# Volunteers as a learning bridgehead to the community

*Hughes and Henry* review recent volunteer retention research with the Country Fire Authority (CFA).

By Lewis Hughes and John Henry

This paper reviews recent volunteer retention research within the CFA. Reflection is invited upon the possibility of a relationship between making the most of what a volunteer knows and can do and the criticality of emergency services working in a strongly bonded manner with communities. There is a win/win outcome as volunteers bring much from their life's experiences and gain much additional knowledge and skill from their volunteering. The conscious valuing of this expanding individual and collective volunteer knowledge and skill base beckons as a foundation from which emergency services can reach to, and engage with, the wider community.

## Introduction

In July 2003, Emergency Management Australia (EMA) undertook to fund a research project addressing the issue of making the most of what volunteers know and can do. This research, which to a degree is still underway, has been hosted by the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and the emerging model will be capable of extrapolation to wider emergency management application.

The research is in support of the EMA/CFA objective of recruiting and retaining volunteers. The notion that CFA volunteers bring much knowledge and skill to the CFA, and add considerably to their personal capability through their CFA learning experiences, is the core idea of the research. Accordingly, the research has been based upon the perspective that recruiting and retaining volunteers has some relationship to the manner in which the broad outcomes from the lifelong learning of volunteers is valued, drawn upon, and strengthened by the CFA experience.

We suggest that our research is relevant to both the *working with communities and managing and developing our people* streams of the **Safer Sustainable Communities** conference[1]. The substantial number of emergency service volunteers is a significant numeric base from which to build a community bridgehead. The efficacy with which this bridgehead connects emergency services and the broad community has a direct relationship to the motivations and capacity of volunteers to so participate in emergency service work.

In the course of our research, CFA members remarked upon the worth of building partnerships within their communities. Remarks have also been made regarding the variability of current engagement ranging from the brigade being the community glue in some rural communities through to apathy in more urban environments. It is also evident that volunteer differences exist regarding enthusiasm for working with communities versus attending incidents. And there are some profound broader membership issues relating to recruitment, training, drawing upon what volunteers know and can do, and motivation to remain as volunteers associated with strengthening and expanding, at the local level, the practices of an emergency service in the direction of working with communities. The outcome of our research is an indicative model that has relevance to the challenges emergency service organisations face in responding to the potentialities of this 'working with communities' development.

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1. This paper was presented at the 2003 Australian Disaster Conference which focused upon Safer Sustainable Communities.

## The Research Project – Volunteers: making the most of learning

The research project was designed around four phases.

### Phase 1. Initial interviews

Interviews with key CFA personnel were undertaken. The data gained from these interviews were analysed for major themes that by the consistency of mention, and comparison with other research data and informal contact with volunteers, were judged to be a sound base upon which to proceed to the scoping workshops.

These open-ended interviews were an exploration of understanding of the nature of lifelong learning, how outcomes from lifelong learning might benefit the individual, the CFA and the community and the factors that aid and inhibit application of what a volunteer knows and can do.

### Phase 2. Scoping workshops

Three scoping workshops (each conducted over a three hour period) were undertaken as the preliminary stage of developing the objectives of the future action learning projects (Phase 4). The workshops were also an opportunity for further testing and expanding the indicative themes identified from the interview data, and, importantly, an evidentiary platform from which to develop the indicative model relevant to facilitating volunteer recruitment and retention (Phase 3).

These scoping workshops – Geelong, Ballarat and Charlton – were forums for regional and brigade level members of the CFA to share views regarding:

- The nature of the retaining of CFA volunteers issue as it might relate to making the most of what volunteers know and can do.
- Aids and barriers to making the most of the diverse range of knowledge and skill possessed by CFA volunteers.
- How to best use the outcomes from the above sharing of views in a series of action learning initiatives.

### Phase 3. Development and reporting of an indicative model

This third phase involved the development of a model based upon the CFA environment and, by extrapolation, having wider application within the EMA network. The model as reported here has been developed using the data analysis of Phases 1 and 2. The relationships of each phase of the project are illustrated in Figure 1.

