

# BRING THEM BACK

5 principles to improve staff retention







Photo courtesy of Coldstream Christian Camp

Staff retention is not merely a logistical necessity; it's a vital component in maintaining the continuity, spirit and effectiveness of a camp's ministry. We need great staff to make great camp happen, and traditionally the best staff are those who return for multiple summers. ▶

To establish a quality culture, it starts with year-round staff embracing and living out the ministry's core values and organizational behaviors.



Photo courtesy of Word of Life Fellowship



Photo courtesy of Camp Eagle



Many camps make it a goal to have 40% to 50% of their staff return the following summer. By developing an ecosystem people want to be in, you're more likely to hit and exceed that goal. The key to getting staff to return is creating an environment of a healthy culture, high trust and wild fun. By focusing on the five principles below, you can create an atmosphere where staff are invigorated at the end of the summer and are already talking about next year.

### Engaging Culture

The current generation of Gen Z staff highly values workplace culture, sometimes more than they realize or can articulate. In my conversations with other camp leaders, we're seeing that key aspects like mental health, inclusivity and a biblically-based community are prioritized more than in previous generations.

Gone are the days of "controlled chaos" and "we can power through this." Instead, at our camp and others I've talked with, staff members seek an intentional, biblically-aligned program. To establish a top-quality culture, it starts with year-round staff embracing and living out the ministry's core values and organizational behaviors.

Gregg Hunter, president and CEO of CCCA, has often talked and taught about the organizational behaviors developed at the national office. He views organizational behaviors as the actions of living out the core values of an organization.

Consider how you reinforce and maintain engagement with staff and a set of organizational behaviors. Are they memorized? Are your organizational behaviors integrated into daily language and actions? Culture transcends mere documentation; it should guide meetings, one-on-one interactions and even disciplinary actions. It is through clear expectations and accountability that a healthy, values-driven community is cultivated. (Learn more in the sidebar on page 32 about the organizational behaviors that CCCA's national office has implemented to foster a healthy culture.)

Mental health is at the forefront of culture today and is highly valued. Camps need to be concerned with staff mental health rather than viewing seasonal staff as disposable. Creating an environment where staff have an outlet to share their stresses and concerns allows them to have great and appropriate boundaries and be called to healthy standards.

Camps are beginning to focus on Mental, Emotional and Social Health (MESH) in different ways. It is important to let staff know during training how you want them to address these needs. Is there someone on the staff who isn't their supervisor they can talk to? I have seen camps partner with local pastors or pay for sessions with a professional therapist.

By positioning and intentionally building an organized and healthy camp culture, as opposed to disjointed and uncaring, you create a space where people feel safe and valued, making it a place people want to be a part of. ▶



Photo courtesy of Camp Pondo



## Organizational Behaviors in Action

*Building and sustaining a healthy culture*

■ by Gregg Hunter

For the last nine years, the CCCA national team has been working toward making and sustaining a healthier culture. We started by adopting several key behaviors that we agreed would keep us on track and provide a safe and healthy work environment for everyone.

I believe core values and behaviors go hand in hand, but it's my preference to describe behaviors as values you can see in action. Following are the behaviors CCCA adopted years ago, which we keep studying and refining regularly:

- Operate with kindness, grace and respect.
- Make it better.
- Take personal ownership.
- Remain open-handed.
- Collaborate.
- Pursue professional growth.
- Maintain conversational integrity.

Each of these behaviors is defined by a promise. I'll give one example. The definition for "Maintain conversational integrity" says, "We will go directly to another team member to express concerns or offenses rather than expressing those to others. We will decline to listen to others' complaints or criticisms about another team member but will encourage conversation directly with the party involved."

We've crafted our behaviors into a covenant that each team member must sign, committing to living out these behaviors as we do our work at CCCA. And we post our organizational behaviors covenant with job listings so candidates know that if hired, they will be required to commit to the same things.

To keep the behaviors top-of-mind, we have had one team member teach on a behavior at our monthly staff meetings, taking five to eight minutes to remind us of the item we've committed to, sharing Scripture and an article or personal experience to support it.

We've also drafted a script for how to hold one another accountable and how to respond if we are approached with accountability. This is important if you want to foster honest and healthy communication leading to a healthy culture.

