

# 9 Leadership styles in event management: A critical reflection case study

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## Abstract

Event managers lead diverse workforces within timebound, service-oriented settings. These conditions create challenges for event managers in delivering effective leadership. Drawing upon critical reflection as a pedagogical tool, this case study follows the reflective journey of 'Aria,' owner of a fictitious event management business called South-East Events. Following a critical service quality incident, Aria felt compelled to reconsider her own leadership approach and the impact she has on her event staff. The case study traces Aria's journey of learning about leadership theory along with her experiences of discussing leadership with other event managers.

*Subjects:* Leadership; critical reflection; transformational and transactional leadership; human resource management

## Introduction

### Aria's business: South-East Events

Aria owns an event management business, South-East Events. Located in a regional community in Victoria, Australia, South-East Events specialises in organising bespoke music festivals on greenfield sites for up to 2000 attendees. Aria also hosts a successful YouTube channel where she produces short videos offering insights and advice for people interested in the event management industry.

South-East Events' workforce comprises of Aria as the managing director, and two full-time employees. During the delivery phase of events, the company's workforce grows through the addition of casual staff and volunteer workers. Much of Aria's business involves organising music festivals on behalf of the local council. Events and festivals are a pillar of the council's social and economic

development strategies. Funding for events is integrated into the council's annual budget and is used to contract the services of professional event organisers such as Aria.

Throughout her career, Aria has worked successfully with a wide range of employees including full-time and casual staff, along with paid and volunteer workers. Aria has a strong awareness of the differing needs and motivations between paid staff and volunteers. She also has a positive reputation in the community for providing fulfilling volunteering opportunities.

In January 2022, South-East Events was scheduled to deliver the annual *Gold Fields Rock Out Festival*, a two-day festival celebrating 1990s country rock culture. To her surprise, when Aria put out a call for volunteers, she received an unusually large number of applications from young adults aged between 18 and 22. Usually, most volunteers at Aria's events are aged over 50. Aria applied her usual vetting and selection process to identify prospective volunteers who were a good match for vacant roles and to ensure that shortlisted applicants were suitable for front-line customer service. For this event, over 80 percent of the volunteer roles were filled by young adults.

Prior to each event, Aria produces an online video recording to brief short-term paid workers and volunteers. This approach to induction and training is augmented by a small amount of hands-on, role-specific training in the days immediately preceding each event. In Aria's experience, this methodology is sufficient to enable short-term workers to perform their roles effectively and with minimal oversight from full-time staff.

### **A critical service incident: Gold Fields Rock Out 2022**

During the 2022 Gold Fields Rock Out weekend Aria found herself distracted in her leadership role. The younger volunteers took up more of Aria's and her full-time staff's time seeking clarification on how to perform their roles. Usually at other events a small number of leaders, or 'team captains,' would emerge naturally from within the volunteer group who would guide sequencing and division of tasks. Although Aria and her full-time staff would spend some of their time checking in with volunteers and helping them troubleshoot, most of the time the volunteers worked autonomously. At this event, team captains did not emerge.

Aria and her two full-time staff became frustrated at having to play a more hands-on role managing the volunteers.

Aria and her team became less available to key stakeholders such as performers, their managers, the production manager, and emergency services leaders. At one point the main entry gate became severely bottlenecked as volunteers became overwhelmed with the ticketing system. Frustrated patrons could be heard expressing their frustrations over excessive queuing times. The event's social media pages were inundated with complaints from customers who missed seeing big acts due to entry delays. At the same time, the production manager required Aria's input to troubleshoot a performer's contract issue. The performer threatened to refuse going on stage unless the contract issue was solved immediately. These circumstances also disrupted the day's performance schedule. At one point,