

# IT'S COMPLICATED

Navigating all kinds of relationships at camp





If you've spent more than one summer working at a camp, you know relationships can make or break a team. We solicited real or hypothetical situations from CCCA members and asked several executive directors and a ministry consultant to respond to them. (Pseudonyms are used in any real scenarios.) ▶

Photo courtesy of Camp Lebanon

## Left Behind

*Andrea joined the summer staff because her college roommate, Brianna, was working at camp. A few weeks into the summer, Brianna was struggling and decided to quit her position at camp. Andrea felt abandoned and was unsure whether she should stay.*

**Cary Hendricks**, executive director of Laity Lodge Camping Programs (Leakey, Texas): I would ensure camp leadership meets regularly with Andrea to help her feel welcome and valued. If helpful, we would allow her to take extra time off to collect herself and hopefully return to her role at camp rejuvenated. We would enlist some of her peers in leadership positions to intentionally care for Andrea as she adapts to being at camp without Brianna.

**Dave Marks**, consultant and VP of The Center Consulting Group: Here's the advice I'd give to Andrea:

- Go and introduce yourself to others and expand your friendships. Be a friend to someone on staff who also needs a friend. Set a summer goal to leave here with five new friends.
- The camp did not accept you to serve on staff just because you were Brianna's friend. They saw gifts and potential in you. Those have not changed. They may come to light even better without Brianna being a large part of your focus.
- Think about how staying at camp might benefit you in the long run. Whether you're gaining new skills, making lasting memories or simply proving to yourself that you can handle challenges, significant personal growth could be involved.

## Breaking Up

*Steph and Dan had been dating for a year and returned as leadership staff. During the first week of camp, they broke up, and it was messy. In addition to a public argument in front of campers and other staff, there was fallout as other staff members felt like they had to pick a side, causing many fractures among the team.*

**Gabe Valencia**, executive director of Mile High Pines (Angelus Oaks, California): When a breakup comes and people have to choose sides in the middle of summer, it's a distraction. During training, we tell staff, "Each of you stated that the reason you want to work at camp is to get closer to God and serve others, so we advise that you avoid creating cliques or relationships that can take away from what you're here to do."

**Tiffany Staman**, executive director of Calvin Crest (Oakhurst, California): We have lived through this multiple times in the past year with year-round and summer staff. On one occasion, we did not offer a summer staff position to either person in the relationship due to the division it would cause on staff. In another situation, one year-round staff member decided it was too painful to remain working at camp with the other person, and we helped relocate him to another nearby camp. In a third, more complicated situation, we had to implement an HR process because harassment was involved.

In all three situations, we explained to year-round staff as much as was appropriate and tried to protect all parties involved. Camp is a beautiful place for Christ-centered relationships to develop and grow, and it is risky for the culture and employee retention when the relationships don't work out; however, it is a risk we have chosen to take. We have had hundreds (if not thousands) of marriages formed over our 70-year history.

**Dave Marks:** The following steps can help the staff move forward after this situation:

- Address the issues promptly and effectively.
- Implement conflict resolution strategies and offer counseling services when needed.
- After the incident, focus on restoring team unity through activities that encourage open communication, trust-building and mediation.
- Determine a proactive approach to help prevent personal issues from disrupting the workplace in the future. ►

“Every position is important;  
leadership is serving, and all  
of us are in this together.”  
—Tiffany Staman



Photo courtesy of Camp Lebanon



Photo courtesy of Cho-Yeh

### Leading Peers

*John returned to work as a summer staff member for a second year and was promoted to leadership. His friends who worked with him the previous summer have difficulty respecting John's new role. Sometimes they feel jealous, overlooked or don't want to listen to him. John feels awkward and struggles to transition to leading his peers.*

**Cary Hendricks:** So much of leading in a camp setting is about self-confidence. It would be important, from the beginning, to put John in positions in which he publicly assumes a leadership role (speaking, leading training sessions, etc.) so staff begin to see him as a leader from the start. I would work with John on how he could individually approach each of the friends he is leading to discuss how their behavior undermines his leadership and weakens the effectiveness of camp as a whole. He would need to approach these meetings with humility, practicing active listening and being willing to lead in a way that serves his peers.

