Stepping up or stepping out? Recruitment and retention of volunteer leaders in grassroots associations

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Abstract

Society benefits from volunteers who form small groups, working together to build communities and promote social change. It is estimated that there are almost half a million of these 'grassroots associations' operating in Australia today. They include sporting clubs, environmental groups and community service organisations. Despite the importance of these groups for a healthy civil society, evidence suggests that the leadership pool of grassroots associations is declining. This paper investigates the motivations for and barriers to the recruitment and retention of leaders. It ascertains that poor leadership, including the misuse of power within committees, is a significant barrier to committee participation. Recruitment and retention strategies for volunteer leaders are identified, which can help grassroots associations become more sustainable in the long term.

Keywords

Grassroots associations; volunteer committees; volunteer leaders; volunteer recruitment; community organisations.

Introduction

Society benefits from volunteers who form small groups and work together to build communities and promote social change. It is estimated that around 440,000 of these groups, commonly known as grassroots associations (GAs), are operating in Australia. They include sporting clubs, environmental groups and community service organisations. Despite the importance of these groups for a healthy civil society, evidence suggests that the leadership pool of GAs is declining. Due to the number of volunteers and voluntary organisations affected by the leaders of GAs, this is an important but largely neglected topic for researchers of the third sector (Bowers 2014; Posner 2015; Nesbit et al. 2016).

This study forms part of a doctoral thesis attached to an Australian Research Council project, *Creating and Sustaining a Strong Future for Volunteering in Australia* (LP140100528). The research objectives of

the thesis are: (1) to identify the motivations for and barriers to volunteer leadership in grassroots associations, and (2) to identify recruitment and retention strategies that would encourage more association members to nominate for volunteer leadership positions. Using the findings of six focus groups of members of GAs in South Australia, this paper investigates the challenges faced by these groups to successfully recruit and retain volunteer leaders, the motivations of those in leadership roles and the barriers faced by potential committee members. The paper begins by examining the existing literature relevant to GAs and volunteer leadership, recruitment and retention. This is followed by a description of the focus group methodology, and an analysis of the research findings. The paper concludes with suggestions on how GAs can become more sustainable for the long term by identifying effective recruitment and retention strategies. It also provides recommendations for how governments and the volunteering infrastructure can better recognise and support GAs.

Grassroots associations

Grassroots associations are recognised across the Western world and have a long history of public support (Putnam 2000; Smith 2000; Glover 2004). They bring people together for a collective cause, creating social bonds and promoting political action through education and reciprocity (Rotolo 1999; Schneider 2008; Kunreuther & Edwards 2011). They are also considered a critical component of social change and community development (Reisch & Guyet 2007). Most GAs begin as semi-formal groups with a fluid membership, and they often evolve into incorporated associations while remaining small and focusing on the local communities in which they originated (Smith 1992). Within the third sector in Australia, GAs are often referred to as 'community organisations' (Lyons 2001: 14). For this paper, the term 'grassroots association' is used; it is defined by David Horton Smith (2000: 7) as: 'locally based, significantly autonomous, volunteer-run, formal nonprofit (i.e., voluntary) groups that manifest substantial voluntary altruism as groups and use the associational form of organization and, thus, have official memberships of volunteers who perform most, and often all, of the work/activity done in and by these nonprofits'.

There have been numerous attempts to put an economic value on the broader not-for-profit sector and volunteering (Putnam 2000; Ironmonger 2011; O'Dwyer 2014). There is scarce data, however, on the economic worth of GAs. As Smith (2000: 5) argues, 'there are so many millions of them [in the USA] that GAs are economically quite significant'. It has been argued they are hard to quantify, and many are not large enough to be captured by official government registries or quantitative surveys (Smith 1997; Glover 2004; Cnaan et al. 2008). In 2006–07, the Productivity Commission estimated that the economic value of the not-for-profit sector in Australia was valued at 4.1 per cent of GDP (Productivity Commission 2010). The same report estimated that 74 per cent of the sector comprised small unincorporated associations. Therefore, it can be assumed that GAs in Australia contribute about 3 per cent of the country's GDP. There are signs, however, that the number of GAs in Australia is declining. When the

