



CARING FOR STAFF IN A DIFFERENT WORLD

CCCA members share ideas to support staff



Photo courtesy of Camp Lebanon

While camps and conference centers are places for rest and respite for their guests — a place to focus on the important things: God, family, rest and recreation — the staff who serve there may not find the same rest and relaxation. The ministry work may be enjoyable, but it is still work. Knowing how hard it is to provide time off and meaningful breaks during busy seasons, how do camps and conference centers create space for their staff to feel cared for and have the opportunity for this same renewal? ►

That's an interesting question, according to Nate Parks, president and CEO of Berea (Hebron, New Hampshire), because the answer has drastically changed in the past three years. "Our models of staff care from pre-pandemic are gone," he explains. "There's no way your staff are the same as in 2019. They have changed." Accordingly, Parks believes that the care of staff must change. "Life has changed, and staff care needs to be redefined. Our staff are still experiencing grief, shock, anger, aggression and denial. How do we allow our staff to grieve?" he asks. "How do we help them walk through this?"

Answering that question will require camp leaders to rethink their leadership style. "People are looking for a different kind of leadership," Parks says. "It used to be directional and strategic — very forward moving — but now my staff are looking for the humanity in me." Staff need a connection to their leaders and the mission. Campfires, s'mores and teambuilding won't meet their needs in the post-pandemic world. "People need to feel like we are walking with them and care for them," he notes. "They need us to say, 'We're going to fight for you; you are important.'"

Fostering Relational Time

Many camps and conference centers have reassessed how they care for their staff. Paul Biles, director of Tejas Camp and Retreat (Giddings, Texas), notes that "pre-COVID, we would encourage departments to do fun things [like] taking day trips and volunteering together, but post-COVID, those things weren't working." In response, Tejas has changed its focus for staff care. "Our biggest goal is just relationship time," Biles says.

Their staff retreats now look more like a family vacation — cooking, playing games and engaging with each other in ways that aren't related to work. It's vital to Biles that their retreats happen on someone else's property rather than at Tejas. This allows staff to feel as though they can truly relax since they do not see tasks that need to be done.

In addition, Tejas pours into their staff by ministering to them directly. "We began to look at how to disciple our team and help them grow spiritually, as individuals and as a group," notes Biles. As a result, they decided to hold a staff chapel on Thursdays for all their staff, from leadership to maintenance, followed by lunch as a team. He says this is a step in "creating Sabbath time for our team." ►

Photo courtesy of Cascades Camp and Conference Center

Lead by Caring

9 lessons to consider for staff relations

■ by Nate Parks

Here are some lessons I've learned. These are ideas for leaders to consider when caring for staff:

- Adapt a leadership style that allows you to engage with people on a human level. See the person in front of you and recognize their needs.
- Regulate the way you react. Don't add more emotional energy to the situation.
- Reframe your perspective. Don't expect things from your staff that they can't give at this time.
- Manage your energy. Pace yourself with your staff. Slow down. We are in a marathon, not a sprint. Consider this when looking at new projects or programs, or groups to add to the organization's calendar.
- The definition of care has changed — we can't coddle, but we also can't be calloused. We need to be somewhere in the middle, and that middle ground is different for each staff member.
- Watch for red flags from your staff. When you see them lacking authentic interaction with others, or you don't feel like you are connecting with a person's soul, it's a sign they may not be in a good place and need some intentional care.
- Don't pull out schedules from 2019 and expect them to work now. Allow your staff time to process the changing world by creating space in the schedule.
- When there is any substantive change in the organization (i.e., a staff member leaving, new programming, change in "the way it's always been done"), allow longer time for preparation, discussion and processing for your staff.
- Empower your staff. At this point, every organization is an entrepreneurial endeavor. Your staff may have new ideas and better ways to do things.



Nate Parks is the President/CEO at Berea in New Hampshire. He is known for his creativity and unique perspective in seeking solutions for organizations. In addition to holding a master's degree in business and an undergrad in Bible, Nate is a national speaker and consultant, always challenging people to look beyond their personal or organizational boundaries for maximum impact.

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Photo courtesy of Camp Lebanon

Making Space for Sabbaths

Ed McDowell, CEO of Warm Beach Camp and Conference Center (Stanwood, Washington), shares that Warm Beach has been embracing a culture of care for 20 years, with need-based, paid time off and the opportunity for sabbaticals. They weren't used very often. "A lot of people in ministry will receive a gift and not use it," he says.

Warm Beach offers a sabbatical of up to six weeks every seven years to the leadership staff to ensure that each team member receives the rest and renewal they need. "It is offered as a gift with the expectation that it will be acted on," notes McDowell.

"We think we're irreplaceable or don't have enough staff in our organization, but that isn't true." Because of that belief, staff members still hesitate to take time off. "Everyone knows that self-care is important, but we tend to champion leaders that don't practice that and live above what is wise and good," he says. McDowell makes it a point to get his staff members to set the dates for their sabbaticals because that ensures a commitment to the time off.

"There are intentionally no requirements from the organization on how the sabbatical is spent," says McDowell. "Boards often make the mistake of wanting to script sabbatical time and have some form of productivity to go with it." He believes this takes away from the purpose of the sabbatical. "Sabbaticals are for rest, renewal, restoration and recreation," he explains. "These are all themes from the character of God and will produce fruit in your staff and organization."

Instead of the regular seven-year rotation, McDowell says, "coming off two years of COVID, we thought it would be a good idea to give all our leadership staff a sabbatical this year." He believes that this helps continue the culture of care. "After you have leaned into [caring for] yourself, you understand how important it is for all of your staff."

Each member of the leadership team at Warm Beach is empowered to pass this blessing on to the staff in their department. "Our leadership team is given the discretion to give time off as necessary," says McDowell. Any staff member can request sabbaticals of up to six weeks in addition to their regular paid vacation and holidays. "Time is a hotter commodity than anything else right now. If we can put more time off into the back pocket of the leadership team to share, we are making it a better place to be a part of," he notes. ►



Photo courtesy of Word of Life Fellowship

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Providing Counselors

At Camp Cho-Yeh (Livingston, Texas), year-round staff have access to a licensed professional counselor. “We decided to offer this to our staff because we outgrew the capacity to handle it all,” says Garret Larsen, president and CEO. “Our staff come out to the middle of nowhere [with] less access to resources, and people struggle to find ways to care for their mental health. This allows our people to get the help they need.” The counselor maintains strict confidentiality, and Camp Cho-Yeh is billed for sessions with no names attached.

Summer staff can also take advantage of this resource. “It has allowed us to retain summer staff longer,” notes Larsen. The counselor does a session during staff training to give camp staff tools for self-care and discusses how to support campers’ mental needs. In addition, she is available throughout the summer if issues arise.

Camp Cho-Yeh has found that staff take advantage of this resource. “There is very little hesitation,” says Larsen. “Younger staff talk about it all the time. The stigma of mental health is gone for so many staff.”

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Staff care is not about checking something off a to-do list. Instead, it is about connecting with and genuinely caring for each staff member individually. “As a leader, now you have to go deeper with your staff,” says Parks. “It will take a lot longer and require more of you.”

It will take time and effort, and there is no magic answer that will work for every organization. “You have to find what works for the team you have,” notes Biles. “There is an ongoing refinement and acknowledgment that you will never get ‘there.’” There are several benefits to this investment. Possibly most importantly for the longevity of your ministry, “You have staff who love their job and look forward to coming to work and serving,” says Biles. This is something that Tejas’ campers and guests see and respond to.

Parks sums it up this way, “Staff care is the first step in camper [or guest] care.” ■



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