



Improving Staff Communication for Small Non-Profits

Girls' Empowerment Program Case Study

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Introduction

Girls' Empowerment Program¹ is a non-profit organization based in the northeast U.S. that serves at-risk girls in its community through a year-round mentoring program paired with a residential social summer camp. Since its creation, Girls' Empowerment has helped hundreds of young girls and teens navigate the struggles in their lives and empowered them to make positive choices. It has been a cornerstone in its community for over two decades, maintaining huge community support to this day.

Despite its undeniable strengths, issues with communication are a persistent challenge. Like many small organizations staffed by a few paid employees and many volunteers, identifying specific practices that lead to miscommunication or helpful informational pathways can be a challenge. This project elucidates some of those challenges and opportunities for Girls' Empowerment, but with the expectation that other small, mixed-staff organizations may benefit from these lessons learned.

To understand the challenges facing the programmatic staff, this project directly engaged those stakeholders. A total of sixteen staff members and volunteers were interviewed via Zoom or phone in July and August 2020, using a semi-structured interview guide. Interviewees include year-round/core staff, camp leaders (Girls' Empowerment Program's alternate terminology for "camp counselors"), and volunteer mentors.

Challenges and Recommendations Based on Staff Interview Findings

Challenge 1: Camp leaders cannot consistently communicate with one another

Several camp leaders brought up that they found it difficult to communicate with other each other. One leader reported that when they had the chance to speak to one another, leaders were "really good" at communicating what they needed to get across. However, leaders said they didn't always have the opportunity to disseminate important information to their coworkers which caused issues. Another leader pointed out that being unable to properly communicate with coworkers was one of the most

difficult parts of her camp experience: "If there's miscommunication between staff, it can be hard to, like, work throughout the program or be able to deal with certain situations." She pointed out challenging situations can be exacerbated "if [one leader] doesn't get one part of a situation and they move on to try to fix it [anyway]." Overall, miscommunication or a lack of communication was the most common challenge reported by leaders.

→ Recommendation: Hold shorter, more frequent staff meetings at camp

One solution to the reported communication difficulties would be to hold more frequent, shorter staff meetings. The current schedule includes gathering all camp staff about once a week at night, and provides time to discuss challenges with campers, receive operational updates, or discuss anything else that leaders feel is important. I would suggest holding short, daily meetings when demands on staff are lowest (e.g., during campers' quiet bunk time), including only team leaders who will then disseminate the information to their team. The meetings can be quite short, twenty minutes or less, allowing for important information to be communicated but leaving time for meeting attendees to take advantage of their relaxation time.

This structure has several advantages. First, instead of having to wait a week to speak to a large group of leaders, more frequent meetings would ensure that leaders are able to regularly communicate and address issues in a timely manner. Directorial staff would also have the chance to make any announcements to leaders that cannot be made in front of the campers without waiting for an evening meeting. Second, holding these meetings during quiet time instead of at night would allow leaders to communicate any important information to their co-leader after quiet time when everything is still fresh in their memory, instead of waiting until the following morning. More immediate transfer of information would improve how well leaders remember what was said and therefore ensure that all leaders are up to date. Finally, shorter and more frequent meetings would improve retention of information for leaders. Currently, staff meetings vary greatly in length, so putting a limit on the meeting time would ensure that leaders are not overwhelmed by information.

Challenge 2: Staff feel unprepared in emergency situations even after training

The level of emergency training has vastly improved at Girls' Empowerment Camp over the past few years. Several camp leaders commented that the more thorough training was extremely helpful. However, when it comes to camper-based emergency situations (e.g., girls threatening to self-harm, girls attempting to run away, girls physically fighting one another), leaders can still panic and feel unprepared when faced with high-intensity, new experiences. One leader commented that she "felt helpless, because I didn't know what to do" when a situation arose that they had discussed in training, but she had never experienced firsthand.

→ Recommendation: Utilize roleplaying more often in camp leader training

Leaders reported that they found roleplaying to be the most effective training method. One leader said that acting out situations "helped open up the mindset of what could happen" and allowed her to see different and novel ways to handle a situation. She also commented that roleplaying tended to come up naturally throughout training on other aspects of camp, but she would have liked if roleplaying were used more intentionally throughout. Since leaders still feel unprepared in emergency situations relating to campers, using more roleplaying during training for these situations could improve leader preparedness when faced with an emergency. A 2019 study on nursing students suggested that roleplaying through emergency situations improves clinical performance in those situations.² Therefore, relying more heavily on roleplay in camp training could improve leader response to real emergency situations by supplying a script for action.

