

Signals from the Campfire:

Insights and Questions for Camp Leaders

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MARKETING FOR CAMPS

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You Don't Need Flying Drones Over the Lake to be an Innovative Camp.

Innovation at camp can be as small as changing how you do cabin clean up or as big as redesigning your entire retreat business. The size is not what makes it innovative.

I want to anchor this Camp Signals in this idea: **At camp, innovation is any intentional change that clearly makes camp better for campers, families, staff, or the mission.**

That might look like:

- Reworking staff orientation so it actually prepares people for hard conversations instead of just covering policies.
- Creating a sensory friendly option for loud evening programs so more campers can participate.
- Opening your site to new retreat audiences in ways that stabilize revenue and deepen impact.

None of those require cutting edge technology. All of them require clarity about what problem you are solving and how you will know if it worked.

Innovation is not just "new"

In the camp world, it is easy to confuse innovation with "new" or "cool."

We see another camp launch a trendy program or a vendor roll out a shiny tool and we feel pressure to keep up. But innovation for its own sake is a distraction. It burns staff energy, confuses families, and often dies quietly after one summer because it was never tied to a real need.

A simple filter helps:

- What specific problem are we trying to solve?
- What will be different if this works?

If you cannot answer these questions, it is not an innovation project yet. It is an idea.

Innovation is often small and quiet

Some of the most powerful innovations at camp never make a brochure.

They are thoughtful adjustments that make camp safer, more intentional, and more aligned with your mission.

In this edition of Camp Signals, we will explore each of the areas of a camp's mission, with one simple goal: spark specific ideas you can adapt to your context this year.

Your job is not to look innovative. It is to be effective.

For some of you, the practice of innovation will look like a bold new program or a reimagined retreat model. For others, it will look like finally fixing a pain point that everyone has quietly tolerated for years.

As you read, keep one question in mind:

"If we could only change one thing in the next 12 months that would make camp meaningfully better, what would it be?"

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Innovation in Summer Camp Programs



Questions for your staff to answer:

- **Which recurring program elements are staff dreading or campers just tolerating?**
- **Where do campers already invent their own fun between activities? How could you support those moments?**
- **Who is not fully included in your current design, and what is one concrete change that would move you toward full participation for them?**

You do not have to blow up your program to be innovative.

Innovation in summer camp programs starts with three simple questions:

1. Who are our campers now, really?
2. What experiences are no longer serving them or our staff well?
3. What could we change that would make camp more joyful, inclusive, or impactful this summer?

What program innovation can look like

Rethinking how days and evenings feel

- Swap one large, staff heavy evening program for camper designed micro activities. Cabin groups host short stations such as backyard games, creativity corners, or storytelling circles. Staff prep drops, camper ownership rises, and the night still feels special.
- Build intentional “choice time” blocks where campers can return to skills they love instead of sampling something new every hour. This especially helps anxious or neurodivergent campers.

Designing for inclusion

- Create sensory friendly versions of classic games by adjusting lighting, sound, and pace and clearly labeling them as options.
- Offer simple supports such as visual schedules, quiet preview times, or alternative spaces for campers who need a different way to engage.

Blending new interests with core camp identity

- Add short “lab blocks” for nature based science, maker projects, or simple tech that still fits your outdoor ethos.
- Bring in guest instructors for pop up workshops in things like spoken word, dance, or sustainability and weave those into campfire or closing celebrations.

The question is not “is this trendy” but “how does this serve our mission and culture.”

Innovation in Summer Staffing



Questions for your staff to answer:

- **Why did your best staff last summer stay, and why did your strongest staff from previous years not come back? What patterns do you see?**
- **Where in the season do you see the biggest drop in staff energy or morale? What is one change you could test in that window this year?**
- **What is one responsibility you could shift from “everyone” to a specific role or small team, so expectations are clearer and the load is lighter?**

Summer staffing is one of the hardest places to feel “innovative” right now. It can feel like a scramble just to get enough people in the door.

But innovation in staffing is not about clever recruiting slogans. It is about redesigning how you find, prepare, and support people in ways that fit the world they live in now.

At its core, staffing innovation asks:

1. What makes it hard for great people to say yes or stay?
2. What promises do we quietly make to staff that we are not keeping?
3. What could we change that would make camp a better place to work and grow?

What staffing innovation can look like

Rethinking roles and commitments

- Offering flexible contracts such as six week commitments for college students with internships or classes on the edges and inviting alumni to fill final sessions or weekend roles.
- Designing clear “step” roles for returning staff such as assistant village leaders, specialists in training, or program fellows so a second or third summer feels like a real progression, not a repeat.

Building “grow your own” pipelines

Instead of starting from scratch every spring, some camps are:

- Treating CIT and LIT programs as the first step in a three or four year leadership journey, with specific skills, mentoring, and small responsibilities each year.
- Pairing new staff with experienced mentors who check in weekly on more than tasks such as “How are you sleeping” and “What has been hardest this week” and “What do you want to learn next.”

Supporting the whole person, not just the position

Staffing innovation often shows up in how you care for people during the season:

- Scheduling true rest by protecting at least one off block a day or designing roles so that “days off” are real days off rather than catch up time.
- Adding simple mental health supports such as access to a counselor, quiet staff only spaces, or normalizing debrief time after hard incidents.
- Being transparent about pay, workload, and expectations instead of hiding the hard parts and hoping people will not notice.



Innovations in Retreating

For many camps, the retreat center is a quiet asset that never quite reaches its potential.