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) released its General Social Survey results in 2014, it found that fewer people were getting involved in social groups. For example, participation in sport and recreation activities decreased from 74 per cent in 2010 to 70 per cent in 2014 (ABS 2014). In South Australia, the number of new associations registered per year has declined from a high of 709 in 1985 to 315 in 2016 (Office of Consumer and Business Services 2016). In South Australia, the general decline in volunteering also extends to fewer people volunteering for leadership positions, from 17 per cent in 2006 to 14 per cent in 2016 (Harrison Research 2016b).

Any organisation, large or small, benefits from people leading tasks and fostering teamwork to achieve results (Tolbert & Hall 2008; Agard 2010). In a GA context, these people include committee office-bearers, board members or regular members who coordinate tasks informally (Smith et al. 2006; Nesbit et al. 2016). Put simply, for GAs to achieve results, some form of leadership is required. But a lack of good leadership can lead to a decline in participation in these types of groups, which can then impact on local communities (Onyx & Warburton 2003; Ziersch et al. 2005; Kunreuther & Edwards 2011).

Leadership of grassroots associations

The quality of leadership within GAs affects the attitude of volunteers, their commitment and the recruitment and retention of future leaders (Schneider & George 2011; Posner 2015). In the context of not-for-profit associations, Nesbit et al. (2016: 916) define leadership as 'providing shared vision, direction and strategy; focus on motivating and developing people without the use of formal reward and punishment systems'. Unlike in larger organisations with paid staff and infrastructure, the direction of GAs is usually framed collaboratively by the members (Chetkovich & Kunreuther 2006), and it is common for members of associations to elect their leaders (Smith 2010). Leading volunteers is a very different proposition from leading salaried staff, as the command and control incentives through salaries do not exist (Rochester 1999; Wilson 2012; Posner 2015; Nesbit et al. 2016). Fellow volunteers cannot be coerced, and their behaviour is often difficult to control because they can quickly withdraw their service and membership from organisations (Farmer & Fedor 1999).

Two leadership theories that are useful when considering volunteer recruitment and retention are the Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory, which focuses on human relationships (Graen & Uhl-Bien 1995), and the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) theory, which focuses on five areas of successful leadership (Kouzes & Posner 2003). LMX theory asserts that the behaviour of leaders, along with the quality of their relationship with followers, have a direct effect on the staff retention and the success (or not) of organisations. Scholars of the third sector have applied LMX theory to the management of volunteers in sport, finding that positive relationships between leaders and volunteers strongly correlate to high job satisfaction and retention of volunteers (Hoye 2006; Bang 2011). Posner tested the theoretical

framework of LPI in a study of 60 volunteer leaders across a national youth sports organisation in the United States, and similarly found that the attitude of volunteers, and the level of volunteer recruitment, was directly impacted by the behaviour of their leaders (Posner 2015).

Retention and recruitment of volunteer leaders

Even though GAs may be less complex than larger organisations with paid staff (Smith 2010), the leaders of these associations have a range of multifaceted issues to manage which directly affect the retention and recruitment of fellow committee members. These include government-imposed regulations (such as food handling and criminal history checks), legal obligations (such as the need to have insurance and accurate record-keeping), as well as ongoing responsibilities such as fundraising and the training of fellow volunteers (Warburton & McDonald 2009). Although GAs are small, leaders of these groups still have to attend to the 'strategic triangle' framework of balancing strategic direction, managing people and dealing with the outside world to secure support (Moore 2000). The amount of work generated from compliance tasks generally falls to the leadership of GAs, and they can experience significant burnout (Pearce 1993; Rochester 1999; Ockenden & Hutin 2008; Baggetta et al. 2013). This high workload can be a barrier to people joining the leadership ranks. Cnaan (1991) found that most leaders of neighbourhood resident associations are uncontested at elections due to the lack of rewards in such positions, and it was hard to recruite members to participate in committees.

