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Methods to create a resilient team and avoid burnout

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By Jonathan Caflun

Photos Courtesy Of Camp Wekeela

Working as a camp counselor is one of the most challenging and rigorous jobs a young person can have. At first glance, it may be viewed as a fun job to run around, teach activities, and make friends, but employees very quickly understand the immense responsibility of caring for other people's children. What's more, staff training has been transformed over the last decade; the old regimen that focused on set-up and safety has since expanded to include a comprehensive list of topics such as diversity and inclusion, food allergies, peer relationships, gratitude, language, drug and alcohol use, cultural differences, and, of course, mental health. Since camp directors are not experts on every single topic, it can be challenging to handle diverse training sessions. However, camps should focus not only on the mental-health challenges of campers but also on those of the staff—and this can occur during staff training.

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Most camp staff members are college-age students, ages 18 to 22, part of the Gen-Z generation. The pandemic has affected this generation's development and growth in contrast with that of older generations. For example, an 18-year-old in 2023 was 14 or 15 in 2020, meaning the second half of social development in high school was disrupted. The same goes for a 21- to 23-year-old, as the pandemic affected the college experience. The pandemic completely changed how these young people interact with each other (largely online and through technology), removing them from dorm rooms and classrooms and back to childhood bedrooms. Being surrounded by strangers in a new setting like camp and dealing with tough topics like homesickness, bullying, eating disorders, and other issues, staff members may feel

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overwhelmed. I've noticed over the last few years that many staff members are easily worried or need to step out of the room when tough topics are introduced as the conversations may be difficult to sit through. Therefore, camps must work on helping staff with their own mental health and potentially stressful experiences during the summer in order to foster a good work environment, provide meaningful experiences, and avoid burnout.

While I am not a mental-health expert, the following are ideas to help engage staff during training:

1. Use the interview process to gain an understanding of staff members' needs.

In 2021, I began asking subtle, mental health-related questions in interviews to learn of possible stressors staff members have and how to support them at camp. Questions like: "How do you handle stress?" "What do you do to personally relax?" and "What are things that would make you nervous about the summer?" allow for real answers that help me, as an employer, support the staff. One should be realistic with job applicants and express that, although the job is amazing, it is not free from stress. Directors who

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support potential staff members from the beginning are promoting healthy communication with coping mechanisms throughout the summer.

2. A director should know each staff member's face and name before arrival.

Like campers, many staff members arrive with nerves or fears about being new. This can be difficult at any age, especially for young or foreign staff members. In 2020, a monthly Zoom call prior to camp allowed staff members to introduce themselves and start group chats. In these calls, staff members were able to ask questions, make plans to travel together, etc. Immediately greeting staff members by name, while a small gesture, goes a long way in building self-confidence and making new employees feel seen and welcome.

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3. Add scheduled break times into staff training.

Unfortunately, due to the influence of constant entertainment and distractions through social media outlets, the attention span of many younger counselors is short, so the longer the session or day—especially in the heat—the faster counselors burn out. Consider making a weekly staff schedule digital and build in specific, unstructured breaks. This allows staff members time to refresh and refocus before the next session or set-up period.

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4. Focus on substance, but also on fun.

While important topics like homesickness, bullying, stress and anxiety, diversity, food and water safety, and emergency procedures must be covered, staff training is about building camaraderie among members who will run the camp this summer. Consider shortening training during the day and introducing intramural games like basketball, tennis, or soccer at night to build teamwork. If the camp provides evening programming for campers, consider adding popular events during staff week to suggest the fun and excitement to come. For example, my camp has a Neon Dance, campfire, and scavenger hunt during staff training so members not only have fun but also feel comfortable with those activities when campers arrive.

5. Embrace healthy conflict-resolution.

Last summer, one of the two staff members hired to teach culinary arts quit the day after she arrived.

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Unfortunately, camp was not for her. Every summer, there will be a staff member, or two, who becomes overwhelmed by the experience. The cheers, loud personalities, and tough topics are not for everyone. When members decide to leave, it creates a void that is difficult to fill. Using conflict-resolution and solving problems quickly can help avoid these gaps. Some staff members may not agree with a supervisor's or co-counselor's decisions; however, having challenging conversations is important. Some issues are as simple as, "I thought I wanted to be with 14-year-olds, but I should be with younger kids." If a camp is able to accommodate a change and make a staff member more comfortable and fix an issue rather than see the person walk out the door or struggle all summer in the wrong setting, it will be better for everyone.

Staff members are more complicated than ever because they are more empowered. Young adults have more options, like service trips, travel opportunities, and school programs, but many decide to work at summer camp for a number of reasons. Giving them the tools to succeed and focus on their own mental health throughout the summer is vital for success. Counselors become role models and support systems for campers during the summer, so directors and administrators should do the same for staff members. Providing staff with the tools before and throughout the summer will create resilient and strong members who will ultimately create resilient and strong camp communities.

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Jonathan Caflun *is the Assistant Director for Camp Wekeela for Everyone, located in Hartford, Maine. Jonathan and his wife live in New Jersey. He can be reached at Jonathan@campwekeela.com.*

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