

A large wooden barn with a metal roof and a tall pole in the foreground, with children playing in the background.

BUILDING PROGRAM

How Maintenance and Program Teams Reach Campers Together



I had just been hired as a program director when a friend asked, “What’s the perfect presentation that would lead every camper to accept Jesus as Savior?” New to the job, I was ready to change the world. I couldn’t wait. Was it possible to say the perfect words or read the perfect verse to achieve camper comprehension? ►

Admittedly, I was naïve at the time, and I've since realized there is no perfect formula to share who Jesus is. But, I have thought about that conversation countless times over the past 28 years. What if there could be a perfect call? Could I find it?

Years ago, the former maintenance team who no longer works at that camp, had a style that didn't meld well with mine. I was eager to make changes, innovate and find new ways to use the facilities to enhance the programs we wanted to offer. The maintenance team was tied to tradition, making it challenging to do my job well. A few years later, I knew it was time to leave.

I pulled into Trout Lake Camp, defeated. Then on my second or third day, our maintenance director asked me to describe my favorite camp activity. I told him four-square volleyball, which was big at the time. Days later the volleyball setup appeared.

I remember telling him, "Look, Mark, I didn't ask for this. It's not approved." With a mischievous grin, he said, "I know." In a simple gesture, Mark showed me program had priority at Trout. Campers over campsites.

Working Together

That moment changed my life. Gradually over time, a different question became my new focus. Are maintenance and program teams working together? If they're not, are they unintentionally preventing campers from hearing the best possible message of who Jesus is? What if program and maintenance worked together to reach campers for Jesus?

In camping, we tend to tell our summer staff that it does not matter what department you work in, your efforts go toward the ministry. Bad dinners and unclean bathrooms undermine good ministry. Empty stomachs and distracted campers don't concentrate very well during chapel. Yet, I think we underestimate how important it is for our maintenance and program teams to join forces.

In so many camps, these two departments engage in consistent conflicts. I know of camps where this conflict is essentially the reason why their camp's ministry dies.

This isn't an easy collaborative pairing. The typical maintenance person is likely a measurer, driven by detail, based in history and someone who follows through. Program teams likely lean toward random ideas based on instinct, throwing concepts at whiteboards until one sticks. Follow-through can sometimes be a challenge. These are two opposite mindsets that do not blend easily. But these departments must work together to create amazing things for campers.

Creating a Varsity Program

From the moment I arrived, Trout was full, serving so many campers and adding hopefuls to waiting lists. It was time to expand. We started building big log cabins at our new site. Then we came up with the idea to make the new site specifically for junior high campers. That idea grew into a theme: "death-defying and social."

We would differentiate this new camp from our existing camp in every way possible. From structuring the week so campers ate with new people every meal to how three cabins would do all the activities together, we were obsessed with how to make the new camp different from the old. We especially leaned into activities like climbing up and jumping off high things, which, in our experience, junior high campers tend to enjoy.

Age-specific programming allowed us to adjust our program to the age groups present. This is not a slight variation of camp from age group to age group, but a focus on running an *almost indistinguishable* version of camp from one age group to the next. How can we help this group thrive in their age demographic's sweet spot? How are we addressing their needs?

This kind of approach has been around for a long time. CCCA members like SpringHill, Pine Cove, Mount Hermon and many other camps have implemented age-specific programming. A lot of on-site camps work diligently to change their programming week to week, designing a program specifically for each age group. What we created wasn't altogether new, but it was new to us and changed the way we provide camping experiences.

We aimed to give every camper a reason to come back to camp next year. Not only will they find new, engaging activities the following year, but they'll also have another chance to connect with what matters most: the gospel.

As we built those log cabins at Timber Ridge, I remember hearing a maintenance volunteer saying, "These cabins are way too nice for Trout. The cabin I had growing up was good enough for us." While I understood what he meant and agreed basic cabins had met lodging needs, I disagreed with his conclusion. We needed better. We needed to present a varsity program.

Eventually, Timber Ridge opened. Soon it doubled, then tripled the amount of junior high campers that we had in the summer. After we built a significantly updated dining hall, our tri-season numbers did the same. It was epic. ►

What if program and maintenance worked together to reach campers for Jesus?



Photo courtesy of Trout Lake Camps (2021)



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Collaborative Dreaming

Together our maintenance and program teams produced better results than in previous years. The experience was like dipping a toe into the lake of age-specific programming. Now, it was time for us to go a thousand miles out to sea.

We began asking, “What if we put first through third graders in the ‘middle of a story,’ like inside a Pixar movie? In a similar fashion to The Walt Disney Co.’s dinner with a princess, what if we replicated the immersive experience, but instead of just one meal, what if campers could spend the *entire week* with a princess?”

Could program and maintenance come together to build a world in which five cabin groups lived? Could we build treehouses, a castle, lighthouses, hobbit holes and a fort? Could each have a unique stage design so that every morning a Bible character could “reverse Narnia” to camp and tell stories live? It would be like bringing the Bible characters back to Whit’s End in *Adventures in Odyssey*.

Then we had the idea to build a treehouse that looks like it was built by 5-year-olds with a Lego set. Everything would be tilted, nothing cut square or built the same way twice — everything would look wrong, and it would be perfect!

I walked up to the volunteer builder, and said, “That’s too square. The trim on the windows needs to be cut to be crooked and crazy.” That likely goes against all the trade skills our maintenance team has acutely developed. I know that every time they cut boards “wrong” for that treehouse, the practice went against what they’d been taught. What our maintenance team did for program was not easy.

Sky’s the Limit

But what had changed? Did that maintenance volunteer no longer think our new cabins were too nice? No, instead he had learned there’s a payoff to the new facilities. More kids, more ministry. The maintenance crew bought in. Now the sky was the limit. With our whole team on the same page, we created a world worthy of Alice’s rabbit hole.

This is hard work. Just like having facilities wield “power,” having program leading the charge can be a huge challenge to facilities. Our building team has had to put up with many late or changed decisions, miscommunication, the works. Yet, Trout has an incredible maintenance team who is concerned about camper needs most, not their egos.

Based on the setting that maintenance built, our program department pushed themselves to break the mold again. They hired cabin leaders who fit inside the story as well — just like the Disney princess — acting as if they’ve lived at Wild Woods their whole life. They created a complete world for our campers to enjoy that’s unique to Trout.

Until we opened Wild Woods last summer, we had no idea if the concept would even work. The question became, “Could our programming team follow through with what our maintenance team had built?”

Can you imagine? Maintenance built something so creative, so amazing and over the top, that our programming staff was worried that they may not be able to hold up their end of the bargain. It was a huge risk, but one that paid off in significant ways.

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“What’s the perfect presentation that would lead every camper to accept Jesus as Savior?” It’s a good question to ponder, but I think it’s the wrong question to ask at the start of program planning. I don’t think that God works that way.

I know in our industry we are often results-oriented. We want to create meaningful, fun experiences. But, I don’t think results are the only thing God cares about. I think He also cares about how we serve those we walk alongside. The disciples were a mixed group — fishermen, a tax collector, tradesmen and a Zealot, each with their own quirks and personalities — and Jesus chose them to work together. I think a big part of God’s plan includes how we collaborate to honor and reflect who He is while building His kingdom. ■



James Rock is the director of Trout Lake Camps (Pine River, Minnesota). He has spent more than 20 years in Christian camping ministry and holds a master’s degree in Christian education. A father of two and husband of one, James moonlights as a speaker and author. Email him at jrock@troutcamps.org.