To read more about CCCA's core values, look for my article from the October/November 2016 issue of *InSite*, titled "Shaping Your Team Culture."

### **Experience Counts**

No one wants to return to something that was a bad experience. If you go to a restaurant and the food is spectacular but the atmosphere is dark and dirty, you are much less likely to return. Too often, at camp, we are so focused on campers that our staff are neglected and overworked.

While staff might fully embrace the mission, people are no longer willing to sacrifice their time and livelihood for a company, regardless of mission, if that company doesn't treat them well. We live in a day and age where there are so many options, we need to provide an environment in which people clamor for more.

What do your staff-only events look like? What are experiences you can provide that they cannot get elsewhere? A question I often ask is, "When your staff are at school next year, what experiences can they not wait to share with their peers?"

Lean into what you do best as a camp. Consider activities that you allow campers to do that can be done differently with your staff, like having a team meeting in the middle of the lake on the Blob.

Beyond staff events, how are you pouring into them? Can you provide a discipleship aspect to your summer program that includes small groups? Is it possible to bring in a speaker just for them?

Staff need to know they are cared for and not seen solely as a labor pool. Your guests are desperate to come back to your program next year. Create a program for your summer staff that they are desperate to return to.

### **Encourage Climbing**

In the movies, what makes the best sequels? It's stories that bring back the main characters we know and love and take them deeper into a new story. Returning staff want to know that they are returning to something they love, but they want the next level from it.

Is there something special that only returning staff can participate in? Do you have a leadership program that steps up every year? Exclusivity is important in today's culture. What do new staff see returners get that could make them want to be a returning staff also?

One effective strategy I've observed involves a supervisor proactively speaking with a staff member about their future. A simple yet profound question like, "What are your plans for next summer?" can have a significant impact. Expressing to staff that they are valued and desired for the upcoming season is not just encouraging but also empowering.

Going a step further, tell them you envision them with increased responsibilities. This conversation invites staff to consider their future growth and success within the role. It also integrates them into the program's future, keeping the idea of returning at the forefront of their minds. ►

# Staff need to feel cared for and not seen solely as a labor pool.



Photo courtesy of Camp Porcdo



Photo courtesy of Sunset Lake



# Returning staff want to know that they are returning to something they love, but they want the next level from it.

## **Engage in Collaboration**

People want to be part of something bigger. Sometimes in camp planning, it is hard to delegate and give control to others. We create a vision; we can see our dreams come to life through planning and it may slow us down to collaborate with others. Yet this collaboration builds the most trust and encourages people to return and could provide some incredible opportunities for organizational growth.

When a staff member gets to speak into the vision of next year, they have a deeper desire to be a part of it. When they get to share their recommendation for the schedule or when they speak into the theme, they are entwining themselves into the next year and crave being a part of it.

Are there any parts of your program or operation that you can “outsource” to that staff member? Have them write a script, create a playlist or write small-group curriculum. These tasks allow them also to be a creator and have them yearning to see it come to life the following year.

## **Effective Communication**

One of the best ways to encourage returning staff is to have consistent conversations with your team. It is important to have scheduled one-on-ones with staff. They need to know that they have an avenue and time to share their needs. These meetings don't have to be long, or even weekly, but they need to be consistent.

One of the best questions you can ask at these meetings is, “What can I start, stop or keep doing?” This question lets your staff know that you value their feedback. This allows them to bring something to you at a scheduled time in a way that doesn't put you on the offense. You can address it as something that should change or constructively share why you disagree with their idea. Most importantly, communicate that you heard them. Don't take calls or answer texts during that time. Be present.

Finally, many camps do wildly effective surveys for their guests but not for their staff. Sometimes it can be productive to do two surveys, one after training and one at the end of the summer. The information in these surveys is extremely valuable. You can see the pain points of the staff and prioritize what to focus on. I highly recommend not making them anonymous; you want to be able to follow up if needed. ■



*Evan Liewer is the senior director of programs and operations at Forest Home Christian Camps in Southern California. With 50,000 guests a year, Evan is responsible to ensure a high-quality retreat and that the gospel is preached. Evan graduated from Biola University with a degree in business and Bible. He is a pastor, author and leader. He lives in Redlands, California, with his beautiful wife and three daughters.*