

IMPACT



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Cabin Leader Program Improves Youth Leadership Skills

The Situation

The University of Idaho along with the Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service sponsor a Natural Resources Workshop for youth (ages 12 to 14) and schoolteachers every June at the Central Idaho 4-H Camp just north of Ketchum. One of the goals of the camp is to develop leadership potential in the youth who return as cabin leaders. Campers apply to be future cabin leaders and are invited back to camp as cabin leaders because of their leadership potential. The problem was that no program was in place to train or evaluate these youth and their effectiveness as leaders. It was decided that a program needed to be developed to train and evaluate the cabin leaders on a yearly basis. This program needed to be developed by professionals who could work with youth and develop the appropriate curriculum materials, as well as create evaluative tools necessary to measure outcomes.

Our Response

Two Extension Educators with 4-H responsibility were selected from existing camp staff to take over the Cabin Leader training program. It was determined that with some training, these youth could not only be responsible for evening cabin supervision but also take a lead role in many camp activities. Previous training materials were revised and updated giving the youth a manual from which to work. The training materials included a mission statement, job descriptions for all staff, a chain of



command chart, Cabin Leader job description, rules of conduct, camp procedures, camper characteristics, and common problems encountered at camp with suggested solutions. The appendices included information on leadership skills, child abuse and neglect, emergency procedures, flag ceremonies, games, activities, skits, songs, and cabin leader application procedures.

The potential Cabin Leaders were brought together on two separate six-hour days for training and planning of camp activities. Previously these activities were planned and carried out by adult staff. We firmly believed that the youth could plan and deliver programs if given the opportunity.

The first year of the revised program, we invited 12 youth (6 girls and 6 boys) to participate. Eleven were

able to attend the 2002 Natural Resources Workshop. These youth ranged in age from 13 to 16 and their experience ranged from first time to third year cabin leaders. During the training, faculty worked with the youth on developing programming skills (i.e., ice breaker activities, songs, and games), group facilitation and teamwork skills, and listening and problem-solving skills. These active, hands-on sessions also included time for food, socializing, and team building. The staff and cabin leaders worked extensively on building a cohesive team that could work together smoothly during a high-energy week.

At camp, the Cabin Leaders helped the instructors during lab time, assisted during R&R sessions, and took major roles during morning and evening programs and other times when the campers were not scheduled with instructors.

Program Outcomes

The outcomes easiest to observe were from those cabin leaders who were back for a second or third year. Based on performance of the previous year these Cabin Leaders were more prepared to handle difficult situations and take more of a leadership role without being guided to do so. An evaluation questionnaire was developed that asked questions about 15 identified leadership traits. The Cabin Leaders were asked for each trait how often they used these skills before the workshop and how often they will use these skills after the workshop. Results show a statistically significant increase in the probability of the cabin leaders use of all 15 skills. The traits indicating the highest percentage change were “Dealing with difficult people” and “Experiential learning” (learning while doing). “Problem solving” and “Group dynamics” were other traits the Cabin Leaders indicated they would use after the workshop.

As a result of this training the Cabin Leaders are more prepared to take on their camp roles. The Leadership Development program helped the Cabin Leaders to be better prepared to handle the day-to-day situations within their individual cabin groups as well as make meaningful contributions to the camp program as a whole. Also, the adult faculty at camp

can interact better with the Cabin Leaders because each has a defined role and is knowledgeable of the others responsibility. Each year the 12 cabin leaders have the opportunity to make a difference in their 10 campers lives as well as the other campers that they make contact with.

For More Information

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