective 70% positive perception of organizational support from volunteer chief fire officers toward Fire and Emergency New Zealand. From the data analyzed, a significant correlation existed between volunteer chief fire officers' perceptions of organizational support and turnover.

Themes from the literature supported the results of this study regarding the impact of perceptions of organizational support on voluntary turnover. When followers have the belief that an employer or organization, through their leader, cares for and values their well-being and extra efforts, workers will portray behaviors that are favorable and benefit the organization. Employers and organizational leaders who invest in the human capital of workers, and who provide a work environment that is supportive, can enhance motivation, positive relationships, more favorable work outcomes, and more beneficial turnover rates. Conversely, when followers perceive there is a lack of support from leaders or the organization, their outcomes and behaviors become increasingly unfavorable, resulting in negative turnover rates.

Qualitative Results

As previously discussed, five themes were identified from the participant interviews regarding strategies that volunteer chief fire officers used to retain volunteer firefighters. The themes were family acknowledgment and involvement, flexibility in training, a positive culture and satisfaction, a robust vetting/induction process, and communication and recognition.

Identified Theme 1: Family Acknowledgment and Involvement

The first theme to emerge was the importance of family acknowledgment and involvement within a brigade. Firefighter 3 explained the importance of involving families, through sharing that: "I think it's more just about increasing inclusion of people and, almost more recently, for us [the brigade members] to make it more family friendly in regards to people wanting to be here or wanting to spend time here [at the brigade]..." Firefighter 3 continued and shared an example of how the brigade facilitates activities for family involvement, and explained "we have a murder mystery night for partners and stuff in a couple of weeks, and just things to try and get the families to buy in".

The link between a leader promoting family acknowledgment and involvement, and transformational leadership theory, is the construct of idealized influence where the leader goes beyond self-interest for the good of the group. This link requires the leader to acknowledge the tasks that need to be accomplished, and to find ways for those tasks to be accomplished not only now, but in the future, and with a workforce that is socially, psychologically, and emotionally supported.

Developing strategies that benefit the volunteer's family directly, can improve family support and increase retention and work-life balance. Organizational leaders can reduce the challenges their volunteer workers face with work-life balance, by developing the desired culture through creating policies and strategies that foster a family-friendly environment. Volunteer firefighters who have their family and friends welcomed into a brigade, and who therefore receive higher levels of support and encouragement from family and friends to be involved in FENZ, have their risk of burn-out reduced.

The reduction of burn-out has positive implications for FENZ, the brigade, the individual's family unit, and the wider community. Firefighter 4 went into detail about the impact of family involvement and how that links to satisfaction, with a specific example, and stated that "some families get more on board than others... One of our brigade members has a son who's got his own BA (breathing apparatus) set and he's super, super hard-core keen and it's very cute. And he comes down to training every day, before he has to go back to bed".

Firefighter 2 reinforced the point of involving family, and explained "we had a recruit that has been to a course and we really helped him along and asked him if his family had any problems. So, keeping in contact with families and letting them know that you care about them". Firefighter 6 also gave an example of an activity, and shared: "families are certainly always welcome on the station. We try and have informal potluck dinners and all sorts of things just to try and get the whole family involved so that, for that reason, peoples' partners don't feel excluded".

Identified Theme 2: Flexibility in Training

The second theme to emerge was the importance of flexibility to the training program, and being adaptable to a voluntary workforce's time and other commitments. The link between a leader promoting flexibility for the follower toward the significant stressor of training, and transformational leadership theory, is the construct of idealized influence where the leader goes beyond self-interest for the good of the group. This link, once more, requires the leader to acknowledge the tasks that need to be accomplished, and to find ways for those tasks to be accomplished in a way, or ways, that suits the needs of the individual.

Engaging with, training, and providing on-going development for an organization's leadership to empower the voluntary workforce and promote satisfaction, can lead to significantly higher levels of engagement and increase retention in the workplace. The value and importance of training, particularly in voluntary programs, is well documented. Training is a critical element of a successful volunteer program. By providing training to volunteers, those individuals can attain additional skills that are used within their voluntary role, and in their everyday lives.

Firefighter 3 outlined the current training climate in their brigade, and the challenges with training: "more things keep rolling out, especially with health and safety becoming what it is these days. Suddenly we've got roof kits and flood kits and all of this extra stuff that we didn't have before that we now have to keep up-to-date with training and stuff on". Firefighter 3 continued and noted that: "it's just requiring more and more weekends, where we're coming in on weekends to do training courses and that sort of thing".

Training also assists in sensitizing volunteers, increasing motivation for the organizational mission, and increasing retention rates. Training helps volunteers to learn about the culture, values, and codes of conduct of an organization, creating alignment with personal drivers. Training, and the use of veteran volunteers in training and supervision, were critical to improving tenure, satisfaction, and productivity of a volunteer workforce. In addition, the implementation of policies that are specific to volunteers, and the creation of a training manual, are necessary to increase or maintain the satisfaction and retention of volunteers, and can assist volunteer leaders in their role. Firefighter 5 outlined a strategy, and possible solution, for minimizing training overload within their brigade, as led by the volunteer chief fire officer (VCFO):

the big [strategy] that we have out at [brigade] that [chief] is always fighting with, is the fire service want us to do more and more training. As a brigade, and over long periods, like 8- or 10-hour courses, they [FENZ] say we need to do it on a Sunday; so, our brigade will say, no, we are not doing it on a Sunday, we will do it on two consecutive Monday nights... so we do it over two Monday nights or over one Sunday and have a pot luck tea or whatever.