Finally, it is important to note that leaders of GAs do not have the training and support structures available to volunteers in larger non-government organisations (NGOs), which have paid staff to coordinate the work of volunteers (Smith 2000; Soteri-Proctor et al. 2016). If fewer people put up their hands to lead GAs, 'oligarchical' leadership can result in associations being led by a small elite (Knoke 1981; Rothschild & Leach 2007). GAs that experience little turnover in leadership positions can become less democratic over time (Osterman 2006; Enjolras & Waldahl 2010; English & Peters 2011). In some cases, committee members of GAs become entrenched and develop into what Aldous Huxley (1962: 152) described as 'village Napoleons', leading their organisations in an undemocratic and dictatorial fashion. English and Peters (2011) describe this phenomenon as 'founders' syndrome', where original creators of associations will not let go of the past and become inflexible in their management style.

Because of the extra demands and time commitments placed on volunteer committee members of GAs, it is often difficult to recruit leaders and replenish the ranks of retiring committee members. This may be because these roles are more demanding than task-based or episodic volunteering with little extra reward (Bowlby & Lloyd Evans 2011). Leadership roles can become unpopular as the volunteer leaders themselves do not appreciate the task complexity and responsibility required when taking on leadership roles (Smith et al. 1995; Darlington, in Smith 2000). Because there is a direct corollary between the quality

and commitment of volunteer leaders in GAs and organisational success (Nesbit et al. 2016), more investment may be required in training existing leaders and improving the collective skills of committees (Meijs & Brudney 2007; Schneider & George 2011; Baggetta et al. 2013).

Focus group recruitment and profile of participants

To identify motivations and barriers to volunteer leadership in grassroots associations, and potential recruitment strategies, six focus groups were held in South Australia from July to September 2016 (Table 1). The process explored not only what people agreed on, also the issues on which they disagreed (Kitzinger 1994; Glover 2004). Focus groups were held in three diverse local government areas, including the Barossa Valley and the municipalities of Onkaparinga and Burnside. The Barossa Valley Council area is a rural area located 90 kilometres north of the capital city of Adelaide. On a national scale, it has a higher than average socioeconomic profile, and a low unemployment rate. The City of Onkaparinga is located 25 kilometres south of Adelaide, and has an average socioeconomic profile but a relatively high unemployment rate of 8.62 per cent. The inner-metropolitan council of Burnside, the smallest council area in terms of hectares, is a high socioeconomic advantaged area, being located 7 kilometres from the Adelaide central business district.

Table 1: Focus Group participants, profile and locations

	Burnside	**Barossa Valley**	**Onkaparinga**
Committee member focus groups	18 July 4 female 4 male 2 younger than 45 Sectors: Sport, civic, environment, recreation, arts	15 Aug 5 female 5 male 2 younger than 45 Sectors: Arts, sport, civic, hobby, health, emergency	22 Aug 6 female 4 male 0 younger than 45 Sectors: Recreation, hobby, arts, civic, health, education
Regular member focus groups	27 Sept 6 female 2 male 3 younger than 45 Sectors: Sport, arts, civic, hobby, disability	16 Aug 6 female 1 male 1 younger than 45 Sectors: Civic, arts, hobby, emergency, aged care	29 Aug 3 female 5 male 2 younger than 45 Sectors: Civic, sport, hobby, arts, health, emergency

