

Demand the Unexpected

If your summer was anything like mine, there were unexpected camper illnesses, behavioral problems that you categorized as "for the record books," and staff machinations that had you calling attorneys and consulting employment contracts.

And that's to be expected.

And it's what you signed up for.

And as difficult as it was, it was good for you.

Neurobiological, physical, and social research all point to the same conclusion: When humans mix up the inputs, they grow. And they grow faster with variety than when they receive a steady diet of monotonous inputs. If you read the same kinds of news, exercise the same way every day, and interact with people just like you, you'll stagnate. You won't learn more, become fitter, or boost your social skills.



So here we are, at the end another camp season, telling stories to our peers—both online and in person—about our summer trials and tribulations. The typical camp professional may be pulling for sympathy in these yarns. "Wow, it must have been awful to have so many kids fall ill" or "I can't believe you had a staff member do that" or "Gosh, I hope that never happens again" are all

expected responses. Except in some ways, we *do* want those challenges to recur. To be honest, we should demand the unexpected because it forces us to up our games.

I'm not wishing, in some sadistic way, that youth leaders should experience pain. Instead, I'm remind us all that new challenges accelerate our growth. Overcoming adversity develops resilience. Crises bring about change. Yes, you felt frustration, anxiety, anger, and sadness in response to some of your biggest, most unexpected difficulties this summer. But meaningful learning always involves emotion. As the

cognitive scientist Mary Helen Immordino-Yang reminds us, emotions are the rudder that steers are cognitive ship.

So rather than have others feel bad for our misfortunes this summer, we should remind them that it made us think in more sophisticated ways about our jobs. As important as sharing narratives about what pushed us or brought us to tears this summer is knowing that those same experiences vaulted us to a new level of professionalism. Get ready to ask, "What did that experience teach you?" instead of offering pity.

At one point this summer, our director came to the health center to find me. I was spelling the nurse from 10pm to midnight so she could get a little sleep in the midst of a viral outbreak that affected almost a third of our population. "You need to wake up the junior leaders," he told me, "and have them move out of their cabin. We've filled the health center and the alumni center and now we need a third building to house our sick kids." I spent the next 90 minutes helping 12 groggy CITs pack everything they brought to camp and vacate their living quarters. Everyone hated it. And it quickly made a good story, accompanied by the typical "we'll laugh about this later" comments. Of course, no one expressed gratitude that the experience pushed us to revise health center protocols, emergency action plans, and hygiene procedures. No one said that it brought us closer together as a community of leaders. And no one said how much they appreciated what they were learning.

We can say all that now, of course. (And indeed, our prescient director did say all that as early as the following week.) When we go through similarly vexing scenarios next summer, I hope we'll remember that it's all part of the camp package...one that forces us to quit or grow. So, how was *your* summer?



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