

COMMUNICATING WITH FAMILIES IN CHALLENGING SITUATIONS

Laura Herrin, Director of High School Programs, SCA

Often in our roles as outdoor program managers we are put in the situation of having to communicate difficult information to families of participants. In order to be successful in these situations, it is important to understand your audience and to be fully prepared ahead of the communication when possible. As outdoor leaders in youth serving programs, staff have an obligation to not only protect the participants as much as possible, but also to inform and engage parents or other family members when managing situations. Understanding that parents are critical stakeholders in any outdoor program is one key to communication management when things do not go as planned in the field. It is equally important to understand the expectations of parents and family members.

Family members and outdoor program staff see the world of participants and children through very different lenses. To the parent, their child is their world and what happens to their child on a program, good or bad, is of paramount importance. This is exacerbated when the child is on a program that is residential in nature or the child is otherwise away from home for an extended period of time.

Situations or circumstances that are considered routine for experienced outdoor leaders are often not within the experience of parents and family members. This, coupled with either a real or perceived diminishment in communication, can result in heightened anxiety and/or a misunderstanding under the best of circumstances.

On the other hand, outdoor program managers are often supporting multiple programs with literally dozens to hundreds of participants. Although each participant and his or her experience are important to the program, staff members do not usually feel non-life-threatening issues at the same level or intensity as the family. We need to remind ourselves of this point often, especially when faced with a situation where things are not going as planned.

It is also important to understand that parents and families often employ emotional versus rational judgment when it comes to issues involving their children. No parent wants to believe that their child is having behavioral issues or mental health challenges or that their child may not be the right fit for the program. It is much easier to rationalize and to place blame elsewhere, most often with the program or program staff. This point may be even more acute when working with parents who live lives vic-

ariously through their children. These parents in addition to the above mentioned reactions may also feel a deep sense of anger and failure that may or may not relate to the actual circumstances program staff are managing.

Another challenge is that it is becoming far more common for communication between program and family is through email or phone rather than an in-person meeting, especially with larger programs. There are also circumstances (and in some programs this is the norm) where much communication is still face to face. When meeting in person it is important to watch for and utilize visual cues (for example facial expressions or body language changes). For program staff that does not have the opportunity for in-person communication, the telephone is preferable to email most of the time. Email has the distinct disadvantage of being completely one-sided and there is a good likelihood of misinterpretation (both content and intent). Email is, however, an invaluable tool for follow-ups, action steps and other information sharing. Email also provides a clear paper trail if needed.

When looking at communication regardless of the format, there are generally two types, anticipated and unanticipated.

Anticipated Communication

Anticipated communication occurs when it is initiated by the program or when it is very clear and obvious that a situation occurs where program staff will be speaking with family members. Anticipated communication is proactive and allows the program staff the most room for preparation and care should be taken to have all relevant information readily available for the call or meeting. It is very important for the program staff to take time before making initial contact to not only gather information and materials, but to mentally prepare for the conversation. This is especially important when the staff member anticipates an emotional meeting. When preparing for a proactive conversation, consider the following:

- Know what you are going to say. Make sure you know the facts of the situation and have incident reports, notes and all other relevant information readily available. Be familiar with this material. This is your opportunity for setting the stage and the tone.

- Be aware of the tone of your voice and how you pace the conversation. Remember that the person on the other end of the line (or across the desk) may be only able to absorb a limited amount of information in this first conversation. Check often to ensure that the other party is following you and is not overwhelmed. Be clear and concise in your conversation.
- Ask frequently for questions. This can help you ensure that the parent understands what you are explaining to them. Redirect the conversation if necessary so as not to let the call or meeting get away from you.
- If further communication is necessary, take the time to develop a clear plan. (For example if you are managing a missing person situation, create a plan to check in every 30 minutes with updates. Determine who will call whom.) If a plan is implemented, follow it without variation until it is mutually determined that it is no longer necessary - keep to the schedule even if there is nothing new to report.

Finally, always remember that you have had more time to understand and absorb the details of the situation. The parent on the other hand is often hearing information or the organization's version of the information for the first time. Patience and empathy are important qualities to foster.

