

THE BUSINESS OF MINISTRY

How professionalism helps nonprofits succeed

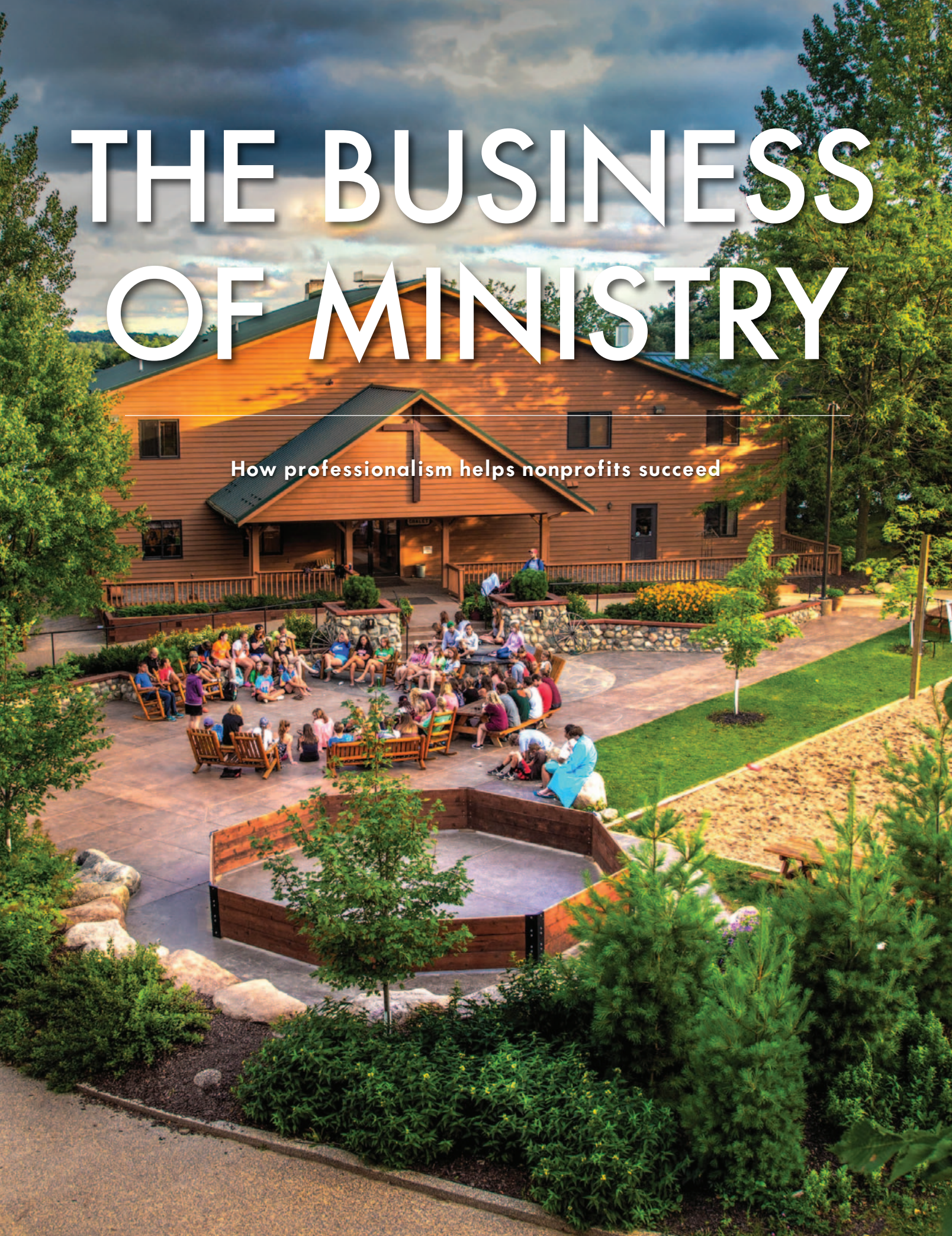




Photo courtesy of Camp Lebanon

So often, the culture created at camp is one of family. As a ministry, it makes sense that the focus is on relationships and mission. However, there's still a bottom line. There are financial goals and budgets, marketing benchmarks and a need to build a strong staff that can serve the needs of constituents. There's a need for a level of professionalism that reflects well on your ministry's brand and builds confidence in the quality people can expect from you.



Photo courtesy of Camp Eagle

But it's important to note that professionalism goes beyond interactions and strategies. ▶

Defining Professionalism

It's easy to picture a "professional" as someone wearing a business suit sitting in a corporate office. In her book, *Sustaining Ministry: Foundations and Practices for Serving Faithfully*, Sondra Wheeler explains five characteristics that define professionalism. While her book is aimed at pastors, any leader in Christian ministry can measure themselves against these attributes.