Two focus groups were held in each location, with committee members and regular members of GAs. The purpose of interviewing these two cohorts was to compare the perspectives of those currently serving on committees with those who were not. There was a total of 51 participants, comprising 28 committee members and 23 regular members, with an average attendance of eight at each focus group. There were more females (60 per cent) than males (40 per cent) in the focus groups, which accurately reflects the 2016 gender ratio of formal volunteers in South Australia (Harrison Research 2016a). The age range of most participants was between 50 and 70 years (59 per cent). This is an older age profile than the total pool of formal volunteers in South Australia, where 34 per cent of volunteers are aged over 55 (Harrison Research 2016a). However, volunteers who serve on management committees across South Australia

have an older profile, which is reflected in the focus group demographics (Harrison Research 2016b). A noticeable gap in the focus groups attendance was low participation by people with a disability and by individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. Single representatives from these groups, however, would not necessarily represent the views from their broader cohorts (Krueger & Casey 2014).

Local volunteer resource centres provided lists of GAs for each council area to commence the recruitment process. This list was augmented by the register of organisations in the South Australian Community Information Directory (Government of South Australia 2016). After government departments, schools and private businesses were deleted from the directory, a spreadsheet was created for each council area, with all known associations. A self-selection sampling technique was employed (Symon & Cassell 2012), where committee and regular members volunteered to attend, either because they were interested in the research topic or wanted to receive a $50 gift voucher incentive. A total of 234 email invitations were sent to all associations with an email address. The invitation explained the purpose of the study and requested the receiver to forward the communication to committee members and regular members of their associations. It also articulated the difference between the two focus groups, and that participants needed to be aged eighteen years or older. Sport, arts and civic assocations were well represented, followed closely by recreation clubs, health services, emergency services and environmental groups. This representation is aligned with results found in the 2016 volunteering survey in South Australia (Harrison Research 2016a).

The focus groups lasted for 1.5 hours, and all were recorded with consent. A questioning route was used to help the participants build on the ideas raised in a sequential order, and to enable consistency across all focus groups (Krueger 2009). The questioning route was tailored differently for the committee member and regular member participants. The questions were based on two research objectives: first, to identify the motivations and barriers to volunteer leadership in grassroots associations; and second, to identify recruitment and retention strategies that would encourage more association members to nominate for volunteer leadership positions. Participants were asked questions about their motivations for joining the associations and committees, their perception of committee work, whether their organisations were having trouble attracting committee members, barriers to participation in committees, what attributes described well-run committees, and what successful recruitment strategies to attract new committee members might be.

The transcriptions were uploaded to NVivo software for coding. Case classifications included a unique identifier, age group, gender, council area, the primary activity of the organisation and the participant's role. The case classifications enable comparisons between committee members and regular members, age group, gender and region. A theory-driven codebook was developed, based on the questioning route and

themes that evolved from the literature review. The codebook was further developed and refined during the coding process, guided by the words and phrases used by the participants (Saldaña 2015).

Motivations for joining committees

Committee member participants included chairpersons, secretaries, treasurers and ordinary committee members. They were asked why they joined their management committees, and what they most enjoyed about their work. The most significant reason for joining committees was to have fun and meet new people. One committee member from Onkaparinga said, 'We have a really good group of people who I've met through doing this . . . and I get a buzz out of it.' Enjoyment was followed closely by self-satisfaction as a major benefit of committee membership. Self-satisfaction was strongly aligned with having a sense of responsibility to the association and wanting to see it succeed. 'You're helping other people who need help, and I think that's most important,' said a Barossa committee member.

Several of the participants mentioned that by being on the committee, they could influence outcomes for the association and make things happen. As a young Burnside committee member said, 'I was frustrated with the governance and the structure in place, and rather than complaining about it . . . I got involved.' Helping to build their career was mentioned by a few participants, and comments were similar to those about building skills. A regular member in the Barossa said if she joined a committee it would 'help me find a job'.

Leadership challenges in volunteer committees

Regular members were asked why they did not join committees, and committee members were questioned as to why they believed members did not participate in committees, given their experience trying to recruit fellow leaders. Some of the non-committee members had been members of committees in the past, so they came to the discussion with some experience in volunteer leadership and retention.