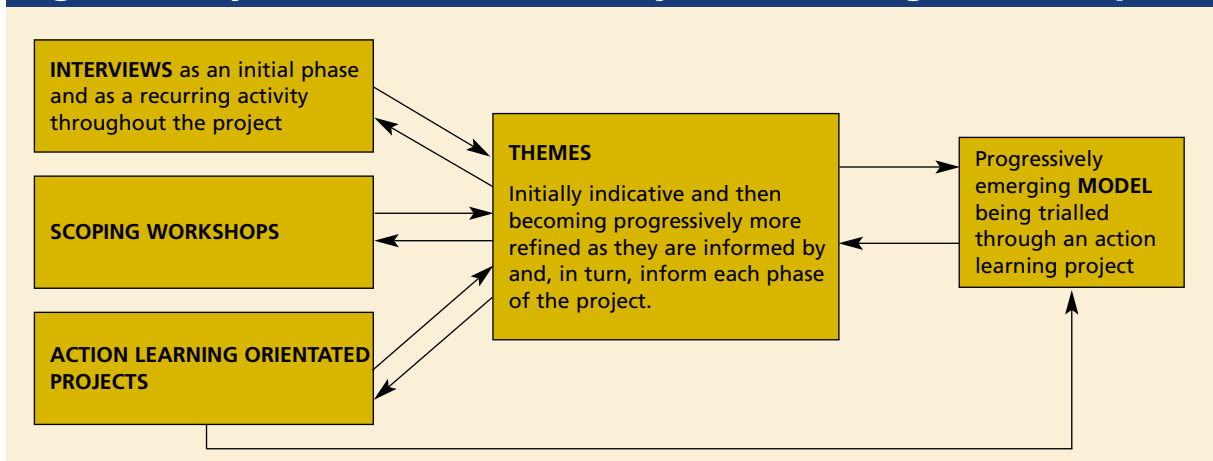### Phase 4. Progress to specific action learning projects

Consequent upon outcomes from the scoping workshops, and again with the guidance of CFA, five action learning projects are in the process of being convened. Each action learning project will have up to 10 set members and will run for four months, or a shorter period as is appropriate to achieving a useful outcome. These set members are to be drawn from volunteer and career members at a local CFA regional level, according to their interest in participation.

As indicated later in this paper, the five action learning projects have different contexts of application, but will have a common focus upon volunteer recruitment and retention. Within this common focus, each action learning project will identify a specific issue for change with respect to current brigade practice. This focus on volunteer recruitment and retention (and on a specific issue) by each action learning project will provide an opportunity for the trialling and further refinement of the indicative model while achieving tangible outcomes at brigade level.

### Data analysis—Interviews and workshops

The data analysis identified three sets of core themes. These core themes reflect the *generality of view* as expressed by CFA personnel in interviews and workshops. This *generality of view* includes, in particular, agreement that volunteer retention is a function of firstly, making the most of what a volunteer knows and can do in the context of the local brigade and secondly,

## Figure 1: Project elements informed by and informing relationships



INTERVIEWS as an initial phase and as a recurring activity throughout the project

SCOPING WORKSHOPS

ACTION LEARNING ORIENTATED PROJECTS

THEMES

Initially indicative and then becoming progressively more refined as they are informed by and, in turn, inform each phase of the project.

Progressively emerging MODEL being trialled through an action learning project

the degree to which a volunteer is getting satisfaction from the volunteer commitment.

This generality of view has been given further structure using a three dimensional framework deduced from the full database of the project to the completion of phases 1 and 2. Each of these dimensions was then succinctly defined according to the foci of this research project.

### Generality of view Dimension 1: Valuing learning outcomes

*Valuing of what a volunteer knows and can do (their learning outcomes) has the potential of being an aid to retention.*

There are two parties to this valuing of learning outcomes—the volunteer as an individual and the brigade as a unit. Both of these parties must value the outcomes from learning and recognise that the other reciprocates. If the volunteer values his/her outcomes from learning, but the brigade does not, then dissatisfaction and frustration are probable outcomes leading to quitting the brigade. It could be the case that the volunteer is keen to contribute in an expanded (beyond conventional/minimal) manner, but the brigade is disinterested. It is also possible that a brigade may have a high level of valuing learning outcomes, but the volunteer may feel threatened or not even recognise that they have much to offer. Under these circumstances the brigade must take steps to assist the volunteer to recognise that he/she does indeed have much to offer. In the absence of this nurturing of the volunteer, the volunteer may leave because of perceived threat or a feeling of just not fitting in.

