

By Chris Thurber

Leadership By Example

Just as important online as in-person

“Chris, in my early years as a camp director, I never worried about the off-season behavior of my staff. Now that staff members photograph and post most of their social lives online, I’m torn. I’m not the CyberPolice, but I’ve received complaints from parents and upset e-mails from campers who have discovered unwholesome postings and unsavory photos of respected counselors and camp leaders. It sours their view of camp. Where do I go from here?”

—Scott Arizala,

Director of Dragonfly Forest

It’s frustrating to work as hard as we do to hire, train, and coach staff members for the camp season, only to have their sterling leadership-by-example tarnished by a careless Internet posting. When social networking sites first became popular, there were some clarion calls for prohibition. Today, the idea of forbidding staff members from joining Facebook seems absurd. People of all ages socialize online, and in many ways, it’s a good thing. Just this morning, I was Skyping with my wife and children, who are visiting family in Serbia. It was wonderful to connect like that.

Not so wonderful are the pervasive “cheers and beers” photos so many staff

members post online. Some—showing friends with one arm around another and a drink in the other hand—probably don’t shatter campers’ or parents’ images of that person. Others—showing keg stands, lewd gestures, partial nudity, sexual behavior and pot smoking—probably do erode your camp’s otherwise wholesome reputation. Here are some simple steps you can take now to keep that reputation intact:

1 Continue whatever health education is woven into staff training. Educating staff members with online videos or in-person workshops that explain the dangers of binge drinking and sexual promiscuity probably lower the base rate of these

SAMPLE LETTER

Three reasons to lead by example on Facebook and other Web sites:

1. Campers
2. Parents
3. Future employers.

Please take a minute to reflect on the wonderful example we set for campers every summer. Think about all the care that staff members put into preserving the purity of our camp’s spirit. Members don’t swear in front of campers; camp policy forbids alcohol or other drugs in camp; members even hide their cell phones so that campers’ thoughts don’t turn to returning home. We go to all this trouble because we believe that our example and our image should be wholesome. As your director, I feel that we need to work harder

to extend that effort across all seasons and into cyberspace.

Posting photos or other content that depicts drinking, smoking or behaviors not suited for campers’ eyes sends a confusing and upsetting message to them and their parents. This winter, campers who thought they knew their counselors and cabin leaders, and understood what camp stands for, have written to me, saddened to have discovered something different.

Let’s face it. Curious campers—the same ones who worship you during the summer—will Google your name and search for you on Facebook. They’re not stalking you. They really care about you, and they want to extend their connection. It shatters their image of you, and of camp, to see you engaged in unhealthy, risky or adult-only behaviors. I’m



asking all camp staff members—past, present and future—to take three simple steps toward better online leadership-by-example:

1 Please remove inappropriate photos or other content from your Facebook page, including content that others have posted.

Ask your friends to remove inappropriate content in which you are tagged.

2 Post only photos or other content that you would be proud to have a camper or his or her parents see. Staff members do many interesting and



Photos of camp counselors engaging in adult behavior shatters the image campers have of them and could negatively impact the camp's reputation.

unhealthy risk behaviors, at least for some staff. The less your staff members are engaging in behaviors unbecoming of a youth-development professional, the less frequently those behaviors can be digitally documented.

2 Stop it when you spot it. I don't recommend combing the Internet for unflattering material, but if a parent or colleague finds publicly available material that casts a staff member in a negative light, promptly ask that person to

remove the posting, or sequester it by using privacy settings wisely.

3 Educate staff members on the consequences of campers and parents viewing material that would be deemed inappropriate for camp. Reactions range from shock to disappointment to sadness. The sample letter to staff published as part of this article will serve as a valuable template. (Naturally, you should customize this letter for a particular camp.)

4 Distribute some social networking guidelines to staff members. Most camps have an electronics-technology policy, but it's probably time to update your social-networking policy. Of special importance is the concept of creating different friend groups, each with its own privacy setting. Of course, the safest option is not to post adult content. For staff members that do post racy material, instruct them to make it available only to familiar adult friends.

5 Keep the discussion going, both online and in-person. It's impossible

to legislate what your staff members do in the off-season. What you can do is provide guidelines and facilitate discussions that heighten their awareness of the year-round nature of leadership-by-example.

Social networking and the Web sites that support cyber relationships are constantly evolving. They are powerful tools that can be put to good use. What shouldn't evolve are the high standards of behavior to which you hold staff members. The guidelines above will help uphold those standards. For many young people, their camp counselors are the most powerful adult role models they see. What will your campers and their parents see this season? **CB**

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inspiring things in the off-season. Share those adventures in appropriate ways online.

3 If you do post adult content, create friend groups in your profile. Then, alter the privacy settings for your different groups so that access to adult content is restricted to adult friends who know you well. Be sure that casual browsers who find you online do not have access to that content.

As you know, I receive a great deal of wonderful praise from parents and campers about the fantastic work you do. Naturally, it pains me to receive even a handful of e-mails and letters from distressed campers and parents who have been exposed to a different side of camp and its staff. Thank you for making a more complete, year-round effort to set a wholesome example, both online and in-person.



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