



The Well-Trained Staff

Preparing a camp's most-powerful asset

Welcome to the debut of Camp Business's new column on staff training. Dr. Chris Thurber, one of the most sought-after camp consultants, responds to reader queries, and offers cutting-edge, turnkey content that contemporary camp directors can use right away to prime their camp's most powerful asset—the staff.

"Hey, Chris, beyond training staff in the specifics, such as first-aid and CPR, I'm searching for the transcendent principles that will help me assemble a solid staff team this summer. What have you got?"

—Ricky Wright, Director of Mystic Lake YMCA Camp, Lake, Mich.

Thanks for this timely question, Ricky. Staff training is more complex and involved than ever. Seasoned directors can remember the days when gathering their college-age staff together for a weekend of hanging tennis nets, putting in the row-boat dock, and singing camp songs was ... well ... all they did for staff training.

These days, the convergence of four factors have transformed that casual weekend into a formal curriculum that sometimes lasts ten days or more:

1. Expanded safety laws and accreditation standards in human resources
 2. Bold increases in camping industry professionalism
 3. Legitimate concerns about lawsuits stemming from negligent hiring and training practices
 4. Sensible requests from new staff to receive professional training that cultivates competitive management and leadership skills they can pitch in the non-camp job market.
- So here are ten practices that will

help every camp director construct a staff dream team. See what you can do to customize these ideas to best meet your camp's mission.

1 Interview thoroughly

Never do "paper hires," where staff is selected after only scanning a fax of resumes. Insist on face-to-face interviews for all staff. You're a good judge of character, or you wouldn't be a camp director. Put that asset to work in a proper interview that realistically assesses a candidate's ability to care for other people's children. My favorite interview techniques: Begin by saying, "Sing a song for me," or "Tell me a campfire story." Bring some camper-age children (yours or a friend's) to the interview, and see how the candidate interacts with them. Be sure to provide a realistic and complete description of the job, and ask the candidate what he or she anticipates the challenges to be.

2 Incentivize certifications

Who on staff should have first-aid and CPR? That's right—everyone. To increase participation in pre-camp certification, buddy up with a few neighboring camps, and conduct it all on-site with expert trainers. Or, pay staff a bonus to acquire certifications before staff training even begins. And yes, promise to reimburse them the cost of the course. Visit www.redcross.org and click "Getting Trained" to learn more.

3 Conduct online pre-camp staff training

Gone are the days of being able to cover all aspects of child development, skillful discipline, effective communication, leadership and management in just a

week. (Actually, did those days ever exist?) Today's camp staffs are of a generation that learns everything online, so feed them what they need—online video training modules. Take a test drive at www.ExpertOnlineTraining.com.

4 Discuss the substance-use policy

Nearly every camp has such a policy, and nearly every camp director "covers" the policy by asking everyone to turn to that section of the staff-training manual and read along. Judging by all the binge drinking and marijuana use among day- and resident-camp staff, that format has little impact. Instead, have staff discuss case studies of substance abuse in small groups, explain the rationale of the policy, outline the consequences of policy violations, and meet separately with senior staff to indicate how to handle the violations it will inevitably encounter. Finally, be ready to enforce that policy, even if it means firing a popular member of the staff. E-mail me for a free webinar on the topic at chris@campspirit.com.

5 Revise the training-week schedule

Shuffling through the staff-training manual—no matter how well-written—is a snooze. In-person training time should creatively combine semi-structured time for bonding (e.g., a softball game) with plenty of movement (physical setup of the camp) with stimulating multimedia presentations (downloaded video training modules) with realistic role-plays in which everyone participates (e.g., last summer's toughest cases and some emergency scenarios). Be sure to include a camp-sponsored, substance-free party a couple days before campers arrive. Oh, and encourage staff to get plenty of sleep.

6 Teach stress management

Popular movies perpetuate the myth that working at summer camp is like being a porn star, a murder victim or a hapless babysitter. Camp counselors are actually surrogate parents and youth-development professionals. I can't imagine a more important responsibility than taking care of other people's children. I also know that it can be immensely stressful. So, teach the entire staff progressive muscle relaxation, meditation and the importance of embracing sleep, a healthy diet and peer support. Buddy new staff with veteran staff to provide compassionate mentoring. Learn more about the relaxation response at www.mbmi.org.

7 Plan for time off

Left to their own devices, some camp staff members will choose to drink excessively on days and nights off. Thwart that default choice by populating a "Time-Off Binder" with healthy plans. For night-off ideas, list the names of nearby restaurants, movie theaters and shopping centers. For day-off ideas, include maps and destinations of nearby hiking trails, regional attractions and camp alums willing to host an overnight. You can't guarantee sobriety, but you can guide staff in healthy directions.

8 Implement internal leadership development

If you can cultivate junior leaders from the ranks of senior campers, cull leaders-in-training (LITs) from your coterie of junior leaders, and select next summer's full-fledged counselors from this summer's LIT group, then staff training takes on a completely new meaning. By the time a staff member is in charge of his or her own group of campers, that person has already been a camper, spent a month as a junior leader, and gone through a summer as an LIT. This type of apprentice training doesn't obviate staff-training week, but imagine the level to which you can take this exercise when first-year staffers already have 15 weeks of on-the-job training under their belts. Read about internal leadership development and other topics at www.campspirit.com/publications/magazine-articles.html.

9 Promote positive adjustment with campers

Nothing is as draining for the resident camp counselor as a chronically homesick child. It only takes one to sap enough time and energy to bring the entire cabin group down. Luckily, there is an entertaining DVD-CD set for new camper families that lowers the intensity of first-year campers' homesickness by 50 percent, on average. The DVD also includes packing tips, advice for completing the camp health form, recommendations to stay on helpful medications and testimony from dozens of campers on the best ways to enjoy the time away from home. As a bonus, the CD is for parents to listen to in the car after opening-day drop-off. There's no better remedy for the helicopter parent than reassuring words from calm, experienced parents. Find out more, including information on bulk discounts, at www.CampSpirit.com.

10 Show staff members they're part of something important

High schools and colleges often promote a self-centered existence (resume-

stuffing community service aside). Stem that tide by sharing with staff (even those members who will only be around for a single summer) some of the camp's history. Invite some of the oldest alums back to tell stories and show pictures of the "old days." Host a panel of last summer's parents who can talk about the positive growth they witnessed in their children as a result of camp. And at each staff meeting, have a few staff members share their success story of the week. The more staff appreciates the larger mission of the camp, the more responsibly it will behave in accordance with that mission. **CB**

Have a great summer!

Do you have a question that you would like answered by Dr. Thurber? E-mail him at chris@campspirit.com.

Dr. Christopher Thurber is a board-certified clinical psychologist and the creator of Leadership Essentials, an online library of video training modules for camp staff. Learn more by visiting Chris's Web sites, CampSpirit.com and ExpertOnlineTraining.com.



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