

Through the Eyes of the Camp Director: A Program Improvement Process for Positive Youth Development

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Research Purpose/Question

- To better understand why some camps flourished while other camps did not during a program improvement process
 - How effective was a program improvement process for camp programs from the Director/Administrator perspective?
 - Did on-site observations support the quantitative findings regarding supports and opportunities for positive youth development?

Theoretical Framework

- Positive Youth Development
 - Away from problem prevention toward supports and opportunities needed to grow into healthy adults
 - Based on contemporary developmental systems theories that change is a consequence of mutually influential relationships (family, biology, culture, community, personal characteristics, etc)
 - Interested in foundation assets for positive development that offer optimal supports and opportunities

Community Action Framework for Youth Development

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**Build Community
Capacity and Conditions
for Change (E)**

**Improve Youth
Developmental
Outcomes (B)**

**Increase Supports
& Opportunities for
Youth (C)**

Adequate nutrition,
health & shelter

Multiple supportive
relationships

Meaningful involvement

Challenging & engaging
activities

Safety

**Implement Community
Strategies to Enhance
Supports & Opportunities
for Youth (D)**

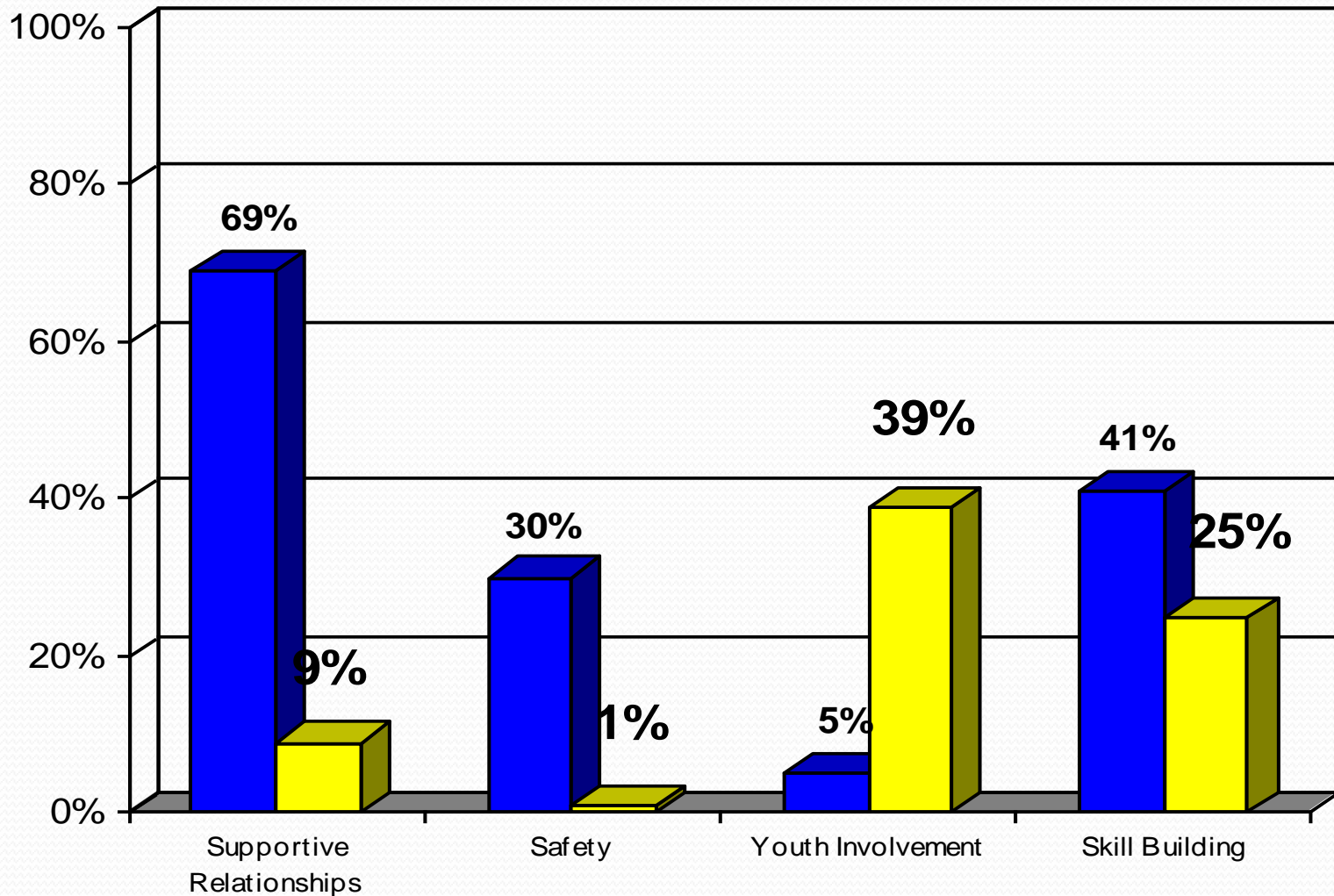
**Improve Long-
Term Outcomes
in Adulthood (A)**

