

HOW SKY RANCH UNITES
AND SUSTAINS STAFF
DURING SLOWER SEASONS

by Deborah Christensen

ONESKY

When many people think of camp, they envision summer camp. Happy memories of campfires, cabin competitions, the dining hall, swimming and horseback riding and committing their lives to Christ come to mind. From their perspective, camp only exists while they're there. Once they're back home it becomes a sweet memory. But as we know, camps and conference centers run all year long. The camp doesn't fade away at the end of summer; it just transitions into another season. Things slow down, staff size shrinks as summer staff leaves, but ministry continues and is just as important. ►

Photo courtesy of Sky Ranch



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Linda Paulk, president and CEO of Sky Ranch (Van, Texas), knows how to keep her staff passionate and committed for the ministry all year long. The mission of Sky Ranch is "Leading Youth and Families to Know and Follow Christ." It's as important during the busy summer season as it is during the rest of year, when things quiet down.

Sky Ranch operates four locations in Texas, two in Colorado and one in Oklahoma. Besides summer camp, they host school programs, retreats and conferences, parent-child weekends, family weekends, SkyMom's ministry and rodeo clinics at the camp. During the summer, their staff of 387 expands to 750 with the addition of the summer seasonal staff. However, they need full-time staff for housekeeping, food service, programming, maintenance, retail, guest services, etc. all year long.

For some, their responsibilities may shift in the "off" season from what they did during summer camp. For example, the summer camp program directors begin to recruit for the next summer's staff a few weeks after the summer session ends. They continue to recruit through the rest of the year. At the camp's smaller locations, the staff wear several hats during the year and work in multiple areas.

So, how does Sky Ranch stay as committed during slower seasons as it is during the busy summer season?

Focus on the Mission and Vision

Sky Ranch developed its mission 61 years ago. Nine years ago, they modified it slightly, but it's basically the same: Leading Youth and Families to Know and Follow Christ.

Linda Paulk said, "If a camp does

not have a vision and a mission, then your staff does not know why they do what they do."

A few years ago, Paulk asked God to "provide vision for the future." He clearly indicated that He had blessed Sky Ranch with excellent programs that effectively grow godly leaders. God also impressed on her that because of this, He wanted them to expand to allow more youth to go through their programs. However, all their locations were already at full capacity.

"God provided clarity on what the growth was to be. As the leadership team prayed about how long it would take to reach the goal, we agreed that it would take seven years. Seven years from when we launched the vision is 2020. Vision 2020 is a seven-year plan to go from serving 54,000 people to 77,000 people through the ministry programs of Sky Ranch, 'Leading Youth and Families to Know and Follow Christ,' while maintaining excellence in everything we do," Paulk said.

"Once we established the vision, we developed a communication launch plan and went through a series of planning sessions that involved board, leadership and all staff. The key was involving everyone in the organization so that each team member felt a part of the process. Everyone's thoughts mattered. We then held a commitment ceremony to nurture a unified effort."

Paulk believes that it's important for the staff to know their role in the mission and vision. "Your staff needs to know where the organization is going and how they can be a part of it."

Work Together as a Team

When Paulk accepted the call to come to Sky Ranch 10 years ago,

the organization was “operating in silos. There was not an understanding of who we are and why we do what we do.” Employees were interested in what was best for their specific area of focus as opposed to working together to further the mission of the organization.

“Quite simply, it was an effort to bring unity,” Paulk said.

They developed what they call the “OneSky” philosophy. “As we launched the effort,” Paulk said, “transformation occurred within the organization. Barriers were broken down and God brought unity.” The team doesn’t look at OneSky as a one-time event. Instead, “It is an everyday commitment to working together toward the common goal of carrying out the mission of Sky Ranch.”

The OneSky philosophy works because the vision of Sky Ranch is tied to the responsibilities each person performs. “As we are driven toward our purpose to serve families and youth so that they would know and follow Christ, we realize the need is greater than ourselves. We appreciate and understand that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. We need to be great as a whole, and not just the sum of the individuals,” said Paulk.

Through Vision 2020, they developed three pillars that have become part of the Sky Ranch operating principles: trust and communication, blend of business and ministry and becoming experts in excellence in all that we do. These operating pillars were used to launch Sky University. They produced four videos. Each video addresses one of the pillars, and then one lays out Vision 2020. Every member of the staff views these videos, and they use the videos as a training tool for new staff. ▶



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The videos reinforce the OneSky philosophy and help keep the staff focused on who Sky Ranch is and why they do what they do.

Unity breaks down when staff members don't value each other. It grows when everyone sees the value of the others on the team and works together. "When you involve everyone, they feel valued, they want to be a part of working together to achieve the mission, and God moves in mighty ways," said Paulk.

