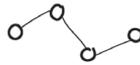


CHAPTER FOUR:

A CORPORATE RETREAT FOR KIDS



I should have seen it coming when I started with the flip chart. But it was only much later that I realized what we had in the making. You could say that Camp Grandma evolved to resemble a child's version of a corporate retreat. Okay, I know that may sound weird, and I never consciously thought of it that way in the beginning. It's just that as it evolved, I started bringing more of my work-life expertise into our day-to-day doings.

In the adult world, when done right, corporate retreats are great escapes from the everyday world and are known for reenergizing participants through training and collaboration. They usually start with setting goals and lofty expectations (like writing mission statements or discussing

branding). Then, through presentations and team exercises, they add fun and activity, all in an effort to educate and inspire the participants. These sessions can be powerful. One reason they are so effective is because you're not working alone but collaboratively in teams, which can be more rewarding than working independently. They also provide an open environment, welcoming of ideas and questions. This can promote stimulating communication through which to develop creative ideas, a sharing that contributes to a sense of belonging—just what we wanted to accomplish at Camp Grandma.

So I tailored the children's version to fit our needs. We began our sessions each morning around an easel. I included presentations along with activities and exercises encompassing the key elements of communication, goal setting, learning, and, of course, fun! Much like an old one-room schoolhouse, I liked that we had a mixed-age setting. The younger ones emulated the older ones and saw them as role models, and the older ones gained confidence by helping the younger ones (even if they didn't know it). Everyone gained something!

THE PARTICIPANTS

Before I tell you about a typical day at Camp Grandma, let me introduce you to my grandchildren. Jack and Katie are my daughter's children, and Jake and Lauren are my son's.

Jack is the oldest, with a full head of thick, sandy brown hair, which I often remind him to comb. He sometimes complains about being the oldest, feeling as if it were a burden.

He thinks that too much is expected of him, and he feels the pressure. Since I, too, am the oldest in my family, I try to help him see the advantages of the position. I remind him that Mom and Dad count on him because they know they can. I tell him, “It’s cool to be the oldest, Jack. You get to be in charge!” I’m not sure I have fully convinced him yet, but as he gets older I can see him developing into a highly responsible, protective, and loyal young man.

Jack often enters with his hands in his pockets and a rather disinterested look on his face. “Hi, Grandma,” he says as he comes over to give me a hug. I know Jack—he tends to be a homebody and resists anything new until he tries it and surprises himself by liking the new experience.

Katie comes in with a smile accompanying her hug. She always looks forward to the day and a chance to play with her cousin Lauren. Katie is three years younger than her brother, Jack, tall for her age, and slender with long brown hair, the color of her mother’s at her age. She is an A student, she’s well behaved and cooperative, and she wants people around her to be happy. I call her the Peacekeeper. Rather delicate in nature, she tends to be quiet and is able to occupy herself for hours. Katie is meticulous and patiently takes the time she needs to complete any task with care (though she may need prompting to finish).

She loves to sing, and onstage, Katie blooms into quite the performer, animated, forceful, and holding back nothing from her part. It is remarkable how she transforms from the rather shy and reserved little girl we all know.

Jake and Lauren enthusiastically run up the stairs when they arrive. Jake always drops off his book bag on

the counter in the kitchen. He never goes anywhere without ten or fifteen books in his large canvas bag.

Jake is without a doubt his own man. He is the second oldest (two years younger than Jack, though almost as tall), and I marvel at his interests. He can focus intently without distraction. Anything about outer space and the planets continues to be a favorite, but as he's gotten older, he's taken an interest in art and has been copying the masters. He'd rather go to a museum than an amusement park.

His eyeglasses give him the appearance of an academic, in keeping with his more intellectual pursuits. He has an extraordinary memory for what matters to him. He once wrote a timeline of the world, with it ending the day NASA lost its funding. He has a keen sense of place and is deliberate in his actions.