Because roleplay was often used to help leaders learn strategies for resolving conflict between campers, helping comfort a distraught camper, and other everyday situations, its application for emergency situations is a natural extension. Staff trainers could use examples of emergencies that have happened in the past so the roleplay feels less abstract and gives leaders an idea of situations that could realistically arise.

Challenge 3: Mentors want more time to simply talk to one another

Since mentors are all volunteers, using their donated time wisely should be, and is, a priority for Girls' Empowerment Program. According to mentors, the best use of their time is simply talking to one another about their mentor-mentee relationships. Half of mentors interviewed reported that they would like more unstructured time at meetings during which they could freely discuss the struggles they have in their relationship and gain insight from other mentors. One mentor explained that "having mentors be able to talk about what's happening in their relationship with their girl or be able to exchange ideas" was the "most valuable part" of mentor meetings. Another mentor reports that while presentations and talks are certainly educational and important for mentors, she has always wanted more time for "sharing ideas and sharing problem solving" among mentors. Researchers Margaret Berg and David Rickles suggest that arranging a specific time for group mentor discussion can spark "engaging dialogue between mentors."³ In particular, they note that those "with less experience as mentors were able to probe and question the more experienced participants" in order to find solutions to common problems with mentees.

→ Recommendation: Facilitate multiple opportunities for mentors to communicate

There are several options for allowing more free discussion among mentors. One option would be to plan more time for discussion after regular meetings. However, mentors who live far from the meeting location or who work early in the morning may not be able to stay after the scheduled talks are over. If the community liaison project is realized,⁴ another option would be to schedule mentor discussion time during liaison meetings. However, this would limit potential mentor connections since the meetings would not consist of the whole mentor population. Lastly, setting up informal mentor meetings at a restaurant, café, or other informal venue specifically for them to have discussions together would be another option. This would allow mentors the maximum amount of time to spend on their discussions but may not be possible for particularly busy mentors.

If mentors already struggle to fit regular meetings into their schedules, another one may not be feasible. All three of these options have pros and cons, so sending out a short survey to mentors to see which idea they prefer may be the best way to decide.

Though mentors valued face-to-face interaction the most, creating a digital platform for mentors to communicate could facilitate mentor-to-mentor discussion as well. Mentors did not mention utilizing any existing forums like Facebook groups or listservs, so it may be beneficial for Girls' Empowerment Program to create a space for mentors to speak with one another via the internet. This would provide a more immediate response for mentors with questions for one another, though it would not be as personal as face-to-face conversation.

Challenge 4: New mentors do not always feel prepared for their role

All mentors reported that they did not receive any specific training that they could remember when they first became mentors. One recalled a meeting for new mentors where they were told about “the trajectory of being a mentor” but were not prepared for any specific situations they might encounter. Mentors also remember being given a binder full of resources, which one mentor believes is not an effective way to get information across: “it’s the rare person who’s going to actually say, ‘Okay, today I’m going to spend the day looking through this manual.’” She suggested that “a more formalized mentor training program” would be a better way to engage mentors before they first meet their mentee.

→ Recommendation: Provide more thorough in-person (or virtual) training for new mentors

To provide mentors with training that will properly address what they need to know in their first weeks and months as mentors, I would suggest holding standardized training programs, either virtual or in person, before new mentors begin their role. In these trainings, mentors could learn about common struggles that mentors face and strategies for communicating with their mentee, along with anything else Girls' Empowerment usually puts in their binders.

Since there is no set schedule for when new mentors begin, holding trainings whenever a new mentor decides to volunteer is not feasible. A solution to this problem may be to create a training video that has the most important information for mentors to know and then holding bi- or tri-monthly live trainings. While a binder can seem intimidating or boring to new mentors, a video may be more engaging, leading to more mentors watching the video than currently read the binder. Holding regular live trainings would allow mentors to have the opportunity to ask questions early on in their mentor experience, ensuring they are prepared.

Challenge 5: Mentors wonder if mentor-mentee matches are made thoughtfully

Several mentors brought up that they did not understand how matches between mentors and mentees are made. One mentor expressed that she never understood what the previous supervisor did and that she wanted more “transparency in the process” in the future. Another mentor expressed concern that matches were being made arbitrarily or based solely on location. Given that the program serves a rural region, location is undoubtedly a factor when matching mentor and mentee so that meeting is convenient for both parties. However, mentors emphasized the importance of creating matches “not just based on location, but based on personality [and] interests.”