Keep the Lines of Communication Open

Sky Ranch emphasizes communication to keep everyone informed. They create an annual communication calendar. The calendar details items that will be communicated daily, weekly, monthly and yearly and what form the communication will take. They email a weekly Sky update to the entire staff. It tells everyone what's going on in the organization, introduces new hires, provides employee recognition, shares the schedule of each location for the week and who will be there, offers a prayer calendar,

and gives general information.

Once a month, they hold an all-staff meeting, known as the Global Skycom. It's live at the Texas facility, and they Skype in the other locations. At this meeting, they engage in corporate worship and prayer, provide updates on Vision 2020, welcome new employees, recognize employees and celebrate milestones.

In January, they conduct an all-staff, all-day retreat. It enables them to give State-of-Sky updates and work together on updating the strategic plan. According to Paulk, they "reflect, rejoice and respond to what God has done throughout the year."

Communication is critical. Paulk said, "Love each other well, pray together and often and nurture an environment of communication. Communication involves everyone and keeps them motivated. Every person is valued and everyone is important to carry out our mission, whether they are cleaning a cabin, repairing a leak, recruiting summer staff, or providing financial reporting. We operate with transparency. This nurtures trust and communication, which, in turn, equals a strong, committed staff." ►

Photos courtesy of Sky Ranch



EXTRA INFO

THE OTHER NINE MONTHS

How Summer-Only Camps Can Use the Off-Season for Amazing Things

Back in 1966 Jim Welch had no idea that he would accidentally start a camp. What began as a way for a new church staff member to avoid bringing back a flailing VBS program turned into a competitive sports summer camp. That turned into two more camps and a few dozen cities running day camps across the U.S., along with summer camps in several countries around the world.

Today, Welch's Summer's Best Two Weeks camps draw in more than 4,000 students at their three U.S. locations each summer. While one of their camps is equipped to run year-round (and did so successfully for five years), Welch and his board made a conscious decision to only run summer camps rather than investing in the infrastructure and staff to run year-round retreats.

What Welch and his team do in the off-season serves as their marketing and staff recruiting efforts, and it seems that it pays off in huge ways. By the middle of October they're usually booked for the next summer, and by the end of December they have around 80 percent of their summer staff under contract (with the rest hired by the end of January).

Here are the ways the Summer's Best Two Weeks team spends their fall months:

1. Visit campers' families. Welch and his team go to the homes of campers where they catch up and

share a video that shows highlights of the previous summer. Families often invite neighbors to the showing, and this is where many of their new campers come from.

2. Visit churches. Welch's team pays a visit to pastors across the country, many of whom are former campers or counselors. Often times they'll be able to show the video and do a presentation about the camp to the entire church. They will also visit churches where campers' families attend.

3. Visit colleges. Welch and his team make a point to visit the college campuses where their counselors attend. They request that counselors set up meetings with friends who may be interested in joining the staff.

During the various visits, Welch and his team are housed by the families of campers, church leaders and in college dorms. Many times the only costs involved are transportation.

In the spring the camp does training for counselors and team leaders, along with hosting parents' weekends. While "camp" may not be taking place all year long, ministry certainly is.

—Jen Howver



SKY RANCH SUCCESSFULLY MAKES THE TRANSITION FROM SEASON TO SEASON BECAUSE OF PRAYER, CAREFUL PLANNING, COMMUNICATION AND UNITY IN THE STAFF.

Avoid Burnout

It's easy for full-time staff to get burned out if they feel like they're all alone or they never get a rest. Paulk used the familiar "Flying-V" formation of geese as an example. She described how the lead goose takes the brunt of the wind as it leads the flock. Eventually, the lead goose falls back in the formation and another one that is well rested, moves to the front to take the lead.

In her example, the former lead goose still contributes to moving the entire group along, except in a different capacity. "This position is always contributing but cannot be afraid to support [the team] during the seasons their program is not in execution. The support may look like anything from helping recruit for summer staff to serving during a booked-out retreat, but their time management is important in their 'off' season. This is more like a consecutive chain of sprints, a relay that allows each team member to be able to sprint for a time and be ready to take the brunt when it is time again," she said.

The monthly Skycoms also help

build up the staff. In addition to the other goals of these meetings (as previously stated), they worship, pray and celebrate. They also do other activities and events to bring the staff together, such as "Bagel Blessing Breakfasts."

They work hard at keeping the staff strong and invigorated. Paulk said, "This happens best when we have that OneSky attitude, a mutual respect for each other and a desire to see the organization as a whole be successful."



Sky Ranch successfully makes the transition from season to season because of prayer, careful planning, communication and unity in the staff. Paulk believes it's key in building a staff that stays strong for the long haul. ●



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Photo courtesy of Sky Ranch