**Dave Marks:** I'd offer John the following advice:

- Have an honest conversation with your friends, expressing that you value their friendship and appreciate their support in your new role.
- Establish a new dynamic that balances the previous camaraderie with your newfound authority.
- Navigate the change with empathy and assertiveness, acknowledging your friends' feelings and providing reassurance about their value on the team.
- Set clear expectations and boundaries to assert your role as a leader.

### New Director, Less Experience

*Brian joined the camp as the new director but had less Christian camp experience than most of the summer and year-round staff. As he tried implementing new ideas and changes to the way things have "always been done," he was met with resistance from the staff. Eventually, the staff developed a bit of an "us versus them" attitude, making Brian feel like an outsider on his own team and questioning his ability to lead the camp despite having the board's confidence.*

**Tiffany Staman:** When I came to Calvin Crest, I had 25 years of pastoral and nonprofit leadership experience outside Christian camping. I came into a staff where people had decades of camp experience. For most of my first year, I attempted few, if any, changes so I could build relationships with staff and understand how things had always been done. I felt it was critical to develop the trust and respect of my leadership team before implementing any changes.

When the time came to try new things or take risks, the team understood the reason for the changes and was willing to try them with me. For me, trust is the foundation of any team. It is critical to a team's willingness to engage in healthy conflict, commitment, accountability and attention to results (see Patrick Lencioni's book *5 Dysfunctions of a Team*).

**Dave Marks:** By taking the following steps, Brian can work toward creating a more cohesive and supportive team environment:

1. Brian should recognize and value the staff's experience. He can involve them in decision-making, showing their input is important.
2. He should clearly communicate his vision and why he wants to implement the changes. When people understand the "why," they are more likely to support the "what."
3. Since Brian has the board's confidence, he can use their support to reinforce his position and the changes he's making.
4. Brian might benefit from leadership training or mentorship, especially in areas where he feels less experienced. ▶

“Navigate the change with empathy and assertiveness.”  
—Dave Marks

### The Boss' Kid

*After a few summers on staff, Becca oversees the water-front team this year, including the camp directors' son, Kurt. A few times, she's had to correct Kurt on standard operating procedures, but he rebuffs her instructions since he grew up at camp and says he "knows the drill." Becca is nervous about going to Kurt's parents to ask for help because she feels like she should be able to handle the situation and wonders if she'll be met with support or resistance from them.*

**Cary Hendricks:** While Becca is understandably nervous about going to Kurt's parents for help, it would be important for her to do so if the situation doesn't change. It would be best for Becca and another leader to meet with Kurt first to discuss his behavior. If this approach doesn't lead to change, Becca and the other leader should meet with Kurt's parents, to inform them of his behavior and ask for assistance or get their insights on how Becca and other leadership can redirect Kurt. In the end, he may end up needing to be reassigned to a different role.

**Tiffany Staman:** One of the beautiful aspects of camp ministry is the ability to work with family. However, it requires frank conversations within the leadership and board and a commitment to treat family members as you would any other staff member.

Our adult daughter works at camp, and we have always ensured she has a manager besides one of her parents. We also encourage her manager to treat her like any other staff member and not grant her special privileges for being our daughter. Interestingly, our staff have talked to us about having higher expectations or being harder on our daughter than other staff, which is another extreme to be aware of.

