

# Volunteering Visions

Enhancing volunteer retention  
at non-profits  
with transformational leadership



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# Relevance

**Volunteers are a crucial force in non-profits**, given that they form large parts of the workforce and are thought to be the backbone of such organisations (1). Furthermore, volunteers are essential to the social development of a country, given that the organisations they are working for are concerned with, amongst others, marginalised groups (2, 3). In the context of volunteering with refugees, volunteers have a unique role; namely, they **bridge between refugees and residents of the host country** since they are one of the first to help their integration (4).

In recent years, the **retention of volunteers has become increasingly problematic** in non-profits because of high turnover (2, 5). Also at the Yalla Foundation, turnover has been a concern, according to preliminary research. Volunteers are especially crucial for Yalla since it is a volunteer-based organisation. Thus, recruiting and retaining volunteers is **central to the organisations' sustainability and growth**. When skilled volunteers leave the workforce, new volunteers must be first acquired and then trained. This costs time and effort; further, it compromises the workflow, for example, the implementation of projects and impedes team-building, amongst others (6). Eventually, it leads to fluctuating contributions on behalf of the volunteers, which hinders Yalla's current functioning and future development.

Not only do these consequences affect the organisation itself, but also the volunteers and the receivers of the work, the refugees. Due to the interruptions in workflow and the team, work overload or frustration may arise, resulting in volunteers adopting a lower employee morale (6). For the refugees, less or unsteady volunteer contribution means fewer opportunities to participate in workshops and receive general support. Why is that? As a result of less volunteer contribution, projects might not go through as planned, or fewer resources might be made available altogether. Consequently, refugees might withdraw from Yalla and seek support elsewhere.



# Study Aim

The research aimed to shed light on the overarching question of **'What organisational factors contribute to the difficulties of retaining volunteers, and further, what can be done to attain a more sustainable organisational culture in light of volunteer commitment?'**. Based on preliminary research that included interviews with stakeholders and consulting the literature, the study was narrowed down to management practices, given that they are changeable by the organisation itself (as opposed to personal factors, for instance) and have a significant influence over the volunteers' satisfaction, performance, as well as their intention to stay at the organisation (1, 7, 8).

# Study 1

Enquiry about the predictors for intention to continue volunteering



The **intention to continue volunteering** at the current non-profit was set as the primary predictor for achieving better retention among volunteers working with refugees. The predictor was chosen because it includes the desired behaviour, namely volunteers remaining at the organisation. Moreover, the higher the intent to continue volunteering, the higher the likelihood of the volunteer staying at the non-profit (2). After all, volunteer intention is a good predictor of future behaviour, particularly because it was too complex to measure actual retention within the scope of the study (2). The other predictors are shortly defined below.

Transformational Leadership

inspires followers, role model in achieving set goals, builds trusting relationships (9)

Need for Autonomy

opportunity to organise & decide for oneself (10, 11)

Need for Competence

sense of accomplishment & productiveness (10, 11)

Need for Relatedness

feeling connected & valuable (10, 11)

