Leadership and Cultural Changes at Camp Whittier

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Abstract

Camp Whittier, owned and operated by the United Boys and Girls Clubs of Santa Barbara County, has faced instability over the past five years. Starting with a fire that burned portions of the camp, the leadership has regularly transitioned five times since the fire. Projects have been derailed, and morale has wavered with each leadership transition. The camp operates as an income source for the United Boys and Girls Clubs, both as a rental camp and location of an "Outdoor School" catering to the local 6th-grade population. With an almost revolving door of camp directors and leadership styles, there have been disruptions and misgivings concerning the budget and workers' efficiency from the CEO and Board of Directors.

This paper will focus on the two most recent directors from the perspective of the Assistant Director who has served under both directors. All attempts will be made to remain unbiased and objective in analyzing and discussing leadership styles and the results from those style changes. Each director has their strengths and weaknesses, creating very different working environments for the employees under them.

The United Boys and Girls Clubs (U.B.G.C.) of Santa Barbara County operates seven sites in southern and central coastal Santa Barbara County. Through these sites, they served 2,963 youth (United Boys and Girls Clubs [UBGC], 2022) while only charging $40 for a yearly membership to the club. The organization relies heavily on donations and community support, supplemented by the operation of Camp Whittier, which runs an "Outdoor School" and is rented by third-party organizations and groups.

Since the fire of 2017 that burned a portion of the camp and over 18 thousand acres (Whittier fire 2022), the camp has had inconsistent leadership as there have been five different camp directors. Since the summer of 2022, the director who was running camp at the time of the fire has returned, replacing the previous director. They have returned to a different mode of operation and expectations placed by the U.B.G.C. CEO and Board of Directors.

Each director brings their leadership style and organization to the camp. While a comprehensive overview of all the directors over the past five years would be beneficial, only the most recent and previous directors can be analyzed and their impact on staff and operations of the camp. The two directors under analysis implemented two very different types of organization: vertical and horizontal, and while both were able to achieve their goals, the staff's experience was very different (Hurd et al., 2008), influencing morale and retention.

The two directors will be labeled A and B for this case study. Director A was the outgoing director who served during the pandemic until June 2022. Director B is the returning director, who initially left shortly after the fire and has since returned to their position leading the camp.

Director A: Background

Director A took the lead of Camp Whittier in the early days of the pandemic before the closures and reorganization of society were necessary to meet the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Installed initially as an interim director while operating as the operations director for all seven club sites within the organization, they eventually became the full director at camp. Before becoming the operations and camp director, they were the director of a challenging and troubled club. During their time at camp, they predominantly brought in school groups to participate in the "Outdoor School" program.

Director B: Background

Director B has extensive camp and relevant outdoor education experience and experience managing other outdoor recreation-type locations. Originally a director of Camp Whittier from 2014 through 2017, and left shortly after a significant wildfire destroyed parts of the camp and the surrounding areas. They managed two locations in the local area before returning to Whittier, a ranch resort and a State Park Recreation location. Previously when they were director of Camp Whittier, they were co-directing with their spouse, running mostly rentals and weekend groups at camp.

Director A: Leadership and Organizational Style

During their time at Camp Whittier, they operated in a "vertical coordination" system of control (Hurd et al. 2008, p 118). Power and management from the top down and the camp were organized with the same intention and standard operating procedures employed in the club setting (Bolman & Deal, 2021. Pg 59-60). Using the online training modules provided by BGCA.net in running clubs, these methods of running and organizing activities were expected of the staff at camp.

Staff at camp encompass more than just those who work with youth; there are maintenance and food service staff and specialty staff to run programming unique to the facilities at the camp: lifeguards, challenge course professionals, and others necessary to facilitate the programs at camp. All individuals were expected to completely grasp the interworking required policies and procedures to run a Boys and Girls Club and apply them to camp operations.

Director B: Leadership and Organizational Style

Formerly Camp Whittier serviced mainly weekend rental groups, with occasional groups that came during the week to use the facilities; there was never a standing group of individuals to run both facilities and programming elements, a significant change to the present-day operation of the camp. With the return of Director B, several former staff returned, and the team that worked under their leadership recommitted themselves to working for the camp. Returning staff cited open and transparent conversations concerning expectations and general management style for their recommitment to camp.