1. Competence: Having specialized knowledge and skills to perform the job.
2. Moral commitment: "It is not enough to have the required abilities; the professional also must be the right kind of person and care about the right things," Wheeler states.
3. Self-monitoring: Professionals monitor one another and hold each other accountable. In the same way that doctors and lawyers have boards and associations that hold them accountable, camp leaders have boards and other structures in place for accountability.
4. Altruism: This involves a commitment to the well-being of guests, staff and constituents, placing their interests above the leader's self-interests. There is a degree of sacrifice on behalf of the good of those served, according to Wheeler.
5. Fiduciary responsibility: This means a person who holds a position of trust. Wheeler explains, "Fiduciary power is not power over another person but power for him or her, exercised at the beneficiary's behest, and on his or her behalf ... fiduciary responsibility [is] the commitment to use entrusted power appropriately."

Let's look at some of the key areas of leading your ministry through the lens of professionalism.

Hiring and Training

The human resources department at the H.E. Butt Foundation (Leakey, Texas) holds special training sessions for every employee who is involved with interviewing potential staff. Here, it's all about competency.

"Camp directors don't know labor laws," Executive Director Cary Hendricks said. "They don't know what can and should be asked in an interview. They need to be taught how to do it effectively."

While some camp directors might fear that implementing business practices could interfere with relationships, Hendricks said that the opposite is true. "While implementing formal policies regarding staff behavior might feel stilted and unnecessary to a relationally minded camp director, these policies set expectations and help staffers succeed in their roles."

Hendricks used an example of a summer staffer who needs some redirection regarding their job performance. "When we're relational, we might hold a conversation with the staffer and try to correct their behavior in a more casual way," he said. "But if their performance doesn't improve and we need to let them go, a [formal] write-up offers protection for both the camp and the employee."

If your camp doesn't employ an HR professional, consider how the staff person responsible for hiring can be trained and equipped to manage the process effectively and within legal guidelines. ►

Creating an internal opportunity to evaluate the organization is one way to increase overall professionalism.

The partnership with Mission Increase taught Mile High Pines Camp's (Angelus Oaks, California) director of donor relations, Cassie Van Setten, "the transformative power of asking for support ... people are eager to engage with our ministry."



Photo courtesy of Camp MiYoden

Goal Setting

Making goals attainable and measurable

Forest Home (Forest Falls, California) operates within a yearly plan for goal setting. These goals, which they call “rocks,” are assigned to senior directors to work on with their team during a specific quarter of the year. “One of our rocks might be to build the best stage ever for summer camp or to reorganize the way the serving lines run in the dining hall,” Evan Liewer, program director, said.

However, under a quarterly system, the second quarter only had six weeks in which to work on these goals because the summer season was starting. The third quarter — during summer — was an even more challenging time to accomplish extra tasks. “Under that system, we felt like we were failing on our goals during the second and third quarters every year,” Liewer shared.

To address this problem, Forest Home recently changed its corporate structure from a quarterly system to a seasonal one. Rather than operating with four quarters, they switched to a three-season model. January through April is their pre-summer preparation, May through August is their summer season and September through December is their post-summer season. “This system gives us extra time to accomplish bigger things before the summer starts,” Liewer said.

In what ways might you need to adjust your goal setting and measurements to work best in the context of your ministry year?



Photo courtesy of Camp Lebanon

“We want to care for campers in a way that shows them they are important to us and important to God. Doing that requires excellence from the top down.” —Cary Hendricks

Staff Growth

Hendricks noted that camp is a learning place for campers and the staff. “This is a first job for many of our summer staffers, and we want to model professionalism for them,” he said. “We want them to see that they are representatives of our camp to parents and families.” Essentially, your brand and the professionalism you hope to convey are in large part demonstrated through your team first and foremost.

In a combination of the moral commitment and altruism principles, the H.E. Butt Foundation holds a parent panel to ask them questions about what they are looking for in their child’s camp experience, as well as any concerns they have about sending their child to camp. “These answers help our staffers learn about the parents’ needs,” Hendricks explained. “We want our staff focused on the things that are important to parents and families in order to represent our camp in a professional manner.”

The camp also does an anonymous survey of summer staff about their experience working at the camp. This is a form of the self-monitoring principle. “These surveys help us find ways to better help and support our staffers in future years,” said Hendricks. “We want them to know that everyone at camp — no matter their position — is still learning and willing to make changes.”

At Forest Home (Forest Falls, California), Program Director Evan Liewer, says their team holds a weekly debrief meeting with summer staffers. “We want to offer encouragement about the things that went well that week and help for the things that didn’t,” Liewer said.

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Finances and Pricing

If you ask camp board members about projecting, monitoring and reporting on financial information, you may learn that camps could improve their professionalism in these areas.

“Camp directors may not be versed in financial forecasting and budgeting, so we partner them with the accounting department,” Hendricks said. “We want our staff to work together and learn from one another.”

In some cases, a camp may need to bring in outside advisors to increase proficiency and professionalism in finance.

When it comes to pricing, Jonathan VanScoter, business director for Berea (Hebron, New Hampshire), advised considering three factors when setting prices: mission, market and history.