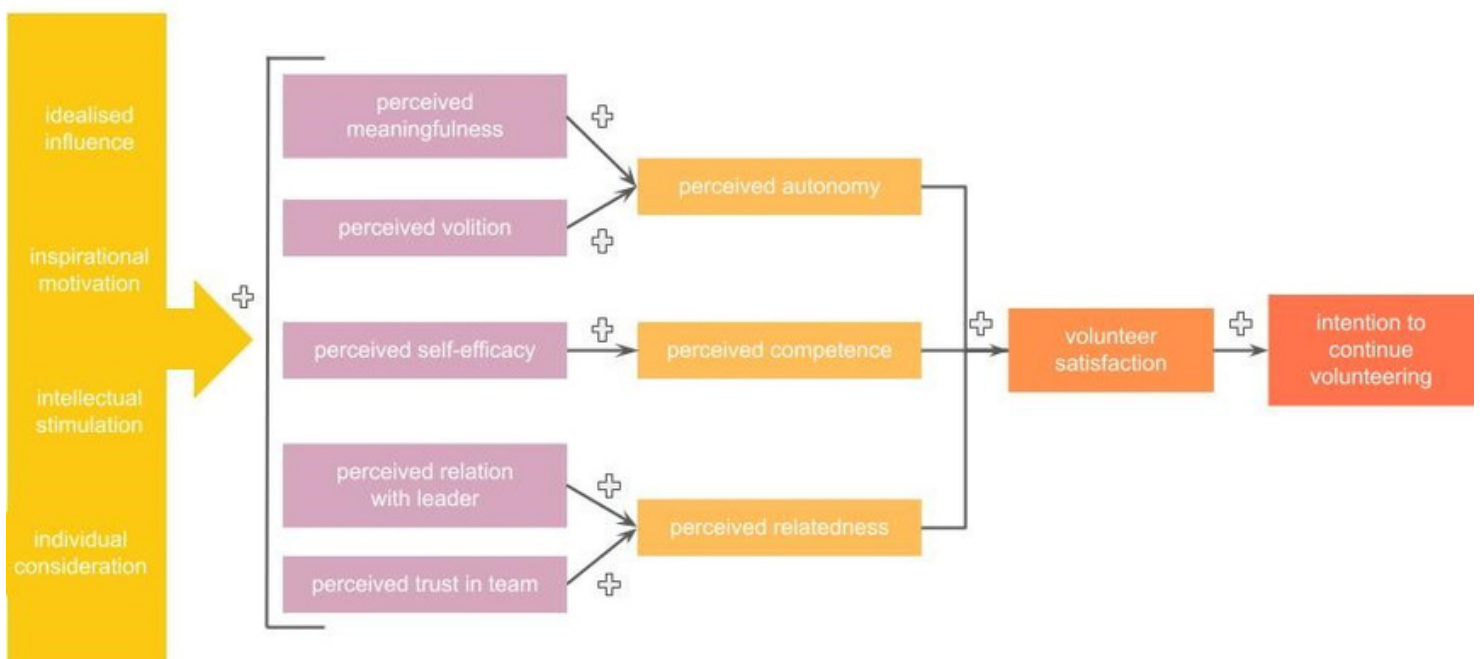
Volunteer Satisfaction

satisfaction with own contribution, initial motives, supervision (8)

**Transformational leadership**, consisting of idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration, was thought to predict the satisfaction of the **need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness**, respectively. Given that, a transformational leader emphasises the meaningfulness of volunteers' work and preserves their sense of volition (6, 11); further, they increase volunteers' self-efficacy (12); and finally, they foster the relationship with the individuals as well as among the team-members, resulting in trust (9, 13).

The satisfaction of the three needs taken was expected to predict **volunteer satisfaction**. The three needs translate into volunteer satisfaction, including being content with the supervision, tasks one carries out, and meeting ones' initial motives (14, 15).

Ultimately, volunteer satisfaction was assumed to predict **intention to continue volunteering** because being satisfied enhances loyalty towards the non-profit. In turn, the likelihood of remaining within the organisation and continuing to contribute is strengthened (16).



# Design

An online study was conducted to test the psychological predictors of volunteers' intention to continue their work. In total, 37 volunteers working with refugees participated, but only 17 were valid for the analysis because the other responses were incomplete.

The participants were asked about their volunteer experiences, covering their perception of their leader and to what extent they were perceived as transformational. Next, their basic need satisfaction was assessed, including autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Then, their overall volunteer satisfaction was evaluated, followed by their intention to continue volunteering for the next 3, 6, and 12 months.

# Results

The results showed that **relatedness was significantly predicted by transformational leadership**. Given that the study did not have enough statistical power due to the low response rate, the other relationships were not found to be significant. However, this does not mean that those relationships do not exist.

# Study 2

## Examining the mechanisms of transformational leadership



Given that neither the first study nor the academic literature sheds light on the **mechanisms of transformational leadership**, the intervention study took a step back to focus on examining **which four of the characteristics** of a transformational leader have the **most impact on intention** to continue volunteering. The four characteristics and the control condition are described below.

### Idealised Influence

- communicating organisations' future objectives by calling upon individuals' motives (6, 9, 17)
- emphasising relevance of a collective purpose (6)

### Inspirational Motivation

- being enthusiastic & optimistic about reaching shared vision (9, 17)
- stimulating individuals to aim high (6, 9)

### Intellectual Stimulation

- reinforcing individuals to think critically, take initiative, engage in novel problem-solving (10, 12)

### Individual Consideration

- coaching & helping individuals to develop (12)
- considering & appreciating each individual plus their contribution (6)

### Contingent Reward

- formulating clear expectations (11, 17)
- rewarding individual in exchange for their efforts and accomplishments (11, 17)



# Design

The second study was also conducted online. The aim was to investigate the mechanisms of transformational leadership and its influence on the intention to continue volunteering, compared to a control condition. In total, 105 participants participated.