Identified Theme 3: A Positive Culture and Satisfaction

The third theme to emerge encompassed the importance of a positive culture and volunteer satisfaction within the brigade. The link between a leader promoting a positive culture and working toward high levels of follower satisfaction, and transformational leadership theory, is the construct of inspirational motivation where the leader talks optimistically about the future. This link requires the leader to both have, and communicate, a vision that followers can relate to, aspire to achieve, and contribute toward. Firefighter 4 provided an overview of what a positive culture looks like within their brigade, through sharing:

part of it is that he [chief] helps engender a community that is fun and you want to be part of and you enjoy. And that's sort of a top-down approach, you know. So, he is on board, he is easily approachable, and you know, when we are not on the fire ground, the hierarchy sort of disappears, which is quite nice. So, it means you can have a laugh, you can chat, you can joke, you can kind of be buds.

Job satisfaction and a positive culture are crucial for volunteer retention as many volunteers are motivated by personally intrinsic factors. Organizations that meet the individual needs of their workforce through practices that directly enhance the satisfaction of volunteers, reap the highest rates of retention. Firefighter 6 reinforced the importance of culture and satisfaction through detailing “I guess we try and play everything to each individual's strengths and weaknesses I guess, but, at the same token, we try to pick up reasonably stable people that we think are going to be in the area for a good, set period of time”.

Creating an organizational environment and culture that seeks to promote individual job satisfaction, can lead to increased levels of volunteer retention. Firefighter 5 stated how their leader creates a culture that seeks to promote individual job satisfaction: “First of all, he listens. It is as much culture-based as operational as far as getting guys to stay... So, I

mean our chief is pretty integral in the retention of good guys... Yeah, there is a lot of professionalism that comes from [chief], he certainly works on the culture”.

Leaders who allow volunteers to have a higher-than-normal amount of control in how they perform job duties and achieve targets, create an organizational culture that has more satisfied workers and a climate of responsibility and trust. Firefighter 2 described how their brigade creates such a climate of responsibility, by sharing how their brigade promotes an open culture “I think the main reason, or the main thing, is just talking to people and asking them if they have any concerns or any issues that might be bothering them within the brigade”. Firefighter 4 also explained how their brigade members get satisfaction in different, unique ways: “as a team, we helped put insulation underneath a house and we spend the whole day doing it. Which would be boring as hell by yourself, but as part of the team, you just get on with it and do it and it’s a bit of fun... and good banter”.

Identified Theme 4: A Robust Vetting and Induction Processes

The fourth theme to emerge included the key elements of robust vetting and induction processes that empower volunteers, new and existing. The link between a leader implementing a system where expectations are set, and transformational leadership theory, is the construct of individualized consideration where the leader helps others to develop their strengths. This link requires the leader to first understand, and then to develop and implement strategies for followers to reach their full potential.

A formal orientation program that is linked to training, as well as a peer support system, can garner positive and beneficial outcomes for satisfaction and increase retention among workers. Firefighter 1 was strong on this aspect and provided details on a buddy (peer support) system their brigade implemented to empower and promote inclusion for new recruits: “we involve the new recruits, as soon as they come on board, to make them feel that they are achieving something... once they’ve actually finished up their recruits’ courses, [we put them into] a buddy system so they can quickly build up their skill sets and their confidence”.

Firefighter 4 reinforced the importance of peer support and on-going interactions with new members, sharing that “with the new people who come in, you sort of try and take them under your wing a bit... and just be like hey, this is what we do... we all sort of contribute towards that”. And in an increasingly competitive voluntary sector newly recruited volunteers who lack, or lose, satisfaction with an organizational climate and culture, are more likely to seek volunteer opportunities elsewhere and leave the organization sooner. The experiences that a new recruit faces, and is provided within the initial months on engagement, are major factors in determining that individual’s retention, turnover intention, and commitment to the organization in both positive and negative ways.

Low retention rates of new volunteers (sub-6 months of involvement), places a financial burden on an organization. Firefighter 6 was strong on this aspect of retention and gave details on how their brigade uses a vetting process “I think [chief] is very strategic in the fact that he won’t take someone on willy-nilly... you’ve basically got to turn up for trainings for anywhere between 6 to 12 months to show your commitment before you’re actually signed up”. Firefighter 6 continued and reported that:

at the end of the day really, it's the chief's decision, but he always throws it out to all the rest of us. Yeah, we try to run our whole brigade so that every member is sort of is part of the management team. So, yeah, at the end of the day he has the final say, but if 75% of the brigade was against someone joining for various reasons, then I think it would be quashed.