The data showed that the primary barrier to joining committees was the misuse of power and internal politics, followed by lack of time, red tape and a lack of self-confidence. The appropriate use of power is an significant factor in both LMX and LPI theory (Posner 2015; Bauer & Erdogan 2016). When power is used incorrectly, it is difficult to have credibility, inspire a shared vision or develop trust and mutual respect. Recent research in Australia has identified that workplace bullying is an issue for volunteers as well as for paid employees (Paull & Omari 2015), and that negative volunteer experiences are a barrier to future volunteering (Warburton & Paynter 2006; Brudney & Meijs 2013). In the focus groups, the misuse of power, including bullying and governance malpractice, was the most commonly reported barrier by both groups, and it was by far the most significant reason given by the regular members. The mental

anguish that participants experienced through their committee work was quite disturbing. As one regular member reported:

> *. . . the politics can be so draining and I'm just shying away from it now. I want to be able to sleep at night without worry, worry, worry . . . [P]eople who lie and backstab, they are poisonous on committees – and they tend to gravitate towards positions they see as powerful too* (Burnside regular member).

A changing society, including the lack of free time, was the second-biggest barrier reported by both cohorts. Most explanations for not having enough time to volunteer for committee roles were family and work commitments. Lack of time is a well-documented barrier to volunteering (Warburton & Crosier 2001; Sundeen et al. 2007; Holmes & Slater 2012; Oppenheimer et al. 2015), so it is not surprising that lack of time is also a barrier to volunteer committee work. This barrier was mentioned across all focus groups, with a committee member from Onkaparinga saying, 'The old fallback is time, and I've heard this many times, I haven't got time.'

The third-largest barrier to joining committees was the phenomenon of 'red tape'. In its 2014 report into charity reporting, Ernst & Young (2014: 3) defined red tape as 'obligations that are excessive, unnecessary or confusing'. Recent surveys commissioned by Australian government agencies and the Australian voluntary sector cite red tape as a barrier to volunteering and a frustration to current volunteers (Knight & Gilchrist 2014; Pricewaterhouse Coopers 2016). Red tape has also been well documented in the literature as a major barrier to volunteering in general (Sharpe 2003; Haski-Leventhal et al. 2009; Warburton & McDonald 2009; Obar et al. 2012). The evidence of red tape raised in the focus groups ranged from macro-level regulations of state and local governments to self-imposed antiquated committee procedures embedded in constitutions. Many GAs in South Australia were established in the 1970s (Office of Consumer and Business Services 2016), and some may still be operating under constitutions that require outdated formalities which are not legal requirements. Participants spoke of many examples of rules that they described as 'red tape' imposed by government authorities:

> *. . . by the time you've done the health hazards, the food handling, risk assessments, you're snowed under with the red tape, you know* (Onkaparinga committee member).

Due to historical reasons and a reluctance to change, some committees bring unnecessary bureaucracy and red tape upon themselves. A key to good leadership is the ability to manage change while at the same time being collaborative and encouraging (Kouzes & Posner 2003). The increasing complexity of leading GAs, brought on by red tape and legal issues, requires a continuous updating of skills. Perhaps without these skills, leaders of GAs become too rule-bound and fall back on the command-and-control methods they experienced as employees. Focus group participants confirmed that the culture of committees could be too formal, as described by two regular members in Onkaparinga: 'You can't just slip in a random

comment about something, you have to always put it on the agenda beforehand' and, 'It was all so officious and rule-bound.' These participants were turned off by the outdated behaviours and policies of committees they had observed. Whether these rules and regulations come from an external government authority or are imposed by the committee themselves, they need to be recognised as a significant barrier to committee work. While the leaders of GAs need to take good governance seriously, they need to balance this with good LPI practices that inspire vision and foster empowerment.

