

Questions Every Staff Trainer Needs To Ask about Staff Training

Designing and implementing staff training is a process of making choices. What will be included and when? How much time will I allot for each topic? What form will I choose to communicate the information? How will I handle returning staff? How will I develop a team and a sense of interdependence within the team?

The content and methods employed at staff training vary greatly because they seem to be primarily functions of our own personal experiences, training, and judgment. After the orientation period and the formal pre-camp training, staff begin to work and apply their skills while “unlearning” and “relearning” information based upon interactions with both peers and campers.

Where should directors begin when planning staff training?

When answering this question, the most common response is “with last year’s plan and schedule.” The challenge is to how to decide what to teach and facilitate during pre-camp training and what can be included as on-going training throughout the season and year. Questions to ask yourself and other key staff involved in the planning include:

- What information can be communicated to staff before they arrive on the property while they are most curious and less focused on group dynamics?
- What training issues are so complicated that we need the face-to-face interaction to tackle?
- What can we introduce and then return with more depth in a week or so?

Thinking of staff training as a process allows for flexibility and flow while communicating to staff that we always have something to learn.

What do my staff need to know to be effective?

All of us want happy staff that are effective in their jobs, but have we taken the time to articulate our expectations clearly? For example, what baseline skills and knowledge do I expect staff members to know the moment the campers arrive? What topics can be addressed with more in-depth coverage once the staff have a better understanding of how these issues play out in camp. What do staff need in order to effectively accomplish the goals and mission of our program? Each camp program will have a different twist to this process, but the following steps can guide the process:

Step 1: Make a list of skills (things staff do) and knowledge (things staff know) to clearly guide the intended outcomes desired in staff. Examine job descriptions, performance-review tools, and past incident and accident reports. Many of the valued skills are spelled out plainly in these documents. You will also remember areas of stress and under-performance from past staff members.

Step 2: Take out a copy of last year’s plan (or quickly jot down the schedule). Be sure to include the information staff receive prior to arrival, on-site schedule, and the in-service training schedule.

Step 3: Mark each content area according to the type of information needed. You might think of it in terms of information “out” (meaning you have the content and want to tell your staff; i.e. many policies, what to do when, etc.), information “created” (meaning you need a high level of buy-in or shared creativity; i.e. team-building, games leadership, program planning, special event ideas, values discussions), or “interactive” information (meaning you can’t explain it, you have to see and do it; i.e. behavior management, group processing and facilitation, conflict resolution, many procedures like dining-room, cook/camp-out, missing person procedures).

Step 4: Talk with the experts. Take each topic and tap into your network. Ask for input from former staff members and supervisors-- both the stellar ones and those you would rather forget! Each group will have a unique perspective about what they wish they had known, what they felt was too much information in a short period of time, and what they felt they already knew. Insuring involvement from

potential returning staff just might be the factor that convinces them to come back for another summer.

Step 5: Think about the best way to communicate the training content. For example, whose voice should the staff hear? Hearing from a parent panel how important health and safety are will make a bigger impact than the camp director voice. Hearing from a youth panel about what they like and dislike about past counselors will make it all very real.

Your list of skills and knowledge can now serve as a template and outline for your decision-making process. Go back through your list, but this time think about expectations for mastery by your staff. Is it something they could come to camp already knowing (many camps now require staff to get First Aid training prior to camp so that more time to focus on camp-specific training)? Is it something that is tough to understand until one has tried it (consider an introduction to homesickness and then the first in-service training one-week into camp do some active role plays and provide tools)? Is it something that one can never fully master, so in-service training would be helpful? Is it something everyone in camp needs to know or only a subset of specialists? Is it something that is helpful, but not necessary, so could wait until the first staff meeting? These conscious decisions rather than ones based only on scheduling or tradition can be helpful guides in developing your training plan.

Back to the schedule

Now it is time to review last year's schedule. You may be pleasantly surprised when you re-examine the schedule, or you may need to re-align and start with a blank page. Regardless of the judgment, by following these steps you will have a different perspective and a core of staff who will have thought about staff training in a different way. Challenge yourself to re-think how you update returning staff...they report they are tired of sitting in the same sessions. If you know they "get" certain aspects of training, it is okay to have a parallel session occurring where they are getting more in-depth content on a "sticky" issue (bring in a guest speaker, offer more challenging scenarios for them, build their skills).

After implementation this year, the planning can begin anew for next year by talking with new and returning staff during their first two or three weeks of work and asking similar questions as discussed above. This process will also help update annually the job descriptions and performance-review tools to reflect the growth of the body of knowledge created during this examination and planning process.

Staff training is one of the most challenging, yet rewarding planning projects we do. If done thoughtfully, we will have happier and more effective staff, a philosophy of long-term learning, ideas for in-service trainings that provide needed renewal for staff during the summer, and opportunities for our campers and staff to have input into this important process. You may start small with just one or two new ideas from this article or you may want to do a complete overhaul- the key is to start...take the first step!

References:

Adapted from: Powell, G.M. (2002). Staff-training: Planning for next summer can start with recruitment and retention now. *Camping Magazine*, 75 (6), 46-49.