→ Recommendation: Clearly explain to mentors how their mentee match is made

Whatever the matching process may be, Girls' Empowerment should explain to mentors when they are matched with a new mentee how the match was made and what criteria the volunteer coordinator considered when making the match. Increased transparency in the process could help alleviate any worries mentors may have about the matching process that could lead to girls not receiving the full benefits of the program. A simple explanation of the criteria for matching would help mentors feel more at ease with the choices being made and reaffirm their trust in Girls' Empowerment Program.

Challenge 6: Mentors do not always feel supported by the volunteer coordinator

While some mentors felt that the volunteer coordinator's efforts are effective for them, others wished that the volunteer coordinator would have more personal involvement with mentors and mentees. One mentor called the volunteer coordinator "very accessible," but another found that there was a "lack of communication" with the volunteer coordinator. One mentor said that she didn't feel the volunteer coordinator knew much about how mentor and mentee relationships were going: "maybe a volunteer coordinator who did the job really well could spend a little bit more time talking to each mentor about really what's going on in that relationship and how it could be improved." One even said, "say I was someone that really wasn't hanging out with [my mentee], I don't think the Girls' Empowerment Program would even find out."

Overall, mentors wanted the volunteer coordinator to be more of a supportive figure for when problems arise with their mentee. They wanted someone who would "establish herself...as somebody who's really there to support the relationship...like, is cheering you on." In particular, one mentor wanted the volunteer coordinator to focus on "problem solving" when "there's some kind of a snag in the relationship" between a mentor and a mentee.

→ Recommendation: Expand the volunteer coordinator's involvement in each individual mentor/mentee relationship

Before a new volunteer coordinator is hired, it may benefit mentors if the prospective job description emphasizes getting to know each mentor and mentee and trying to get a sense of their relationship. With a more personal connection to the volunteer coordinator, mentors may feel more supported. As well, having the volunteer coordinator reach out to mentors instead of waiting to hear questions from them could improve the level of support for mentors. Frequent communication would also send the message that the volunteer coordinator is invested in each relationship and available to help.

Challenge 7: Mentors struggle to navigate their relationship with their mentee's family

Three out of four mentors mentioned issues revolving around communication with the family members of their mentee. They explained that "it's just hard to coordinate schedules" with parents or guardians and it can be even harder to maintain a good relationship with them. One mentor said that "the mentor's relationship with the parent or the guardian is absolutely crucial" because it's extremely difficult to "have the relationship be zeroed in completely on one member of the family without being aware really of the whole family unit."

→ Recommendation: Hold trainings on how to communicate with the mentee's family

Since this is a common issue, having presentations, panels, or workshops about how to navigate the parent-mentor relationship may be beneficial for mentors. Mentors said that Girls' Empowerment Program doesn't explain to mentors how important the relationship with their mentee's family is, but many found that it is extremely important to foster a connection with families early in the mentoring relationship. Once a connection is established with the adults in a mentee's family, mentors can more easily organize and strengthen their relationship with the mentee. Additionally, the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention found that strong relationships between parent and mentor were related to children who "performed better academically (higher grades) and developed more negative attitudes toward substance use and risky behaviors."⁵ Therefore, Girls' Empowerment Program should help mentors foster a relationship with the family to ensure that Girls' Empowerment girls receive the full benefits from the mentor-mentee relationship.

The execution of this kind of training would be difficult since the reaction of each family to their child's involvement in Girls' Empowerment Program varies. Girls' Empowerment should consider telling mentors that while most families are excited that their child has the opportunity to participate in the program, others may feel slighted at the suggestion that their child needs another adult's guidance. There is no one-size-fits-all method for mentors to connect with the parent of their mentee, which makes this solution particularly difficult to implement. However, any effort from Girls' Empowerment to help mentors navigate this relationship could potentially improve Girls' Empowerment girls' experiences, which makes it important to consider.

Challenge 8: Girls' Empowerment uses digital communication with the public inconsistently

Girls' Empowerment Program has large followings for an organization of its kind on Instagram and Facebook. Girls' Empowerment tends to post frequently during camp and around other large events, but it does not post often otherwise.

→ Recommendation: Broaden the use of social media communication

To remain more consistent, Girls' Empowerment can post more regularly about mentors and Girls' Empowerment girls. Currently, Girls' Empowerment occasionally posts mentor spotlight posts which typically have high levels of engagement, so expanding the use of this type of post may lead to more consistent interaction with followers. Girls' Empowerment could consider doing Girls' Empowerment girl spotlights as well so that the public can hear stories of how Girls' Empowerment has impacted its community. Photos of Girls' Empowerment girls are typically the most popular posts on Facebook so, with parental permission, Girls' Empowerment could more regularly post photos of this kind to increase engagement with their followers. Girls' Empowerment should also consider branching out to other platforms. Girls' Empowerment's Twitter account has been inactive for several years, so starting to post there again can connect Girls' Empowerment to an audience it is currently not reaching.