“We need to make sure we are getting top dollar for our programs to help further our missions, but [also] be aware of the competition in [our] area. You need to know where your product of camp compares with others in your region,” he said.

In addition, VanScoter suggested, “You don’t want to make dramatic shifts in your pricing. Making rate changes too quickly can ostracize your campers.”

VanScoter mentioned the strategic use of early-bird discounts and how to determine the cut-off date for this benefit. “The purpose of this discount is to incentivize registrants to get onboard before others, not to hand it out to most campers,” he explained. “If too many people are accessing this discount, try moving it earlier by 15 to 30 days. This can help you grow your revenue without even touching your price.” Being strategic about pricing programs, products and services elevates your camp’s professionalism. ▶

Fundraising

The fiduciary responsibility of a camp or conference center is to its staff, guests and constituents. None of the ministry's goals can be met without funding.

Liewer stressed the importance of developing a clear fundraising plan. "We typically don't mail or email general requests for funds," he said. Instead, the fundraising team at Forest Home stays connected to their donors through updates on the various projects going on around camp. "They will send an email about the project with photos showing the progress that's been made," he said. "Many people will donate again because they see that their money is making a difference."

Forest Home also collects success stories to use in their fundraising efforts. One such story is of a financial planner who has attended family camp at Forest Home each summer for 42 years. "The man added up what he'd spent at Forest Home over those decades, and he decided that it was the best money he'd ever spent," Liewer said. Keeping donors informed, being transparent and updating them on how their investment is changing lives are critical steps to build confidence in your funding base.

At Mile High Pines Camp (Angelus Oaks, California), Director of Donor Relations Cassie Van Setten has found success partnering with Mission Increase. In 2019, the ministry didn't have any established donor programs. "We had a few board members and friends of the ministry give irregularly to the tune of a few hundred dollars a year," Van Setten said. When the pandemic hit in 2020, the ministry realized they needed help financially, "not only to weather the storm but also to connect with individuals who felt called to support our ministry," shared Van Setten.

The partnership with Mission Increase taught Van Setten two important lessons. First, "I learned the transformative power of asking for support," she said. Van Setten began to understand that "people are eager to engage with our ministry."

Second, Van Setten said she "learned the importance of meticulous planning." In partnering with Mission Increase, Van Setten received comprehensive plans, "including yearly giving plans, fundraising event guides and donor engagement strategies."

All CCCA members have access to the services of Mission Increase through the Thriving Finances initiative. To learn more, visit www.ccca.org/go/thriving_finances.

Maintenance

Nothing says "unprofessional" like deferred maintenance. You might have the best programs, a committed staff and excellent food, but if the bathrooms are in disrepair or paint is peeling, guests develop an impression that you may not be taking care of the most important things.

Like every other camp, Forest Home doesn't have enough money to do every building and improvement project they'd like to do, so they need to plan ahead. "I know what we're doing with each of our buildings for the next ten years," Liewer said. "We prioritize our building projects to ensure that they line up with our long-term goals."

This involves maintaining structures to head off issues and knowing what is urgent or what can wait. A plan to address maintenance issues around the property, with set deadlines and personnel assigned to tasks, can help you stay ahead of the bigger problems deferred maintenance can create.



Photo courtesy of Word of Life Fellowship

Implementing Professionalism in Camp Life

Hendricks said there are benefits to being both a warm and caring community serving together while maintaining a high standard of professionalism.

Like many camps, H.E. Butt's Laity Lodge serves many different groups of people. "In addition to youth and family camps, we run an outdoor school program where we work with the local public schools," he said. "This program is not overtly Christian, and we want to present our camp in the most professional way possible within the context of each program we run."

The H.E. Butt Foundation uses a strategy they call its Pillars of Excellence. Paying attention to the details is vital to providing an excellent experience for campers.

"We want to control the things we can control: good food, nice housing and clean grounds," Hendricks said. These things might seem like small details, but they serve a larger purpose.

Liewer agreed, saying, "Using business principles to govern our camp ministry is vital," he said. The camp has a written one-page strategic plan that combines its corporate strategy with its ministry goals.



Ultimately, leaders in Christian camping can demonstrate professionalism to everyone around them, including the young campers being impacted by the ministry.

"We teach our campers that they are the crowning achievement of God's creation," Hendricks said. "We teach them that God put love and care into creating them, and we want to put love and care into taking care of them while they're at our camp. We want to care for them in a way that shows them they are important to us and important to God. Doing that requires excellence from the top down." ■

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Diane Stark lives in Indiana with her husband and their five children. Her writing has been published in Guideposts, Outreach, War Cry, and about 40 Chicken Soup for the Soul books. She loves to write about the important things in life: her family and her faith.



Jen Howver serves as the editor of CCCA's flagship publication, InSite magazine. She is also CCCA's training manager, planning the EIT webinars, RoundTables and seminars offered at the national conference. Jen was a camper and worked on staff at Camp Paradise (Newberry, Michigan), where she met and later married her husband, Jay. They live in Colorado with their daughters, Noelle and Chloe, and way too many pets.