Lauren is the youngest of the group, which, like being the oldest, is cause for complaint. She, too, is tall for her age, with light brown hair. Lauren is outgoing, sometimes silly (taking after her dad), and good-natured. She likes to sing and dance and makes funny videos for her cousins. She is the grandchild with whom I have spent the most time since I had just retired when she was born.

Lauren is easy to be with, maybe because of the time we have spent together or because she is the grandchild most like me. We have a lot in common. She is a people pleaser and a problem solver, makes friends easily, and is a natural caretaker. More than just bright, she is wise beyond her years, as well as a good planner and organizer. I often remark that she is nine going on thirty.

THE AGENDA

The four grandchildren are dropped off at my home by their parents, usually by 8:30 a.m. They call the house I live in “Granada,” which is the name of the street where I reside. Once all the kids arrive, Camp Grandma begins.

“Hey, Grandma, guess what?” Lauren asked one day when she was around seven, having spent two summers at Camp Grandma by that point in her young life.

“What, dear?”

“I made the agenda for Camp Grandma today!” Lauren proudly announced as she waved the paper in her hand. She already well knew that at Camp Grandma we begin each day with an agenda.

The agenda not only gives structure to their day but also sets goals and expectations. It gives voice to what they will be doing and accomplishing. And this is another way in which Camp Grandma is like a corporate retreat. Planning is important, and it’s never too early to start. It’s about more than just setting priorities. It’s about having an ongoing process that keeps people on track and focused on what they want to accomplish—no matter how old they are. I want my grandkids to begin thinking about how they can take charge of their days, their years, and their lives.

“Okay, everyone,” I announced, “let’s begin our time together today. Please meet me at the table.”

“I want to sit next to Katie,” Lauren said, rushing to the table to grab a seat and show Katie her chair. Jake brought along his pen and paper to continue with his writing. Jack thoughtfully brought over an extra chair from my desk so we’d all have a seat.

We gathered around my kitchen table. We call this Table Time—almost always the first item on the agenda. Table time is when we focus on filling in plans for the other categories of the agenda, which fall under the headings Presentations, Things to Learn, and Activity Time. This is also a time to practice mindfulness. This involves focusing on the present moment and being aware of thoughts, feelings, and experiences. It means being accepting; it's nonjudgmental. It has to do with paying attention so that whatever we do or say has purpose. And at Camp Grandma we've always made choices based on those observations, which means it's important that we remain flexible. We don't set specific time frames in our agenda because a plan should always leave room for the unexpected, which will happen whether it's good or bad (an obstacle). As in the corporate world, a plan should not squash the creativity and pleasure that come from that magical chemistry of spontaneity and focus, a blend that can create some of the best ideas in the world. It's the same at Camp Grandma.

Here's a typical agenda:

1. Table Time. I start with some suggestions, usually based on activities I have prepared for the day or ingredients I've purchased for a special recipe. I try to give the kids options and choices. They then discuss and agree together on what they want to do. This is where we also set some general time frames.

2. Presentations. This is our time for show and tell (see chapter 5).

3. Things to Learn. I suggest a number of possibilities, including manners/etiquette, write your résumé, candle making, and meet your ancestors.

4. Activity Time. This may include swimming, bowling, performing a play, doing crafts, baking/cooking, making Christmas presents, going on a treasure hunt, and more. The kids decide on the particular activities we'll do, and then we always add some free time for whatever fun thing they feel like doing.

I encourage you to adapt the above agenda as needed to suit your needs and those of your grandchildren.

ROUND-TABLE DISCUSSION

The kids decide who will facilitate that day's discussion. The facilitator is the one who writes the agenda on the easel and leads the discussion on suggestions. I try to keep quiet, but being a Type A personality, I often can't help but throw in a comment or two. The ideas for the day start streaming in. Frequently, Lauren comes in with an agenda she has already written. Although the youngest, she's the planner in the bunch. We inevitably incorporate many of her ideas into our day, but we don't finalize our plan until all opinions are heard and considered.