Because social media can connect organizations to a more diverse audience, this can help Girls' Empowerment reach its goal of having more diverse mentors. With more visibility from different demographics, more diverse groups of women may volunteer to become mentors. Every single interviewee, no matter their position at the organization, said they heard about Girls' Empowerment Program through word of mouth. While this is a testament to its continued presence in the community, it also reveals that other recruitment sources currently go untapped, specifically social media. To reach new networks of people that cannot be reached through word of mouth, Girls' Empowerment Program should consider utilizing social media more.

Challenge 9: Mentor meetings are not accessible to all mentors

Several mentors reported that living in the southern half of the program's area of impact made it difficult to attend mentor meetings held at the office headquarters at the northern tip of the area of impact. One mentor said that after working a full day, "for me to drive north for a meeting, just not possible. You know, it's often an hour drive. And whether there was COVID or not COVID, I'm just not able to do that." She remembered that meetings used to sometimes be held in a more central location and wondered why those meetings no longer took place as she had been able to attend much more frequently in the past. Mentors in rural areas can face the same problem as their trip will take much longer than for those who live in urban areas near major roadways.

→ Recommendation: Make mentor meetings more accessible to mentors from rural areas and areas that are farther from headquarters

The mentor from the southern half of the area of impact mentioned that she would like to see Girls' Empowerment address these issues by holding meetings somewhere in the southern area, rotating between the headquarters building and the southern area. Further, she felt that Girls' Empowerment did not seem to be aware that southern and rural mentors are unable to attend meetings and wished they would talk to people who regularly didn't attend meetings to find out how they could make them more accessible. Girls' Empowerment Program should consider creating a survey for mentors to delve further into the reasons why mentors do or do not attend meetings and adjust their timing, location, and organization based on the results.

While holding in-person meetings is not possible due to the global pandemic, setting up the infrastructure to make meetings available through Zoom or other video chat technology could allow more mentors to participate in meetings in the future. If mentors are unable to or simply do not want to drive all the way to headquarters, they could still virtually attend. I did not speak to any disabled mentors, but having virtual meetings can also improve access for mentors with mobility or other types of disabilities.

Conclusion

Nearly all of these suggestions center around improving communication between Girls' Empowerment Program core staff and camp leaders or mentors. When Girls' Empowerment Program's focus is on the girls they serve, it can be easy to have staff and volunteer issues slip by unnoticed. With some improved communication strategies, Girls' Empowerment can ensure that staff and volunteers have the best experience possible, which will in turn improve Girls' Empowerment girls' experiences.

Implementing all of these suggestions could require a significant time investment from core staff members. Staff members should consider carefully what is feasible, prioritizing what can have the greatest effects on staff communication and the effectiveness of their organization. Considering foundational issues such as staff and volunteer training and the structure of staff meetings can have lasting effects on communication between all parties involved in the Girls' Empowerment mission.

However, Girls' Empowerment is at a unique moment in its history that provides a large window for these types of changes to be made. With some of the original founders of Girls' Empowerment Program leaving in the recent past and several new core staff members joining the program, Girls' Empowerment has the perfect opportunity to continue the changes it has already made with these suggestions for improved communication and to widen the positive impact it has on its community.

Endnotes

1. Girls' Empowerment Program is a pseudonym created to protect the identity of the organization and the participants in this study. The pseudonym has been substituted into direct quotes throughout this paper accordingly.
2. Mohammad Nasr-Esfahani, Ahmadreza Yazdannik, and Shahla Mohamadiriz, "Development of nursing students' performance in advanced cardiopulmonary resuscitation through role-playing learning model," *Journal of Education and Health Promotion*, 8(1) (2019): 151–151. <https://www.jehp.net/text.asp?2019/8/1/151/265845>
3. M. H. Berg and D. A. Rickels, "Mentoring for Mentors: The Music Mentor Plus Program," *Journal of Music Teacher Education*, 27(2) (2018): 39–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1057083717720634>
4. The community liaison project is a proposed idea to have mentors "gather in their even more local regions [where] they can talk to one another about what their local [problems]" are.
5. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, "Associations between Parental Characteristics, Attitudes, and Engagement on Mentoring Relationship Outcomes" (2017), NCJ 251392. <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/grants/251392.pdf>

About the Author

Elizabeth Schwaner is a Master of Public Policy student at the Carsey School of Public Policy and the 2020 recipient of the Carsey School's Peter C. and Kristin Van Curan Nordblom Summer Fellowship.

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