### Dave Marks:

1. Becca should have a private, respectful conversation with Kurt. She might say, "I understand you know the camp well, but these procedures are in place to ensure everyone's safety and smooth operations."
2. If Kurt continues disregarding the procedures, Becca should document specific instances where he didn't follow the rules. This will provide concrete examples if she needs to escalate the issue.
3. Becca could discuss the situation with trusted colleagues for their perspectives and advice. They might offer valuable insights or strategies for handling Kurt.
4. If the situation doesn't improve, Becca should approach Kurt's parents. She can frame the conversation around ensuring Kurt's success and the overall safety of the camp. For example, "I want to ensure Kurt is set up for success and that our team operates safely. I've noticed a few instances where he hasn't followed the procedures, and I think we could work together to address this." ▶

“We have had hundreds (if not thousands) of marriages formed over our 70-year history.”  
—Tiffany Staman



Photo courtesy of Camp Lebanon



“We didn’t start with a decision to include family or not — we couldn’t do it without family.”  
—Gabe Valencia



Photo courtesy of Word of Life Fellowship

## All in the Family

*The Smith family has been part of the camp for generations. Currently, their family members hold various staff positions across nearly every department. Maintaining healthy boundaries can sometimes be a challenge, and other staff members sometimes feel like they're on the outside.*

**Gabe Valencia:** When I got to camp 26 years ago, I was the only full-time person on staff. It made sense to include family members, whatever their skill level. We didn't start with a decision to include family or not — we couldn't do it without family.

Having family as part of the staff is a value and perk of serving in ministry. Can you imagine going to the mission field and telling your spouse and kids, "This is my mission; you need to find something else"? If we see camp not as an organization first but as a ministry that is your mission field, then working with family at camp should follow the same healthy guidelines as people on the mission field.

### Dave Marks:

- Establish clear, impartial conflict resolution protocols to ensure all voices are heard and valued equally, mitigating the risk of familial disputes impacting the wider team dynamics.
- Embrace the Smith family's legacy while setting firm boundaries for decision-making and program management to help create a balanced environment where tradition and innovation coexist.
- Explore scenarios where non-family staff might feel marginalized and proactively develop strategies to integrate their perspectives so the camp can evolve into a more cohesive community.

## BFF

*Angel, Sara and Mere joined the summer staff together after being recruited at their college camp fair last fall. Their close friendship has made it hard for others to feel welcome when the three of them are working together. Others also feel like they're outside of personal jokes and shared experiences.*

**Tiffany Staman:** During orientation week, we work hard to encourage close friends or those in dating relationships to step outside their comfort zones and get to know others. We try to put incoming friends on different teams or in different staff housing so they are exposed to others and create what Henri Nouwen calls "a friendly, empty space where the stranger can enter and become a friend." We can only show gracious, radical hospitality to our guests if we first practice it on staff with our fellow team members.

### Dave Marks:

- Acknowledge the strong bond between Angel, Sara and Mere. This can set a positive tone for the conversation. It's important to communicate that while their friendship is valuable, the team's unity is paramount.
- Share specific examples of behaviors that may lead to feelings of exclusion, such as personal jokes or consistent pairing in group activities, which can help them understand the impact of their actions.
- Encourage them to rotate partners and include others in conversations to promote a more inclusive atmosphere.
- Invite them to take on mentorship roles and help integrate newer staff members, ensuring that everyone feels valued and included. ■



*Cary Hendricks is the executive director of Laity Lodge Camping Programs with the H.E. Butt Foundation (Leakey, Texas). He has worked for 25 years in both the church and parachurch ministry settings. Hendricks holds an M.A. in theology from Fuller Theological Seminary and is working toward a D.Min. at the same institution.*



*Tiffany Staman is the executive director of Calvin Crest Conferences (Oakhurst, California). She is working on her doctorate in spiritual formation and loves applying what she learns to camp ministry. She enjoys hanging out with her husband, adult children and two dogs, camping, boating and reading in her free time.*



*Gabe Valencia is the CEO of the multi-site camp Mile High Ministries (Angelus Oaks, California) and serves as the board chair for CCCA. Over the past two decades, he has served on the board of several nonprofit organizations, including the California Collaboration for Youth and has actively engaged with advocacy for Christian camps and youth organizations.*



*Dave Marks is the vice president and senior consultant at The Center Consulting Group. He has over 35 years of church ministry experience, including 23 years as a senior pastor. His consulting experience includes ministry assessment, leadership coaching and strategic planning. Dave's degrees include a M.S. in organizational leadership and a D.Min. in leadership.*