A fourth barrier reported, especially by regular members, was a lack of self-confidence to nominate for committees, which stemmed from a sense of alienation and 'not feeling good enough'. Nine participants were 45 and under, and while they often mentioned this feeling of alienation, they were also exasperated by what were perceived as old-fashioned and boring meeting procedures. Two regular members from Onkaparinga who were under 35 said of attending meetings: 'It's a little bit daunting' and 'It's a bit of a spectacle . . . ridged, alienating and separatist.' The presence of over-formality in meeting procedures seemed to increase the feeling among the young regular members that they did not have the skills to be leaders. The lack of self-confidence was also cited by older participants who felt they did not have the skills for committee work:

> *When you're retired, you subconsciously put yourself on the scrapheap, society does, not individuals, and then you think alright, I'd like to get involved in that, but you feel your own self-conscious steps in and stops you* (Onkaparinga committee member).

Combined, the lack of confidence and the alienation caused by meeting procedures create a significant barrier to committee work, especially among those who are not currently committee members.

Retaining leaders

Committee member participants cited good leadership as the most important success factor for retaining committee members. Kouzes and Posner (2003: 4–5) define leadership as an 'observable set of skills and abilities' and describe five practices of exemplary leadership, which include 'model the way', 'inspire a shared vision', 'challenge the process', 'enable others to act' and 'encourage the heart'. Participants mentioned several attributes of good leaders, including conflict resolution skills, seeing the big picture and not getting bogged in minutiae, and effective chairing skills. Other attributes included the ability to delegate and motivate others, to set a direction, to organise tasks and to create a good culture by 'selling the vision . . . to be part of something' (Burnside committee member). Some young committee members across the focus groups concurred and saw good leadership as being flexible and enabling. They cited examples of where they personally introduced changes such as the introduction of specific working groups, the breaking down of roles, dealing with strong personalities and 'leading from behind'. These

strategies confirm the LSI practices of good leadership, such as empowerment, inclusiveness and effective communication (Kouzes & Posner 2003).

Leadership styles were frequently mentioned, but with contrasting views. One Barossa committee member supported a strong leadership approach, saying: 'Quite frankly, if you have a committee of volunteers and you don't have strong leadership, you're wasting your time.' A Burnside committee member was also an advocate of strong leadership, stating: 'I think if you go look at all the successful organisations like us probably 85 per cent of the reasons why they are successful is the leadership, that top person, if you haven't got the strength up they (swoosh) go downhill.' Not all agreed with this top-down view, with a committee member in the Barossa stating: 'I'm not a great believer of the person at the top cracking the whip . . . if you can get teamwork going, you've got the makings of a good club.' Another Barossa committee member agreed, believing that some people didn't join committees 'because there have been bad experiences where someone hasn't been controlled, where the talker is always the talker, and the bully is always the bully, so people avoid it'.

Participants who were regular members of associations reported that good communication was a leading factor for retaining committee members. When participants gave examples of good communication, they talked about leaders demonstrating inclusive behaviours, keeping the organisation abreast of activities, active listening, considering the ideas of others, not interrupting, and being diplomatic. LPI theory states that frequency of communication is an important moderator in organisations, and can increase agreement between leaders and followers (Bauer & Erdogan 2016). As a Burnside regular member said, 'You have to have good communication skills, you got to know how to treat people, and if you don't know, you're right behind that eight-ball.' Other regular members vented frustration, with examples of poor communication which left them feeling confused and disconnected with their committees. A regular member from Onkaparinga wanted her committee to 'take on what other members are saying'. Some examples of poor communication were linked to behavioural issues, with participants recalling instances that led to poor morale. For example, '[Don't] just over-talk everybody – they don't hear what other people have to say' (Burnside regular member) or 'Don't just think that your idea is the best one – let's talk about it, debate the pros and cons' (Burnside regular member).