Unanticipated Communication

Calls coming "in from the blue" are often very challenging for program staff. They occur without warning and can be very unsettling. Unanticipated communication with a parent may be the result of the parent receiving a letter or call from their child, a parent having no communication with their child when they expected to, or an emergency situation on their end, as well as many other reasons. There are several key considerations for successful management of unanticipated communication.

- Listen more than you talk. Try to get a sense of the issue at hand as well as the emotional state of the caller. Do not come across as defensive or dismissive.
- Remember that you have limited information. Do not make hasty judgments or decisions based on one call.
- Admit when you do not know the answer or if you do not have enough information to give an answer. This is very important and can in fact serve to enhance your credibility in a tense situation. Do not ever fake it; it will come back on you!
- Know when and how to end the conversation. Do not let things run rampant; when no new information is being

shared, then it is time to end the call. It is important for you to take control and explain that you need to end the conversation and why. Lay out clear and concise action steps so the parent does not feel dismissed or unheard.

- Show appreciation of their trust and their concerns. Articulate that you and the organization take their concerns seriously.
- Follow-up. Do what you say you are going to do. If you do not have the information you need to make a decision or give an answer, let the parent know this and give them an idea of when you will be back in touch. Do not leave them hanging without a plan.
- Document your conversation.

Always thank the parent for their call or visit and let them know that you appreciate their concerns and that you share them. Sometimes parents simply want to be heard. In other situations action is needed.

There will be times when we are delivering news that is very difficult for a parent or family member to receive. For example, a program manager may need to inform a parent that their child is missing from the program or has been hospitalized for an injury or has committed a crime while on the program. There is no one right way to deliver information or no way to know in advance how someone is going to react so it is necessary to be prepared to manage some intense emotions.

It is important to ensure that the parent understands the information they are being given. If they are unable to communicate coherently, ask if there is another person available who can serve as an intermediary. Deliver and confirm the information at their pace. It may be necessary to repeat the same information several times. Acknowledge immediate reactions, and realize that these reactions may change with time or more information. Allow time for initial shock. Depending on the situation information may need to be delivered over several calls. Be prepared to support emotional reactions and answer questions.

It is also very important to offer emotional support as appropriate and possible. As noted previously, parents are seeing the world and receiving information through a different lens. Being aware of that lens and respecting the emotions that go along with it will be a crucial element in the successful management of communication.

When speaking with a parent there is a definite possibility of anger getting in the way of productive communication. There are several "do's and don'ts" when attempting to diffuse anger!

Do

- Acknowledge the anger
- Identify the focus of the anger
- Legitimize the anger if it is appropriate
- Encourage the healthy expression of anger (in other words, do not allow yourself to be abused verbally or otherwise.)

Do not

- Dismiss the anger or the person
- Refute the focus of the anger
- Act defensively

Closure for Conversations

Closure and moving on is an important and oft overlooked aspect of managing challenging communication. Without formal closure, all parties are left with a feeling of loss and discomfort. It is preferable to be firm with closure rather than allowing situations to linger. In circumstances where closure is difficult or the parent is unwilling to allow matters to conclude there are several steps that may be helpful. First, identify the unresolved issues and determine the steps needed to resolve them. Be aware that there may be situations where agreement and consensus are not possible and it may be necessary to 'agree to disagree'. It may become necessary to send a letter that formally ends communication. In this case, directly address the areas of disagreement and acknowledge that continued communication is unlikely to change the situation. Do not simply ignore matters in the hope that they will go away. They will not go away and it is actually more likely that the situation will escalate.

Specific Issues to Consider:*Dismissal From Program*

Dismissing a child from a program is often very stressful for the program staff, the family and the child. Usually dismissal is the last step in an ongoing and progressive process and in most cases the family should be aware of the impending action. It is very important to work with families when getting ready to dismiss a participant in order to keep negative emotions at as low a level as possible. Programs should have clear expectations and defined policies and procedures in place that spell out different consequences. Having these policies relating to dismissal in place before a program begins and ensuring that families have read and signed off on the policies can go a long way towards de-escalation should a dismissal need to occur.

Program staff should also develop a plan for dismissal prior to communicating with the family. The plan should be concise and clear and leave no room for misunderstanding. If there are travel arrangements to be made, it should not be a point of negotiation regarding who makes the arrangements or the changes. If the family is

required to pick up the participant, a tight timeline needs to be established. It is important for program and field staff to ensure that all the participant's belongings and medications are returned to the family when the participant leaves the program.