Upon returning to the position of Director, an inventory of staff and facilities was made and assessed as to who or what needed more resources to produce success. The result was a "lateral coordination" (Bolman & Deal, 2001, pg. 61-63.) that looked at how camp could stitch individuals as resources together but also look to individuals to share their expertise to accomplish the goal.

The Maintenance Worker Who Could:

The differing styles of management and organization can be summarized in the individual who performs all the maintenance and physical improvements at camp. This individual is middle-late aged, speaks very little English, and they have worked various jobs that place them perfectly as a camp maintenance worker.

Director A communicated fluently with them in their native language, explaining the tasks and jobs that were expected of them. When the worker was sent to accomplish their tasks, they were never given a list or adequate time to achieve the goals set in front of them. Projects were often abandoned as the director would send them to work on other tasks or reengage with previous projects. The result was a series of projects that were half completed or not completed with a high quality of work due to interference from the director.

Director B cannot communicate in the native language with the maintenance worker but has a strong working relationship with them, and bilingual staff facilitates communication. During the initial inventory of the camp, the director, with the aid of staff, created a list of projects and renovations that needed to occur on-site. Many projects and repairs had existed over the previous director's term. The list was shared and explained, and in under a month, the maintenance worker returned to the office looking for more tasks to complete. The completed tasks were accomplished with a high level of quality and a drive that was not seen in the employee before. The process was repeated, but the list was created in a camp walk-through with the director, assistant director (bilingual), and maintenance worker; this list was a more comprehensive look at the issues and repairs at camp. The list was completed quickly and efficiently.

An additional change had been implemented between the two directors, and it is worth noting; the maintenance worker was given housing on-site at camp. They were commuting over an hour away from an unstable housing situation and now had a cabin on site that was theirs to stay in and secured with a year-long housing agreement. Director B had set “HARD goals,” as described by Murphy (2014 p.13), and an increased “Total Motivation” (McGregor & Doshi, 2015).

Analysis of employee management:

Every organization is unique, and the same can be said for camps, as they are made up of individuals who bring their own experiences and motivations to the workplace. The role of the manager or director is to get those employees together and to work as a team towards a common goal, and depending on the staffing motivations and goals, a leader needs to adapt and learn how to motivate their staff.

Director A took a regimented top-down approach to organize the camp, as Heifetz et al. described a hunker-down approach (2009, p.1). Staff was given limited autonomy or explanations for changes in rules or expectations as the Director believed they were protecting the team and the camp from problems or issues. Coming out of the Covid-19 pandemic, this reaction was relatively understandable for some of the rules and regulations, but solutions were created unilaterally instead of engaging the staff.

Unilateral decision-making was seen as necessary by the administration, but this caused a decreased collaboration with staff. The declining association affected not only productivity but also engagement. There was no joy, play, or purpose to work (McGregor & Doshi, 2015), resulting in staff burnout and a higher turnover rate, further destabilizing morale and the camp.

Director B came to what was billed as a “turn-key” camp that would take little to maintain operations, but the facilities were poorly maintained, and the staff was looking to leave for other opportunities. They could restructure the work environment by taking an inventory of the human capital and assessing the staff's needs.

The reality is that there were very few changes to any rules or guidelines enacted, but two significant changes were made. The first was that the expectations were explicitly stated, explained, and discussed, giving the staff a sense of ownership, control, and understanding of

what was needed from them. The second was that they were given the autonomy to do the work within the guidelines set out before them. The example of the maintenance worker exemplifies how the two directors lead their staff and the culture they created for the individuals working at the camp.

Conclusion

Two directors with differing perspectives on organizing and managing their staff had similar results but very different experiences for their teams. The director, who explained expectations and engaged their workforce, had a more productive and interconnected group of workers. They are the same individuals, but their effort and pride in their work have increased, and they have ownership of their jobs. Taking the time to adapt to the workforce and learn their strengths and personalities, what motivates them and brings them happiness in their career, is a powerful tool for a manager.

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