

Camp Leadership for the 21st Century

Bob Ditter

Michael Yeh is standing in front of an audience of over 1,000 health care and mental health professionals telling a story about a recent surgical procedure he led at the UCLA Endocrine Surgical Unit, which he directs. An Associate Professor of Surgery and Medicine at UCLA, Dr. Yeh is describing the delicate surgical procedure while an actual videotape of the operation is being shown to the audience. What we see unfolding before us is a medical drama that rivals any reality TV show one could imagine. A few minutes into the procedure it is clear that the surgical team is losing the patient. There is blood loss, a drop in blood pressure, and other signs that the team only has a few minutes before this patient will die on the table in front of them unless they do something to turn things around. In most surgical suites under conditions like these the head surgeon will begin barking orders to the team. Yet what Dr. Yeh does at this moment is strikingly different and totally uncharacteristic of most surgeons. He pauses for a moment, makes deliberate eye contact with each of the five members of his team, addressing each one by name as he goes, then says calmly but firmly, “I need five minutes of excellence from each of you right now.” As we watch the video we see the team rise to the occasion and save the patient. There is not a dry eye in the audience.

As Dr. Yeh pointed out, surgeons are only one class of leader in high-performance arenas where the stakes are high and the need to get it right is paramount. As I sat in the audience I thought of another place where this is true – camp! After all, there are few things one can do in this world that are riskier and where the stakes are higher than taking on the responsibility for the care and well-being of other people’s children. In the 40 years I have been working with camp professionals around the United States, I have seen all kinds of camp leaders. I am convinced that because of certain specific changing conditions in our society, along with the general mission of investing in people that is the epitome of camp, there is an urgent need for *transformative leadership* in camping.

. . . *there is an urgent need for transformative leadership in organized camping.*

Before I explain what I mean by “transformational leadership,” let me spell out what it is that strong camp leaders must do. As John Gardner explains in his book, *On Leadership* (1990), there are certain specific expectations that leaders are charged with, as follows:

- Create positive, enduring, *collective* action (giving kids a high-quality camp experience).
- Envision goals (kids having safe fun; counselors taking a healthy interest in kids; everyone growing).
- Affirm values (those of community, respect, growth, creativity, and gratitude).
- Motivate others (inspire camp staff to their best).
- Manage others (help camp staff achieve their best).
- Achieve a sense of unity (teamwork).
- Tie actions and decisions to goals and values.
- Serve as a model of those goals and values.
- Unleash human creativity, energy, and talent.

It is clear from what Gardner is saying that *leadership has a lot to do with those being led* and not just with those doing the leading. In other words, transformative leaders invite others into a shared mission of optimal human performance. We see this in sports where great coaches inspire great players and teams; and we see it in industry where great bosses inspire great companies, products, services, and performance. Leaders who are focused on themselves — on their greatness, their expertise, their achievement, and their reputation — are what we call “heroic” or “traditional” leaders. They are the Steve Jobs and the Bobby Knights of the world. They are leaders who achieve incredible results and command as much respect through fear as they do through competence and expertise. In fact, many well-known leaders of the past operated in the “heroic” style of leadership exemplified by Jobs and Knight — individuals who accomplished tremendous feats, who were extremely charismatic, and who inspired others who knew them at a distance. Of course, camp professionals are not in the business of scoring a record number of wins in basketball or innovating in world-changing electronic gadgetry. They are involved in the

business of fortifying young people with authentic learning experiences that stretch their horizons and enhance their resilience. The very nature of the work camp professionals engage in calls for an investment in people.

Traditional Heroic and Transformative, “Post-Heroic” Leadership

To see how the heroic style of leadership contrasts with a post-heroic or *transformational style* of leadership, named for the way it transforms others (team members) into high performers, let us look at the following chart, which is based on the work of renowned business consultant and professor, Barbara Kellerman (2012).