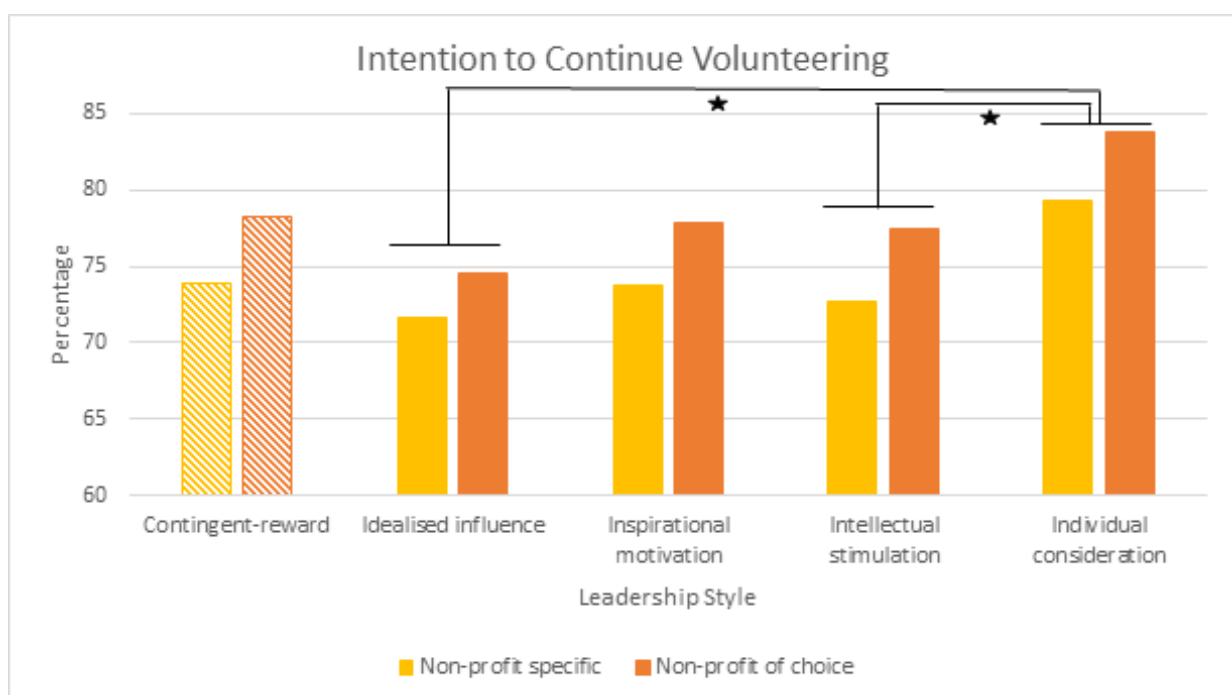
They were each presented with five hypothetical volunteer scenarios, varying in leadership style and cause of the non-profit. Their intent to continue volunteering at either 1) the given non-profit or 2) at a non-profit of their choice was measured.

Lastly, an exploratory question included ranking the five leadership styles from most to least favourite.

# Results

All leadership characteristics were found to be effective. There is no difference between the four I's and the contingent reward condition, and their effect on volunteers' intentions was present. Therefore, adopting transformational leadership with additional contingent reward tendencies is advisable.

Additionally, differences between the four I's and their impacts on intention were found in exploratory analyses. **Individual consideration led to higher intention** than intellectual stimulation and idealised influence. The ranking question further supported this tendency: volunteers voted for individual consideration as the most preferable.



# Recommendation

## 1)

The first recommendation entails that volunteer management should focus on **building supportive relationships** with individual volunteers. As the additional insights of study 2 indicate, individual consideration leads to the highest intent to continue volunteering and is also rated as the most favourable leadership style.



### **Why?**

Volunteers decide to invest their time and effort by choice, without expecting (monetary) compensation, for example. However, they anticipate that the volunteer activity will be gratifying, including their experience within the organisation. Individuals will develop more commitment towards the non-profit when they feel respected by the non-profit. The organisation can establish respect through supporting the volunteer, which includes considering the individuals' needs in light of their welfare (emotion-oriented) and their work (task-oriented) (18, 19). After all, organisational support is the primary way a non-profit can signal to its volunteers that they are cared for (18).