### Generality of view Dimension 2: Valuing the culture of the brigade as conducive to learning

*The brigade exhibiting and valuing a culture that nurtures making the most of what a volunteer knows and can do.*

Again, there are two parties to this valuing—the volunteer as an individual and the brigade as a unit. Both of these parties must value the culture of the brigade as a culture that nurtures learning and recognise the reciprocating nature of the relationship between the values of the individual and those of the brigade. There is the potential for a significant mismatch where a volunteer might have a negative view of the brigade culture whereas the brigade as a unit feels that the culture is fine. Under such a circumstance it is incumbent upon the brigade to recognise and respond to this mismatch by assisting the volunteer to value the brigade culture and/or to remedially address deficiency in the brigade culture.

It is interesting to reflect upon the potential recruitment and retention outcomes of a brigade seeing a volunteer as a lifelong learner and intentionally adopting a stance of contributing to this learning journey. Such a brigade culture would be in marked contrast to only valuing fire fighting skills and possibly even having some resistance toward contemporary formal training and competency assessment. On a positive note, anecdotes of volunteers growing in unexpected ways – to themselves and others – abound, and beg the question – "Have CFA brigades long been nurturers of learning, beyond their consciousness?"

### Generality of view Dimension 3: Valuing of the level of motivation:

*The volunteer being satisfied that the commitment to the brigade is delivering something of appropriate personal value.*

Once again, the volunteer and the brigade as a unit are the two parties to this valuing of motivation. The volunteer needs to be individually satisfied and the brigade as a unit needs to be satisfied with the return from the commitment of its volunteers. It is important that the brigade, as a unit, is alert to the degree of satisfaction that exists individually and collectively, and is responsive to feedback along this dimension. It is also important that the individual volunteer has a conscious personal valuing of motivation and is sensitive to the needs of others in this respect.

In considering this dimension, it is important to keep in mind that the reasons volunteers have for joining and remaining are broad in nature and range from contributing to the community, through excitement and adventure, to proper self-interest. However, there is a knowledge and skill base underpinning the capability to be a fire fighter, a leader, or to fulfilling other roles at brigade level. No matter what the motive, it is unlikely that these roles will be performed competently without drawing upon the outcomes of learning that volunteers have brought into the CFA, acquired through the CFA, and transferred from the CFA to other aspects of their lives. The effectiveness with which volunteers are able to access their lifelong learning from across these registers of experience is a measure of the levels of motivation volunteers express and, in turn, the degree to which brigades are able to nurture and maintain high motivational levels amongst their volunteer members.

## Emergence of the LCM model

The full argument supporting the indicative model arising from this research project is included in the Report to EMA (Henry & Hughes, 2003). A brief summary only is included here.

### The Model: its dimensions as qualities of experience

The model is directed at CFA brigade level and is focused upon three dimensions as discussed above. These dimensions can also be understood as shaping the qualities of brigade life as experienced by volunteers. From this perspective these dimensions can determine the quality of a volunteer's participation in the activities

and practices of a CFA brigade. Accordingly, the qualities to be embedded in the model are:

**L Quality:** valuing the learning outcomes of a volunteer

**C Quality:** valuing a brigade culture that is conducive to learning

**M Quality:** valuing addressing the motivations of a volunteer.

## The Model: qualities of experience and retention

The model holds that CFA volunteers are more likely to remain as volunteers when they feel valued as learners, when they are comfortable with the brigade culture as a learning culture, and when they continue to experience personal motivation from remaining as a volunteer.

Retention is understood from this proposition as a very individualistic (personal) matter at the level of each volunteer, but as a collective responsibility at the brigade level. This construction of the retention matter for the CFA, as an emergency service, poses particular challenges.

For example, given the critical nature of the protective and response service that the CFA provides to the community through its primarily volunteer-based membership, it may be something of a challenge to deliver individual attention to members in order to enhance the retention performance of a brigade while at the same time necessarily functioning in a disciplined command and control mode, and especially so during emergency events.

In addition, in seeking to operationalise strategies aimed at addressing the volunteer retention from an acceptance of the above proposition there is the issue that, according to this research project, a volunteer's relationship with his or her brigade is far more important than the relationship with the CFA