The other top success factors were evenly reported and included member recognition, changing with the times and being willing to help the organisation. Being open to change was important, especially with the changes in technology and the increased demands on time. A regular member in Burnside said: 'I think openmindedness, a willingness to listen to other people's ideas even if you don't agree with them, and being open to suggestions of how things could be done better [are important]'. Committee members provided more comments than regular members regarding difficulties with committees due to their firsthand experience of serving on committees. The top two reasons were directly related. The first was the issue of committees being driven by a few people displaying oligarchic behaviour, and the second

reason was that committee positions could not be filled – which could then cause the oligarchic behaviour. Both committee members and regular members thought that declining membership of associations reduced the pool of people available for committee work.

A significant challenge for GAs that have a concentration of power with the same people serving a committee year after year include the 'burnout' of existing committee members, leading to inflexibility, which in turn is a barrier to prospective committee members (Baggetta et al. 2013). As two participants said:

> *It really got driven on the back of a couple of individuals who just worked tirelessly* (Burnside committee member).

> *The same person has been in the chair for 25 years, and there is nothing in the constitution to make him resign and it's pretty frustrating for people if they feel like they have something to offer* (Barossa regular member).

Other reasons given for committee difficulties were a general declining of association membership and an ageing membership. These two are related, as many participants observed that young people are not joining associations, which in turn gradually reduces the total number of association memberships, making the general pool of willing committee members much smaller. This pattern supports Putnam's argument about the decline of the 'long civic generation' (2000). One Burnside committee member said: 'Our club was a very big club back 32 years ago; it's now down to about 45 members.'

Onkaparinga and Barossa committee members had the same concerns: 'Committees haven't got new blood, younger blood, coming through' and 'I think that what exercises all of our minds in every group I've been involved in, is how to get younger people involved, and I don't know what the answer is.' Many of the above reasons for committee difficulties are interrelated and can lead to barriers to committee work, as described above. It raises the question: if improved governance and leadership might address barriers, can more regular members be recruited to be leaders of GAs?

Leadership recruitment strategies

By far the most successful recruitment strategies reported by both committee members and regular members was the direct approach. This was primarily the case for committee members, as most were recruited by being asked. Participants in all focus groups reported that this was standard practice, even though it encourages homogeneous organisations (Warburton & Paynter 2006). As a Burnside committee member said, 'Every single one that I've been involved in, I've been asked by someone I couldn't say no to . . . I've never put myself forward.'

Having specific job roles was the second-most-suggested strategy, notably by regular members who were afraid of overcommitting themselves. The participants indicated that information could range from formal job descriptions to a verbal outline of required tasks, so they had a better idea of what was expected of them. The importance of congruence between a specific volunteer role and the aspiration and skills of the volunteer is confirmed in the literature (Nettting 2008; Haski-Leventhal et al. 2017). A Barossa regular member explained the importance of clarifying committee responsibilities this way:

> *I think I'd be more interested in being on a committee if I knew what I was getting myself in for, again, having had positive and negative experiences being on a committee, I want to be well informed before I got myself into that position again* (Barossa regular member).

Advertising committee roles in association newsletters, on social media and in community newspapers was regularly suggested by participants. Publicising opportunities in this way also promoted the organisations more generally to build their reputations and standing in the community (Boezeman & Ellemers 2008). As a Barossa committee member said, 'You have to have some way of publicising what you're doing because it makes your members feel worthwhile.' Regular members suggested creative ways of recruiting committee members, such as increasing the pool of members generally, mentoring members who might be interested, increasing flexibility and selling the benefits of being on a committee to members. Participants stressed the importance of lifting the profile of their organisations to make sure they stay relevant in their communities, of showing leadership in their cause and of publicly sharing their successes, which might inspire others to join.

Discussion

Volunteer committees in GAs are groups of people, sometimes strangers, coming together for a common cause. With that come the advantages and disadvantages of working with people, similar to a workplace except that GAs do not have the same command-and-control systems (Pearce 1993; Harris 1998; Wilson in Andrews et al. 2010). As a Burnside committee member stated: 'You can't manage paid people the same way you that you manage volunteers – it's entirely different.'