### **How?**

Volunteer management can ensure that the volunteers feel acknowledged and appreciated by, for example, incorporating regular one-on-one **reflection moments** with the volunteers. In these meetings, the parties can exchange their impressions and experiences over the last period, which promotes open communication and further nurtures the volunteer's commitment (20). In these meetings, the managers can **express** their **recognition** of the volunteers' contributions (emotion-oriented) as well as offer them **guidance on the achievement of their tasks** by, for example, sharing tips or a handbook (task-oriented) (18). Further, volunteer management is advised to facilitate their volunteers' growth by **coaching** them. This means that leaders are encouraged to provide opportunities for the volunteers to learn new skills, for instance, given that expanding their knowledge and experiences is one of the motivations that individuals start volunteering (8, 21). Nevertheless, they should not use a 'one-size-fits-all' approach and pay attention to individual preferences (22).

# Recommendation

## 2)



The second recommendation is to invest in **team-building**. Connecting to the first recommendation, volunteers want to have a good relationship with their superiors and fellow volunteers (23).

### *Why?*

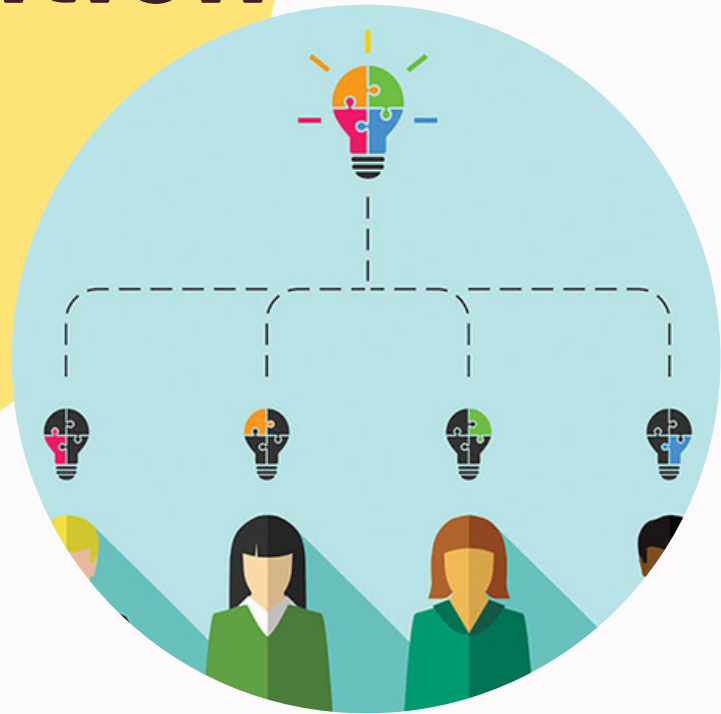
Indeed, previous research highlights the importance of **satisfying the need for relatedness** within the volunteer context. On the one hand, individuals want to feel connected and, on the other, be cared for by others as well as tend to their team members (2). Feeling related to the team will make individuals feel more comfortable and respected, which results in volunteers being more satisfied with their volunteering; in turn, they want to stay at the organisation (10, 24).

### *How?*

The first study showed that the satisfaction of the need for relatedness was predicted by adopting transformational leadership. The more a leader uses transformational characteristics, the more a volunteer will feel connected to their team members. Therefore, the management is recommended to enhance group identification and team spirit (25). For instance, a leader can **emphasise the collective purpose** (idealised influence) and **convey an intriguing and meaningful outlook** regarding the non-profits' cause (inspirational motivation) (9). Moreover, leaders can make use of **team-building exercises**.

# Recommendation

## 3)



The third recommendation is to incorporate **expectation management** by **agreeing on a set of responsibilities** for each volunteer. The extended insights of study 2 imply that adopting a contingent reward approach results in high intention to remain at a non-profit and further, was voted as the second favourite leadership style in the ranking.

### Why?

Agreeing over expectations between the different parties decreases conflict, reduces the need for control, and leads to more motivation in attaining goals (11). Because duties are clearly agreed on, there is less room for misunderstandings and frustration. Further, the objectives are more graspable, and fulfilment of those goals will result in agreed rewards (17). Also, volunteers gain more volition by having the opportunity to agree or disagree with the expectations and rewards (26).

### How?

For instance, expectation management could be **integrated into the reflection moments** (recommendation 1). In those meetings, the parties can **communicate regularly** regarding the **goals and responsibilities** of the volunteers. Also, it can be clarified what rewards the organisation will provide, for example, what and how much support can be expected.

# Take-Home Message



Retention strategies can be improved by...

- Focusing on the relationship between the organisation and the individual volunteer. That is, building supportive relations through reflection moments, for instance.
- Next, the non-profit is advised to invest in team-building, which boosts trust and cooperation among volunteers.
- Finally, it is recommended to incorporate expectation management to decrease conflict and unsatisfied needs by communicating regularly and openly about goals, responsibilities and rewards.

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