Background of Larger Study

- Two phase study
 - Benchmarking in 80 camps (7600+ youth 10-17 yrs old)
 - Program Improvement Project (PIP) (23 camps with 2200+)
 - Focus on Supports and Opportunities of
 - Supportive Relationships
 - Safety
 - Youth Involvement
 - Skill-building

Overall Supports & Opportunities

(Optimal) **(Insufficient)**



Organizational Improvement Process

- Step 1: Leadership Sets Initial Targets
- Step 2: Staff Conducts an Organizational Assessment
- Step 3: Youth and Staff Review Survey Results
- Step 4: Develop Action Plan
- Step 5: Prioritize Areas for Improvement in Year One
- Step 6: Re-set Targets for Year One Plan
- Step 7: Leadership Reviews Survey Results



Qualitative Data Collection

Data were collected and triangulated based on :

- Camp Administrators/Directors phone interviews
- Director self-assessment at end of project
- Selected on-site observations

Emergent Themes

The following themes resonated within the data:

- Need to create a “culture of change” at camp
- Intentionality of action is critical to the process
- Directors experienced benefits by participating in the PIP process regardless of quantitative score changes

- Camp characteristics can't be ignored

Creating a “Culture of Change”

- Directors approached the process in holistic way that integrated their PIP goals in all organizational practices (structures, policies, activities)
- Developed detailed improvement plan that took a year around perspective that extended beyond one year
- Effective strategies included:
 - Updating camp’s mission and philosophy
 - Sharing information about new programs/changes with campers and staff after asking for feedback from both groups
 - Recruited/trained staff comfortable with change and worked on “growing their own”

- *“Camp culture is steeped in traditions that may be hard to change, particularly when it means moving away from the way things were ‘always done’”.*

- *“Staff may be hesitant to give up the power and control, because they often perceive power and control to be ‘leadership’. This problem is often prevalent with staff who were former campers...”*

Intentionality/Accountability


- There is “intentionality” and then there is “Intentionality”
- Good intentions most favorable when integrated with fervor into the camp community and philosophy!
- Strong leadership was critical especially when staff and/or camper “buy-in” was necessary
- Availability of resources (staff, time, money) affected some camps’ “good intentions”

- *“Staff felt more confident about knowing their job. What we covered and how we covered it was different... felt prepared to focus on campers. There was a different attitude throughout camp because of intentionality...”*

- *“The process helped us do strategic planning in direct relationship to youth development. We thought about youth development, but this helped us focus... and re-motivated us around youth development principles.”*

Benefits of PIP

- Every director acknowledged while no one strategy would work in every camp, every camp benefited from the process that demanded self-evaluation and action
- The self-examination based on camper/staff feedback and the brainstorming steps were viewed as sometimes painful but enlightening




- *“The survey and the framework gave us the motivation to see ourselves as others see us and move forward. What a gift that was! I am growing through this process...”*

- *“It’s hard to take an honest look at yourself. This helped us do it!!”*

Can't Ignore Camp Characteristics

- Strong leadership is essential
- Resources are crucial!
 - Administrative staff consistency
 - Financial power over budget
 - Time to plan and implement
 - Year around staff is nice but not critical
- Staff and camper return rates need to be considered (but you also need new blood)



- *Helped staff see camp was strategic, and they needed to make a conscious effort to create the environment.”*

- *“The amount of time in planning and putting the whole thing together was challenging. This is a real time commitment- and it requires more than two people to be involved.”*

Conclusions

- From the directors' viewpoint understanding a youth development framework was an essential component to a program improvement process
- The step-by-step process used in this project helped structure and focus the camp's strategies to improve supports and opportunities for positive development
- The directors' comments indicated a sense of effectiveness associated with the improvement process
- Leadership by the director, the staff, and campers all contributed to successful change

Implications

- The leadership of the director is often the fulcrum for success or failure so they need to be well-supported in the improvement process
- Processing with/by campers and staff should be an integral part to any improvement process (often need tools/training to develop this skill)
- Camps need to continue to capitalize on their sense of community and incorporate on-going change as an important component
- Any improvement process is likely to affect staff recruitment and training
- Youth must be involved in all the major parts of the process
- Remember to include the parents/family
- Be OK with the fact that challenges happen and not everything good will result in statistical significance!

Questions?

“Camp is not something you do to kids. We must do it WITH them!”