Traditional, Heroic Leader

Projects energy

Decisive action

Forceful, self-confident, self-assured

Commands attention

Strong ego: *their* mission and goals

Intellectual rigor

Holds power

Structured

Values self

Transformative, Post-heroic Leader

Emanates calm

Listener-reflector

Receptive, self-regulated, vulnerable

Invites reflection and feedback

Healthy ego: *shared* mission and goals

Emotional agility; authenticity

Shares power

Flexible

Values others (and sees the value *in* others)

These two styles of leadership are pretty much diametrically opposed to one another. After all, if as a leader you are busy being “the expert” and taking all or most of the credit for your camp’s success, then not only are you not inspiring and nurturing your team, you are devaluing the significance of their contribution.

What makes me say that the post-heroic, transformational style of leadership is the one that will bring about success in today’s world? After all, at camp where the responsibility for other people’s children is so awesome, one can certainly meet that responsibility with a my-way-or-the-highway, in control, commanding style of leadership. For many camp directors it is safer to have a very clear structure with a clear vision and expectations, combined with an adherence to a

strict way of doing things than to take a gamble with their mostly 18-22-year-old staff! For directors with this style of leadership, their ideal staff is one that marches in step with that director's vision and goals to assure safety and success. For the heroic camp director, running a camp is for strong-willed folks like Jobs and Knight who are assertive, like to have authority over others, take responsibility for making decisions, see themselves as more capable than others, always know what they are doing, and drive success, both in the for-profit and nonprofit sectors, through the sheer magnitude of their personalities. So why change? What makes me say that heroic leadership is outmoded? Why risk collaborating with young adults who often don't have a grasp on the bigger picture?

Changes in Today's World — Information and the Internet

Years ago, before the Internet put so much information into the hands of so many people, experts were revered for their specific, particular, and hard-earned knowledge. For example, few people in the latter half of the 20th century questioned the advice or judgment of their doctors. After all, doctors, like other experts, had spent *years* acquiring their knowledge and expertise, so on what basis did the general public have to question them? The same could be said for many professions, including my own. With the advent of the Internet, however, even I as a child therapist have parents who come into my office who, after reading extensively on the Internet about the challenges their child may be having, hand me *their* diagnosis and *their* treatment plan!

Camp directors experience this very same phenomenon at camp. Years ago, the prevailing attitude among camp professionals toward parents was something like, "Give us your kid, get out of our way, and let us do what we know best. If your child is homesick they simply have to tough it out, so stay away!" That attitude simply doesn't work anymore. By contrast, parents today frequently tell camp directors what it is the directors should be doing, *not only to manage their child, but also to manage the other children in their child's cabin or group*. Today one doesn't need to have experience or training to have an opinion on a wide array of matters.

To illustrate this point about information further, let's look at how people make decisions today. Years ago, if I wanted to find a great new restaurant I asked my friends. A few years later I would look it up in something like a Zagat guidebook. Today I go on the Internet and check out

Yelp or OpenTable. At colleges and universities today professors are, for better or worse, ranked by their students. The same is true for children's summer camps. Camp directors who assert their ego and dictate their decisions will find themselves at odds with parents who simply do not revere experts the way parents of the past did. While one's expertise and experience was enough to get people to listen to you in the past, today it is your ability to form relationships and *nurture authenticity* that wins parents over. Or as Geoff Colvin states in his new book, *Humans Are Underrated* (2015), "(Today) being a great performer is . . . less about what you know and more about what you're like." This is especially true for the world of camp where directors must convince parents that they can be trusted with their children. Parents today are not as impressed with a director's expertise and experience unless it is accompanied by an authentic openness to their thoughts and concerns. You still need to know what you are talking about. You simply can't stand on that expertise alone.

The same can be said for working with camp staff today. Raised by parents who have told them they are special and can be anything they want to be, today's young adults question authority as a way of life! They have been tutored and carefully schooled to have their own opinions and to be vocal about them! Not knowing how to harness their very real positive energy, care, and concern is a typical mistake of too many camp directors today.