When I first introduced the concept of planning together as a team, we started with a pretty simple outline. Our agenda included group time at the table, a structured activity, and social time. The agenda was basically used to

organize our day together, but the kids enjoyed setting the agenda and wanted to give more input. As I saw them standing in front of the flip chart, I recalled the countless times I was part of a training session at work and it dawned on me: the “core competencies” that enhance your experience in the workplace have to start somewhere, so why not here?

It took off from there. One activity led to an idea for another. Eventually we were giving presentations, writing résumés, and doing strategic planning and team building exercises—all elements of a typical corporate retreat. As my grandchildren got older, they provided the content, and we modified it per their direction, along with my input. All I ask is that they come prepared with a presentation to make to the group. The rest of the day is theirs to create.

SET GOALS, BUT BE FLEXIBLE

Although we like to structure our days so we can accomplish our goals, we don't ever want to be too rigid at the expense of creative play. We adults may be guilty of overplanning or overworking our days, potentially missing opportunities that unexpectedly come our way. We might all do better to take the lead from kids. Be prepared to have fun at a moment's notice.

So create a plan. And be courageous to modify it or even throw it out if something better presents itself. Because, even with the best of intentions, things can go awry or an unexpected opportunity may surface, and we all need to learn to be flexible and go with the punches when need be. This, too, can be a good learning experience.

One afternoon at Camp Grandma when we were all together, I unpacked a shipping box. Inside was a white cardboard cutout, like a picture frame. Jack grabbed it and held it up to his face and started making funny faces.

“Take a picture, Grandma!” he exclaimed. Next thing I knew, they were all asking for turns (me included).

“Me next!”

“I want a turn.”

I ran and got my camera to capture this spontaneous and delightful moment. They had the best time. And it wasn't even on the agenda!

ACTIVITY: GOAL SETTING

Following are some ideas for teaching kids about goal setting. Goal setting is the process of identifying something you want to accomplish and creating a plan to do it. Whether you set a short-term goal (I'm going to mow and edge the lawn this weekend) or a long-term goal (I want to earn my master's degree), committing to the process ensures you reach your goal and get the job done.

What Kids Will Learn

- How to focus on what they desire
- How to take control of their life and choose the direction they want to go
- How to make a commitment
- How to motivate themselves to get something they want

- How to feel a sense of accomplishment and self-confidence from the rewards of their efforts

What You Need

- A notebook
- A pencil or pen

What You'll Do

1. Sit down with your grandchildren and ask them to tell you something they would like to accomplish (maybe get a part in the school play, an A in English, or an after-school job).
2. Ask them to write it down. Writing it down is critical since research shows that the people who write down their goals achieve a lot more success than those who don't.
3. Now apply the SMART goal-setting process by asking and discussing the following:

S—Specific: Is the goal clear and well-defined?

M—Measurable: Does it include dates or amounts so you can measure success?

A—Attainable: Is this goal actually achievable?

R—Realistic: Is it consistent with your direction in life?

T—Time-Bound: Does it have a deadline or a period in which to complete it?

For instance, instead of saying “My goal is to start improving the environment,” a better goal statement would

be “Because I care about our planet, my goal is to start collecting recyclables, one bag a month.”

4. After they have stated their goal, create a plan of action. Fill in with steps necessary to reach the goal. If they follow the SMART goals criteria, they have a great start on their plan since it already includes the objective, measurement, and time frame. Now they just need to put it in motion.

Time Required

Start with about one hour. More than that and your grandchildren will tire. Then follow up periodically to check on their progress. How often will depend on whether it is a short- or long-term goal.

Tips

- You can begin with educational, family, and physical goals and then advance to include career, spiritual, financial, and social and personal development goals.
- Don't forget to celebrate! That's part of the fun and keeps kids motivated to achieve their next goal!
- You can participate right along with your grandchildren and set a goal for yourself. You can support and cheer each other on so that you can all achieve your goals.