

Certain Certification

Quality training is important for summer staff and leaders alike

How well do I train myself before I attempt to train my team?

by James Rock

Three weeks into our summer, my phone rang. It was one of the bubbliest staff members I've had, but this time her voice was very direct.

"James, is John working up there?" she asked.

The quick question threw me a bit. "Yes."

"Is he a lifeguard?"

Several weeks earlier, when I had been in my typical pre-summer short-on-staff panic, John (not his real name) had called. Immediately, I had had a great feeling. He had been part of our

high school staff program. He was a goofy kid, but I liked him. He told me he wanted to be a camp lifeguard, and that he dreamed of working in our boating area.

The only catch: He wasn't certified. I told him that if he could find a way to get certified, his chances would be very good. Soon, my phone rang again. He had found a class. After a bit of paperwork and a promise that his certification card would soon follow, he was lined up to work that summer.

"Is he a lifeguard?" she asked again.

I felt my stomach wrench, but I cautiously told her that he was. And I didn't stop there. I told her how John was a great cabin buddy and how our young guests seemed to really like him. The young man had a wonderful ministry going, I said.

Then, she told me a story a lifeguard instructor friend had told her. It was about a guy who had done pretty well the first day of his class, but on the second morning, he was a no-show. When the instructor realized that he was not there, she called him at home, woke him up, and told him to hurry up and get to the pool, so that he could still complete the course.

I knew where this was going.

"The guy never showed up again," the former staff member told me. "That guy was John."

John, I realized, had been smart. He had used his time away from the pool to memorize the verbiage in his lifeguard manual. Our camp staff never



Rubberball

had a clue.

I can't remember a time in my ministry when I was angrier than at that moment. What if something had gone wrong? Could I imagine telling a mother that her 12-year-old daughter had drowned because our lifeguard was a fraud? We trained this guy to "put campers first." Yet he was willing to risk campers' lives so he could have his dream summer.

Later, I thought about it from a different perspective. I wondered how John had felt. Could I imagine waking up each morning, wondering if today was the day that things went bad, wondering if today would be the day my hoax would be exposed? Could I conceive of living like that?

Every spring, when the certification story comes to mind, it makes me think more about myself than my staff members for the upcoming summer. How well do I train myself before I attempt to train my team? Am I going through the motions and memorizing the verbiage, or am I doing the hard work, putting in the diligent effort it takes to be a leader of leaders?

This reminds me of what the apostle Paul advised his spiritual son, Timothy: "But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry" (2 Tim. 4:5).

I require my staff to read their Bibles, pray for camp, and put campers first. But if I do not push myself to do the same, what will the result be? My ministry effectiveness and my leadership will be jeopardized. As teachers, leaders, coaches, and mentors, we need to be sure that we keep our "certification" current, too.

Oh, and never wait for "Mom" to send in a lifeguard's certification card—she just might not have it. ■

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