Leaders of GAs need to demonstrate a variety of useful leadership practices to attract and retain people to their committees (Kouzes & Posner 2003), but they have the added challenge of having to do this without offering a salary. Unlike larger NGOs, these GAs do not have the support of human resource managers and access to training opportunities to build the capacity of volunteer leaders. Associations with paid staff often provide training in LPI practices that develop the capacity of leaders. The findings from this study indicated that GAs would benefit from this training. However, leaders in these organisations are operating on their own without support in an increasingly volatile and changing environment.

The major findings of the focus groups concern the misuse of power in committees, including personality clashes, bullying behaviours, internal politics and governance malpractice. This outranked a lack of time as the largest barrier to joining committees, especially by regular members. This finding is inversely related to the main motivations for people joining committees in the first place. Individuals agreed to take up committee positions for personal satisfaction, enjoyment and making new friends. If major barriers are not addressed, such as misuse of power and poor governance, it is logical to expect that people will not join committees experiencing these problems, as they are seeking a positive experience from their volunteering. Most GAs operate at a local level, and it does not take long for word of mouth to publicise committee problems across a community. It can be assumed, too, that many committees are unaware of their reputations, due to the 'group think' that comes with oligarchic behaviours. Hence, misuse of power – a significant barrier – could go unnoticed in grassroots committees.

The focus group data reveals a set of cause-and-effect relationships concerning the issues facing GAs today. When discussing barriers to join committees and committee difficulties, focus group participants often talked as though they were one and the same. This was the case regarding 'red tape', which is both a barrier and a difficulty, and can be imposed from outside or created by outdated internal governance procedures. Conversely, the reasons people serve on committees were often factors for success, such as enjoyment and a sense of satisfaction, which help give organisations a good reputation and high membership levels. These would be the outcomes of volunteer leaders who demonstrate good LPI practices.

Conclusion

From the focus group data, it can be concluded that improving committee culture and policies should remove some of the barriers to serving on volunteer committees. GAs facing difficulties could consider improving their leadership practices, which may also increase membership numbers. This, in turn, would increase the recruitment pool for new committee members. For this to happen, more support needs to be available for volunteer leaders to improve their leadership practices so that they can prepare for the inevitable changes that are impacting GAs.

There is volunteer infrastructure available in Australia for volunteer-involving organisations which is subsidised by governments (Maher 2015), but very few GAs are aware of these services. In Australia, this infrastructure includes a national peak body, state peak bodies and resource centres located in cities, suburban centres and regional areas (Volunteering Australia 2017a). These organisations provide a comprehensive volunteer referral service and a wide variety of quality training courses in governance and leadership. Many of these courses, however, appear to target paid volunteer coordinators working for larger not-for-profit organisations. GAs, who do not have the benefit of paid staff, may not be aware of these forms of support. In fact, in order to become a member of some of these organisations, it is a

requirement to be insured, pay a fee and nominate a person who manages volunteers, which would disqualify most GAs (Volunteering Australia 2017b). More could be done to help grassroots leaders to take advantage of resources and training opportunities, such as more flexible eligibility requirements and greater awareness of training opportunities. This could build organisational capacity that would, in turn, help their associations become more sustainable.

Conversely, ignoring committee difficulties can lead to increased barriers for individuals considering committee work. This will lead to a further decline of committee nominations and accelerate the reduction of GAs in our communities. The importance of GAs needs to be acknowledged by governments and the volunteering infrastructure. These groups are vital to society. Without the thousands of small sporting clubs, craft groups, resident groups, men's sheds, service clubs, advocacy and self-help groups, many Australians would be living in isolation, with severe consequences for mental and physical health. Our democracy would also be weakened, as fewer people would be engaged in civil society. The leaders of these GAs, who are so vital to civil society, need more attention from governments, researchers and the volunteering infrastructure to access relevant support. This assistance, in the form of education, training and policy improvements, will help organisations become more sustainable, for the long-term benefit of Australian society.

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