as a corporate entity. A further complication in meeting the challenge of volunteer retention relates to the differences between brigades, arising from local need, tradition, and community demographics.
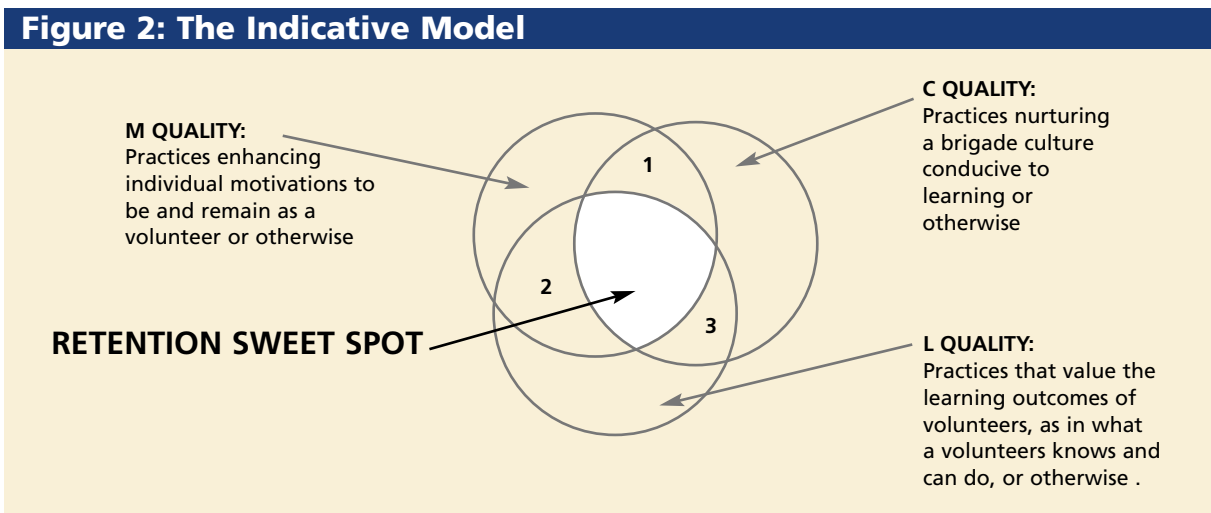
However, recognising fully the complexities of the organisational environment that characterises the CFA, it is claimed that there is usefulness in focusing upon the valuing of the outcomes of volunteer learning in terms of what a person brings into the CFA and as acquired as a consequence of being a CFA member. This claim is made, notwithstanding that it is not common for people to overtly think in these terms. However, having pride, albeit at a somewhat subliminal level, in what "I know and can do" is an abiding factor in our self-image and, according to the research of this project, impacts upon the decision of individuals to remain as a CFA volunteer.

## The Model: expanding the retention sweet spot

The concept of a retention sweet spot is introduced in the diagrammatic representation of the indicative model below (Figure 2).

It follows from this construction of the model that retention enhancing actions inherent in the model will function to diminish the intersection areas labelled "1", "2" and "3" in Figure 2 and thus expand the *retention sweet spot*. That is –

- Area 1 diminishes – along with expansion of the retention sweet spot – when a volunteer is predisposed to apply more of what he/she knows and can do.
- Area 2 diminishes – along with expansion of the retention sweet spot – when the brigade culture is more conducive to learning.
- Area 3 diminishes – along with expansion of the retention sweet spot – when a volunteer's motivation to remain as a volunteer strengthens.

## Figure 2: The Indicative Model



**M QUALITY:** Practices enhancing individual motivations to be and remain as a volunteer or otherwise

**C QUALITY:** Practices nurturing a brigade culture conducive to learning or otherwise

**RETENTION SWEET SPOT**

**L QUALITY:** Practices that value the learning outcomes of volunteers, as in what a volunteers knows and can do, or otherwise .

It should be noted that when one of the above occurs alone, the model presents the other two areas to brigade members as activity areas of additional opportunity for further expansion of the retention sweet spot. This observation is consistent with the research findings that all three qualities (L, M & C) are important agents of retention and are most powerful when integrated.

## Trialing the LCM model

While the model has been developed with a stand-alone value of strengthening retention of volunteers, it has potential as an embedded tool within specific projects, which do not necessarily have retention as an end in itself. Accordingly the trial action learning projects now being undertaken as the fourth phase of this research are applying the LCM model in the context of:

- Adding value to the CFA New Member Induction Program—Barwon/Corangamite Area.
- Better "selling" training to CFA volunteers—Midlands/Wimmera Area
- Strengthening CFA brigade sustainability—North West Area
- A project relating to retaining and strengthening brigade proficiency—Yarra Area
- A project relating to supporting leadership development and application—Westernport Area

These projects couple working with communities with managing and developing our people, as foreshadowed in the streams of this Safer Sustainable Communities conference. In reinforcing this point we briefly consider, in conclusion, one integrated project drawing upon the LCM model.