Identified Theme 5: Communication and Recognition

The fifth and final theme to emerge, reinforced the importance of communication and recognition by leaders toward volunteer firefighters. The link between a leader having open communication and recognizing the value of followers, and transformational leadership theory, involves every construct of the theory: idealized influence (going beyond self-interest for the good of the group), inspirational motivation (talking optimistically about the future), intellectual stimulation (re-examining critical assumptions to question whether they are appropriate), and individualized consideration (helping others to develop their strengths).

These links require the leader to be open to feedback; to be comfortable partaking in, and observing, positive conflict; being vulnerable to answer questions that may be controversial; and prepared to publically acknowledge superior or desired behavior. Firefighter 5 shared how communication reinforces recognition, and the benefits they see in their brigade “[chief]’s door is always open out of the station. If you call him or went to see him at [workplace], he’s always open, he keeps private issues private. Like if you want something kept confidential, he’s really good that way”.

Communication and recognition from leaders represent one of the five specific factors that influence worker turnover intention. Proactive, effective, and efficient leadership is key for recruiting and retaining volunteer firefighters. Volunteer leaders play a significant role in the satisfaction that volunteers experience. Firefighter 4 provided an explanation of how appreciation is given and received within their brigade: “when you are at a job, the hierarchy is there, but [chief] is not unapproachable... you know he is not going to come down hard on you and I think that helps because you don’t feel like you are being under-appreciated. You feel, from top down, like you are appreciated”.

Firefighter 1 identified an environmental survey as a medium for creating more effective communication and recognition, and shared “[chief] put out an environmental survey to the brigade, just to capture the perception of the brigade in terms of leadership within the officer group and how that translates to the firefighters”. Firefighter 1 continued and stated: “I think definitely working on better communication... [chief] is trying to work on clearing that space up and being more professional in that space, even while we’re on the station... And with the whole situation around better leadership and communication, I think that will also help with retaining new firefighters”.

Support and recognition are strong predictors of job satisfaction for volunteers, and may be key motivators of volunteers’ ongoing commitment to the organization. The perceived satisfaction of a volunteer toward their leader can provide predictive rates of successful retention. Retention rates, and the commitment a volunteer expresses toward the organization, are higher when individuals feel and perceive that leaders have a genuine

concern for their, and others, welfare, and appreciate the efforts of the volunteer workforce. Firefighter 6 provided an insight into how their brigade provides services that make members feel valued and acknowledged “even though peer support and things are always offered... we always try and have a good debrief after something like [heart attack] and we call in and check in on each other after something”.

Organizational leaders should seek to understand how the empowerment of followers can lead to increased motivation, a more inclusive culture, and higher retention rates of volunteers. To increase retention in a workforce, organizational leaders need to understand, and accept, the psychological contracts that are consciously or unconsciously made between themselves and followers, and ensure that any agreed or perceived expectations are satisfied. Firefighter 5 explained a strategy used at their brigade, monthly meetings, and the benefit they see from the practice: “another big thing with our brigade is having our monthly meetings. They’re a chance for everyone to get everything out in the open if they want to and it airs all the problems in the brigade I think and it allows us, as a brigade, to band together”.

Significance of the Research

Organizational leaders in a nonprofit, volunteer setting, must balance financial performance with the mission of the organization, and the expectations of volunteers. Therefore, leaders, like those at Fire and Emergency New Zealand, must seek to maximize volunteer retention, to minimize the costs of recruitment and onboarding, and maintain critical knowledge capital within the workforce.

Because 14.1% of all volunteers complete over 50% of the total volunteer hours per annum, if leaders are able to effectively undertake activities that value the volunteer and their contribution, those volunteers may take their positive experiences with them to other voluntary roles, and the creation of supplementary environments where volunteers are valued may be achieved in similar organizations around the area, region, and country. The occurrence of supplementary environments would greatly increase the positive social change that may be achieved for communities, and further demonstrates the opportunity that FENZ leaders have to influence New Zealanders, and New Zealand society, for the better.

Dedication

I dedicate this study to my family; to every volunteer who gives of their time so generously; and, to any person who believes in the value of education. I endeavored on this journey to become a doctoral scholar because I wanted to make a credible contribution to volunteerism, and to the value of volunteer leadership. I thought the process and outcome would give me greater authority in the sector, and provide for a thought-provoking document that allowed organizational leaders to better lead, and serve, a voluntary workforce. What I got out of this process, though, was much more profound.

I discovered that that resilience is an outcome of dogged determination; that following a set path is acceptable, but setting a new path is inspirational; that prioritizing one’s own goals does not need to come at the detriment of others; and, that with the power of a loving, supportive family, absolutely anything, can be accomplished.

Throughout this journey, I met incredible volunteers, and leaders of volunteers, who choose to attend incidents and act in emergency situations because of their belief that what they do, does make a difference. It does. Volunteers are people, and organizations exist because of, and for, people. It is okay, as a volunteer leader, to treat volunteers as equal people. In fact, when that occurs, a mutual respect forms that is the basis of teamwork, collaboration, and trust.

I thank volunteers and volunteer leaders at FENZ, in New Zealand, and around the world. Your contribution is valued. You are valued. Please remember that.