

Staffing Practices of High Quality Youth Programs

Troy Bennett, ACA Research Assistant
University of Utah



We all want to deliver high quality programs. As a Camp Director, one has to ask, "Why is one camp experience "better" than another? How can I ensure that the proposed

outcomes and benefits for my campers will be realized?" Camp Directors committed to offering effective programs know that they must rely on competent frontline staff to create positive, meaningful relationships and exhibit high quality behavior in order to achieve desired youth outcomes.

Program Quality at Camp

Camp is a unique and valuable setting for positive youth development outcomes (Garst, Browne & Bialeschki, 2011, American Camp Association, 2005). Camps provide an exceptionally strong environment in which young people develop supportive relationships with adults that offer guidance and emotional and practical support (American Camp Association, 2006a). This relationship is credited as being one of the most important aspects of a quality camp experience (American Camp Association, 2006b; Sibthorp, Paisley, & Gookin, 2007; Roark & Ellis, 2009). Managing and training important frontline employees is critical.

Research Says

The literature on achieving program quality through frontline staff training suggests that:

- Program quality in afterschool and camp programs leads to increased youth development outcomes. (American Camp Association, 2005; Garst, Browne & Bialeschki, 2011; Smith et al, 2009; Wagner, 2010).
- Staff performance and behavior is an important component of high quality programs (Grossman, Campbell, & Raley, 2007; Larson et al, 2009; Sibthorp, Paisley & Gookin, 2007).
- Staff training is critical to achieving desired youth outcomes (Larson et al, 2009; Schaumleffel & Backlund, 2009, Smith et al 2010).

Despite this importance, many organizations have under-trained or untrained personnel leading programs (Schaumleffel & Backlund, 2009). Often times, the training that may be lacking is in youth development processes, handling difficult or sensitive situations, and connecting the individual activities with overall goals (Smith et al, 2010).

High Quality Staff Development at Camp

While not much research has been done around frontline staff and levels of quality specifically in a camp setting, our national survey research findings suggest that to improve program quality, camp professionals need to think about motivating staff to behave in high quality ways. One way to do this is through the intentional development of intrinsic motivation in frontline staff. Intrinsic motivation at camp can be encouraged through the principles of Self-Determination Theory (Ramsing & Sibthorp, 2008; Roark & Ellis, 2009; Roark, et al, 2010). Intrinsically motivated staff often make the difference in both program quality and the positive influence they have on youth attending camp (Metz, Goldsmith, & Arberton, 2008).

- Intrinsic motivation is influenced by factors such as autonomy, relatedness, and competency (Roark & Ellis, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ward et al, 2010).
- Autonomy can be increased by taking into account the perspectives of staff, listening carefully, asking staff what they want to do, allowing staff time to talk, and encouraging effort (Roark et al, 2010).
- Competency can be developed through staff training on youth pedagogies, stages of development, how to build relationships, how to interact positively with people, how to handle a crisis situation, and how to describe camper's social and emotional development as goals of their program (Brandt & Arnold, 2006; Khashu & Dougherty, 2007; Smith et al, 2010).
- Relatedness can be achieved by including staff in mentoring, team building, strategic planning and goal setting, and by creating regular debrief opportunities for frontline staff to share and report their contributions.

Bottom Line

Camp and other youth programs have the opportunity to make a tremendous impact on the lives of young people. High quality programs operated by staff demonstrating desired behaviors are more successful at achieving youth development outcomes. High quality staff behavior can be achieved by working to facilitate intrinsic motivation in front line staff.

Camp Directors can increase high quality frontline staff behavior by encouraging autonomy through opportunities

for staff to give input and make decisions; developing staff competence through youth development training; and increasing feelings of relatedness by connecting each individual staff member to the overall mission of the team through shared goals. Empowering staff in these ways will lead to increased youth outcomes, happier clients, and a more enjoyable camp experience.

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