Changes in Today's World — Teamwork and Collaboration

What used to ensure success in most professions in the world was personal achievement. But as Adam Grant points out in his book, *Give and Take—Why Helping Others Drives Our Success* (2013), the service and team-oriented nature of most businesses today require people to *collaborate*. Or as *Fortune Magazine* points out in a recent article by Geoff Colvin, the number one critical skill that workers of the future will need to be successful is not technical knowledge but *empathy* (2015). Whether in law, medicine, consulting, teaching, accounting, or the trades, working with others is and will continue to be of supreme importance in the workplace (Grant, 2015, p.16). Today more than half of American and European companies regularly use teams to get work done. People whom Grant calls "givers" — people who are focused on what it takes to make others successful rather than on themselves — thrive on teams where collaboration matters (Grant, 2015, p.5 & p.16).

Camp is clearly a team-oriented collaboration. With all the safety considerations, special diets, allergies, parent requests, operating standards, and individual camper needs, there is simply no way that a camp today or in the foreseeable future can be successfully operated by one commanding personality, no matter how great a character he or she may be. By definition, heroic leaders are not givers. They are “takers” — people whom Grant identifies as those who like to get more than they give (Grant, 2015, p.4). Takers are people who truly feel that good guys finish last. They feel that to succeed they have to be better than anyone else, including anyone and everyone on their team. Takers are the sharks in a competitive world — a world they see as cutthroat. They typically nurture only a very few chosen favorites whom they see as endorsing their power and way of doing things. Such leaders, who are typically heroic, run their camps on the sheer magnitude of their personality. They have an extremely difficult time relinquishing control and when it comes time to retire, they take special satisfaction in knowing that the camp can’t go on without them. Or as Michael Yeh says, “What greater testament to your own personal greatness (is there) than that the place falls apart after you leave (Yeh, 2015).”

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Heroic leaders do not nurture their teams. In fact, many heroic or traditional leaders are threatened by the success or expertise of members of their team. They are what James Collins and Jerry Porras call “good time-keepers and lousy clock-builders (Collins and Porras, 1994).” That is, they perform for the sake of their own gain, whether that is financial or in terms of their enhanced reputation. The true measure of great leadership in the 21st century will be the way a leader empowers others to run the organization so that it endures well beyond the passing of any one individual. By contrast, heroic leaders make everyone dependent on them. No one is given the authority to make decisions other than the supreme leader, and no one is truly given the tools and coaching to flourish. Heroic leaders want things done *their* way. Transformative leaders build consensus through skillful teamwork.

Motivation and Leadership

What motivates people is pride. What de-motivates people is when we hurt their pride. When camp leaders acknowledge staff members' contributions; when they show them how meaningful and significant their work with campers is; when they recognize their effort, energy, and positive intention, those leaders are nourishing their staff members by making them feel proud. When we shame or blame people or fail to recognize their positive intentions or their contributions or just their effort, we hurt their pride. Even money, considered by some the ultimate motivator, is a matter of pride. Pay me an amount that makes me feel valued, and you have boosted my pride. Pay me less than others who I see as my equals, and you have wounded my pride. Wounding my pride is one certain way to affect my performance negatively.

In the typical operating room the heroic surgeon barks at his teammates because he thinks he is right. He barks out of a belief that success is simply *willing* people to do things his way. What happens instead is that those team members tense up and make more, not fewer, mistakes. In the presence of a controlling leader who can deeply wound your pride, people are too busy protecting themselves to speak up. They become silenced. This can be seen at camp where, when I tell a director that her staff feels unappreciated, she yells in disgust, "That's their job. They need to stop whining and do their job!" Or when I inform another director that his team is afraid to speak up in meetings and share critical events that the director should know about, he gets angry and impatient, further reducing the chances that his team members will be honest with him out of their fear of his reprisals. By contrast, a transformative leader would get genuinely curious and wonder out loud what it is impeding this vital communication — not to shame or blame his people, but to understand, address, and correct the problem.

Camp is about building people — campers and staff alike. In the day of collaborative teamwork, ubiquitous information, and shifting expertise, it is the nourishing empathy of the true mentor-leader that is most powerful, valuable, and lasting. Many camp professionals have already embraced this collaborative, people-skill intensive vision of leadership. By doing so they may just save the patient.

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