Illness or Injury

Illness or injury may or may not mean that a participant needs to leave the program. When discussing illness or injury with a family member the program's staff should make sure to have complete and current information to share. The name of the hospital or clinic, attending physician and relevant phone numbers should be compiled prior to making the first call (attachment #1, a sample incident report form, has all the needed information). With minor illnesses or injuries where the participant will remain in the field, the call with families is primarily informational. There are usually no decisions that need to be made and often the participant can provide reassurance by talking directly with their parents.

In more serious circumstances, it may be necessary for the program and family to make decisions regarding continued communication, treatment, and a plan to transport the participant home. While the majority of the conversations from this point on will be between the family and medical personnel, it is important for the program staff to remain engaged and privy to as much information as is appropriate. Program managers should always follow up with the family post-incident. This is just good customer service as well as protecting the organization.

Family Emergency

There may be situations when a participant needs to leave the field temporarily or permanently due to a family emergency. It is crucial for staff to be sensitive to the needs of family members and to be as supportive as possible. This is also a time to be as flexible regarding policies and procedures for programs as long as the safety of the program is not compromised. (For example, it may be prudent to allow a participant to keep his or her cell phone on and on their person during a family emergency situation even though the program does not allow participants to have phones on the program.) Program managers should manage communication between the participant and family but in most circumstances should not be put in the position of delivering serious news to the participant. This should come directly from the family whenever possible.

Disclosure

Disclosure is not limited to abuse allegations. Participants may disclose a medical condition, eating disorder or mental health issue. These disclosures by a participant on program will bring up many difficult issues. Beyond the legal

obligation to report abuse or neglect to the appropriate social service agency there is the decision to be made regarding informing the family about the disclosure. There is no hard and fast rule for this. Determining factors will include the nature of the disclosure and the identification of the alleged offender in cases of abuse or neglect. For example if abuse is alleged against a parent, program staff may be advised by social services not to share information with the family. If the program staff feels in any way that informing the family of the disclosure will potentially cause harm to the participant, then it is advisable to let social services make the call. There will be some circumstances where the program manager will inform the parent or other family members that there has been a disclosure made. This is usually done with the participant's permission or at the participant's request. Program managers making this call should be sure to have the appropriate social service contact information available for the family.

Taking Care of Program Staff

It is very important for program staff to take time for self-care when managing emotional and stressful situations. In order to be effective as a program responder, staff (and their supervisors) must be aware of their own needs and possible triggers. Key considerations include having the time before a call (when possible) to mentally prepare for a difficult call or meeting. Staff members will know best what works for them. It may be as simple as closing the door for five minutes, taking a short walk or drawing strength from colleagues. There is no one right way to prepare; strategies will be different for different people. Colleagues and supervisors can and should be valuable support mechanisms both for the call and debriefing the call, so it is helpful to inform them ahead of time. Organizational policies and procedures can also assist in difficult conversations.

There may also be situations where due to fatigue, conflict or lack of particular expertise, it will be appropriate to excuse the staff member currently managing the communication and have another staff member step in. This should be done with sensitivity and no implied blame (sometimes even an executive director will need to be "pulled" to successfully manage a challenging relationship with an angry parent).

Conclusion

Working with youth is perhaps one of the most rewarding and satisfying aspects of outdoor programming. Children and youth are naturally taken with the outdoors and if provided a quality outdoor experience, will ultimately take away a life changing and life long appreciation of wild places that will contribute to the saving of those places. But the quality of the experience cannot be guaranteed just by what we do in the field, as we are returning these kids back to their homes and parents. Being a partner with those parents is essential for our success, and under the majority of circumstances this is an easy and likely result.

When things get challenging, understanding parental motivations and the lens through which they see their children; gathering information and being prepared ahead of time; having strategies to effectively manage their concerns and in some cases anger; understanding legal obligations surrounding disclosure; and taking steps for self-care will all contribute to the successful management of challenging communication. Hopefully, in achieving success in that communication, the experience for the participant, while not quite as expected, will still have great value.

Notes

ⁱ Dana, D. PhD. *Managing Differences*. Prarie Village, Kansas: MTI Publications