

Camp Counseling Magic™

Making ordinary moments, extraordinary

By Jeffrey Leiken, MA
© Likone Corp. 2003

Greg was a first time camp counselor. He went to college in the Midwest and could teach tennis. There was nothing remarkable about him on the surface. He was a nice guy, got along well with his peers and did what he was asked to do. When the campers arrived though something transpired. Campers from all ages came to congregate around him. Even some of the toughest campers in camp liked him. At his mid-summer evaluation the Head Counselor dared to ask him this question: "What is your secret? What are you doing that all these kids are drawn to you?"

Greg's answer was simple, yet poignant:

"I consistently do the little things that matter, and I do them when others don't."

• • •

This past winter I facilitated a two-day winter retreat for 20 camp counselors from a Northeast summer camp. The intention was to engage them in activity and dialogue which would gather ideas, suggestions and insights on how to improve their camp. The secondary goal was to get this core group working together as a team to bring a heightened spirit of seriousness and commitment to the staff.

One of the activities I asked of them was to imagine and describe their "ideal camp", specifically what it would look, sound and feel like. Then I asked them to think of a time in their history at camp when it was most like this ideal, and what the factors were that made it so. This led to a rich and vivid sharing of stories, mostly of what they called "peak moments". Most of the stories happened around big events or at the final campfire – the moments where sworn enemies came together, where a homesick nightmarish camper wouldn't let go of his counselor when his parents arrived, of a "loser" camper who grew up to become a Director.

These stories are a significant part of camp folklore and mythology. Many camping professionals went into this field because of a moment like this. These defining moments are a significant part of what we teach our counselors to expect. The special event days in particular at many camps have build up of importance and expectation that begins before the campers even arrive. Often when a counselor struggles in week five we tell them "Wait until the busses leave and the kids cry and don't want to say good-bye. Then you'll understand what an impact you made."

The implication of all this is that it is okay to wait while the tension and drama builds, then wait for the extraordinary moments to occur.

There is a whole different approach that many of the most successful effective camp counselors take though. They don't wait. They make every moment important, and they act on it. Greg for example made it a point to go up to three random campers each night at flag lowering ceremony and privately give them accolades for something he liked or admired about them. No one knew he did this and over the course of 54 days of camp, over 150 campers received unsolicited attention and praise from this young man. Some of those compliments he gave were the defining moments for these campers.

Imagine for a moment a camp where EVERY counselor followed this practice.

Consider what happened when the people in the following examples decided to make this commitment.

Benchmarks

Last year one camp director I worked with wanted to dramatically increase the attention and priority her staff put on doing the little things that mattered most to the campers. Rather than emphasize this during orientation only to have it fade into the hustle of daily camp life, she held it out as the most important thing for her staff to have their attention on. Each week she began staff meetings by requiring every counselor to share a story about how they had done something to positively impact a camper's life –

calling these “benchmark” moments. The more subtle and unexpected and above and beyond the counselor had to go to do it, the higher the bar was raised. The result was magnificent. She had her closest knit staff ever and the least amount of discipline issues amongst campers. In addition she had virtually no parent complaints – a benchmark most camp professionals would dream to achieve.

Peaceful bedtimes

At night, after lights out coverage is a challenge at many camps. The effort to allow staff time off often means leaving one counselor to cover several cabins at night. No surprise that so many problems arise between campers at night when there is the least coverage. One camp decided to change their policy and require one counselor to be on duty and IN the bunk with their campers until they were asleep. They compensated by making a later curfew for those on time off. During orientation we spent an entire session on how to do bed times quietly and orderly. The staff were taught how to lead discussions, tell stories and create positive bed time rituals. One counselor started a ritual that spread to his whole unit. Before turning the lights out, he would get every one quiet. Then he’d go around and give each person 30 seconds to talk about the highlight of their day. This was followed by each camper getting 30 more seconds to either thank someone or share something they had learned that day. The campers loved it so much that they came to look forward to their bedtimes! More impressive than that, so did the counselors!

Current events

Another part of the mythology of camping is how “cut off” we are from the rest of the world. One camp counselor last summer was deeply moved and inspired by the story of the coal miners in West Virginia who survived waist deep in near freezing water for three days until they were rescued. In particular he was compelled by the way they tied themselves together and took turns being on the inside of the huddle to keep each other warm. He learned of how they took turns writing notes to their loved ones and sealed them in a waterproof container, not knowing if they would be alive to see them delivered.

This counselor made that story of the coal miners and their courage into his bedtime story that night, only with a twist. He emphasized how these men survived by relying on one another and working as a team. He then asked each camper to take a minute and write a positive, personal note to each other camper in the bunk. He would collect them and distribute them in three days time, much the same as these miners did when they were rescued. This tough group of eleven year old boys quietly scribbled away notes to one another for nearly an hour. When they finally received the notes written to them the whole mood shifted in the bunk and they became one of the most unified in camp.

The unordinary day

A camp counselor decided to take her own initiative to get past the mid-summer slump in week 5. She spontaneously woke her campers one morning to the announcement that “today is Unordinary Day”. Her 13 year old campers looked puzzled. She explained that every thing they did that day would be unconventional, unordinary. They began by dressing up for breakfast. Then they went and made other cabin’s beds. They enthusiastically participated in all activities! As the day progressed they become more and more unordinary. The campers decided the most unordinary thing of all that they could do was to be on time and quiet for announcements. They took it upon themselves to get the whole camp on time and quiet. There was such a sense of solidarity and unity amongst the camp that day as the director walked out to the evening line up and was greeted with total silence and attendance. This counselor had a ball as her campers – and all those around her – broke out of the midsummer slump and made an ordinary day, into an extraordinarily unordinary day to remember.

• • •

What each of these examples – and the literally hundreds more I’ve collected over the years – have in common is that the person who started it, acted intentionally. These counselors decided that they would take action now, rather than wait until some special day. Those who do it consistently make summers happen that are magical for those around them. They have summers filled with the kind of moments that others hope for. And they raise the mark of expectation of what is possible when we realize that with the right intention and right action, any moment can be extraordinary. What better time and place to begin exploring what’s possible in this domain then right now at your camp this summer. ©Likone Corp 20