## Strengthening brigade sustainability in the North West Area

The account of this project is limited by the early stage of the work being undertaken (and by the required page limit), but the intention is clearly to build capacity to work with communities.

### Project objective

The objective of this project is to put in place a local brigade process that will contribute to other initiatives directed at recruiting volunteer CFA members and retaining these members.

### Project participants

The people joining the project group are a combination of volunteer and career members joining the group as a consequence of their interest in the project.

### Taking action to strengthen brigade sustainability

The Charlton workshop outcomes were identified as major themes and potential actions. In each case the relationship to the qualities of the LCM model were also

identified. One of the five major thematic categories is included below as an example.

**With respect to getting interest to join:**
- Appropriately and sensitively promoting the community and self-interest reasons for being a CFA volunteer member. **(C, M)**
- Assist potential volunteers to understand that the CFA does much more than fight fires and therefore there is a valued place for everyone. **(C)**
- Assist potential volunteers to recognise that they have much knowledge and skill of value that they might bring to the CFA and there is much that they can add to their knowledge and skill from the CFA. **(L)**
- Promote the community "glue" attribute of the CFA that applies even in times when there isn't imminent threat. **(M)**

### Moving beyond initial planning to initial action

The local brigade-level action learning project will begin with an initial action step informed by one or more of the themes identified. The project will be a relatively small-scale project that can be quickly acted upon within presently available means and with an immediate outcome.

### Placing a strategic focus upon working with communities

From this brief account of the background to a local brigade-level action learning project, it is clear that a connection exists between what is instrumental for recruiting and what may potentially work for community 'influencing'. The reasons for joining, and remaining, as a volunteer resonate strongly with the reasons for why a community should value its CFA brigade and other emergency services and how there can be a strong partnership with the community that is served.

With this partnership-building objective in mind, the four dot points listed above as thematic components are worthy of closer consideration. It is very probable that innovative actions by a CFA brigade (and other community services) will arise from responding to the

question "How might this getting interest to join theme work also as a community influencing approach?"

For example, raising awareness and responsiveness to the issue that the CFA does much more than fight fires might be a significant step toward working more strongly with the community. Arising form this, the *valuing of what you already know and can do* might encourage joining as a CFA volunteer member or, alternatively, contributing more toward building a safer sustainable community as a member of the community—but not necessarily as a CFA volunteer.

In terms of the community-influencing leverage to be gained from the formal volunteer base, there are already a substantial number of volunteers to be drawn upon. Furthermore, these volunteers have a high level of commitment and are directly connected to their own networks within the community. As a learning bridgehead to the community, volunteers can draw upon an expanded quantum of knowledge, skill and other attributes that is an aggregation of what they bring to their volunteering and what they gain from their volunteering as illustrated in Figure 3. It may be that many volunteers have not had it in mind to deliberately use their expansive knowledge as an asset to influence their community in its development toward sustainable safety.

Figure 3 foreshadows that the actual degree of engagement with the community is an outcome that can be designed and managed in a planned manner. It is suggested that the nature and quality of this engagement with the community is influenced by the degree to which volunteers are assisted to recognise and value what it is that they have to offer, and the deliberate nurturing of motivations to engage in a community-influencing manner. Volunteer influence at the broader community level can be conceptualised in terms of

'leverage from numbers'. It is suggested that there are already sufficient volunteers to directly influence a substantial proportion of the community by directly engaging, in a learning bridgehead way, with their personal networks. A cascade of change towards building safer sustainable communities could be the outcome.

## Conclusion

In consideration of the above action learning project, a volunteer may well bring more to their emergency service volunteer role, and add more knowledge and skill to their personal repertoire as a consequence of their service, than what might at first be recognised. In so doing they derive personal satisfactions beyond what was initially foreseen. It is very probable that an emergency services volunteer's capacity to work with communities is more than is initially apparent, and initially valued. It is not only through their weight in number that volunteers present as a potential learning bridgehead to the community, it is also through their commitment and direct connectedness. These are powerful attributes, the development of which can be facilitated through attention to the LCM model.

## Reference

Henry, J. & Hughes, L. (2003), *Volunteers: making the most of learning*, a research report commissioned by Emergency Management Australia, Canberra.

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**Figure 3: Volunteers as a learning bridgehead to the community**

Capability gained by volunteer

Capability brought by volunteer

Expanding engagement with the community as a consequence of deliberate nurturing by the emergency service