Innovation in retreat usage is about moving from “we rent the site when we can” to “we design specific experiences that serve our mission and community year round.”

At its core, it asks:

1. Who could benefit from this place outside of summer?
2. What gets in the way of them saying yes now?
3. What new formats or partnerships would make retreats a reliable part of our mission and revenue, not an afterthought?

What retreat innovation can look like

Designing for specific audiences, not “any group”
Instead of waiting for random inquiries, innovative camps are:

- Creating simple retreat “packages” for clear groups such as teacher wellness weekends, healthcare worker renewal retreats, nonprofit leadership intensives, or family grief and healing gatherings.
- Naming the outcomes those groups care about such as rest, reconnection, team cohesion, or vision work and then shaping schedules, space use, and facilitation to match.

Partnering rather than just renting

You do not have to become an expert in every audience.
You can:

- Co-create recurring events with local organizations, congregations, schools, or nonprofits who already serve a group you want to welcome. They bring people and content. You bring place, hospitality, and program support.

- Invite mission aligned partners to “adopt” a weekend or an annual gathering at camp and build it together over several years instead of treating it as a one time rental.

Making it easier to say yes

Sometimes innovation is about removing friction:

- Updating how you communicate retreat options so group leaders can see dates, capacities, and sample schedules without a long back and forth.
- Offering simple planning tools such as ready made menus, activity menus, or “good, better, best” pricing tiers to reduce decision fatigue.
- Using basic digital tools such as online inquiry forms, virtual tours, and clear follow up timelines to build trust quickly.

Questions for your staff to answer:

- **Which months or weekends are consistently empty, and who in your region is under a lot of stress during those same times? (teachers, social workers, healthcare teams, clergy, youth workers, foster families)**
- **What barriers do group leaders mention most often (price, planning time, uncertainty about what to expect), and what is one change that would lower those barriers?**

Innovation in Volunteering



Questions for your staff to answer:

- **What important work are you paying for that a passionate volunteer or small team might gladly own if you framed it clearly?**
- **Where are volunteers currently underused or under directed, and what is one way to give them more clarity and purpose?**
- **Who are the people who say “let me know how I can help” and then never quite get plugged in? What specific invitation could you make to them?**

Volunteers can be so much more than extra hands on workday weekend.

Innovation in volunteering is about treating volunteers as mission partners with clear roles, real responsibility, and meaningful connection to the life of camp.

At its core, it asks:

1. What work really matters that we cannot do alone?
2. Who would light up if they were invited to help in that specific way?
3. How do we make it easy to say yes and satisfying to stay involved?

What volunteer innovation can look like

Instead of vague pleas for volunteers, innovative camps are shifting from “any help” to specific roles:

- Defining skill based roles such as photography, storytelling and social media, IT and database support, fundraising events, facility planning, or garden and grounds.
- Inviting people to short, clear commitments such as “join the scholarship calling team for four evenings in May” or “serve on the alumni stories project for one month.”

Creating micro and remote opportunities

Not everyone can give a full day on site. You can:

- Offer two hour “mission sprints” such as prepping camper mail materials, packing welcome packets, or organizing equipment where people see a quick win.
- Create remote roles like editing videos, designing simple graphics, proofreading handbooks, or writing thank you notes from home.

Innovation in Staff & Board Development

Boards and year round staff set the ceiling for how much innovation a camp can actually hold.

You can have creative ideas and eager summer staff, but if the people steering the ship are stuck in old patterns, change stalls. Innovation in board and staff development is about helping leaders think, decide, and learn in new ways, not just attend more meetings.

At its core, it asks:

1. What skills and habits do our leaders need for the camp we are becoming, not just the camp we were?
2. Where do our current structures keep us repeating the same conversations without progress?
3. How can we build simple, ongoing practices that grow our capacity to adapt?

What leadership innovation can look like

Turning meetings into working sessions, instead of reports that could have been emails.

- Dedicating a portion of each board meeting to a generative question such as “How might we expand access for underrepresented campers” or “What is one new revenue idea worth testing.”

- Using short “innovation labs” where small groups brainstorm options, pick one to sharpen, and identify what it would take to test it in the next 6 to 12 months.

Creating cross role understanding

New energy often comes from seeing camp through someone else’s eyes:

- Setting up simple shadowing such as the executive director spending time with kitchen or maintenance, a program director sitting in on development calls, or a board member attending part of staff training.
- Asking each person afterward to share one insight and one question with the full group.

Building a habit of small experiments

Innovation grows when leaders get comfortable with trying and learning:

- Agreeing on “90 day try its” where the board or leadership team chooses one small change to test, defines what success would look like, and commits to a review date.
- Framing these as learning projects, not referendums on whether “it worked perfectly,” so people are more willing to propose new ideas.

Questions for your staff and board to answer:

- **Which recurring agenda items feel like you are talking in circles without decisions or experiments attached? What is one you could redesign into a working session?**
- **If you looked back a year from now, what is one leadership skill or mindset you wish your board and year round staff had developed together (for example comfort with data, having hard conversations, or piloting change)?**

Fueling Your Innovation



Selling and Funding Your Ideas

When you have an idea that could make camp meaningfully better, you will inevitably need funding to make it possible. Remember, not all innovations are expensive or time consuming. However, many are and need external partners to make them possible.

In order to get the funding, you need to be able to communicate the idea clearly.

Think about it this way:

- Your donor or funder cares about kids, community, faith, justice, belonging, or leadership. They want to see those things grow.
- You know camp. You understand the problem on the ground. You have a plan.
- You are inviting them into a clear, hopeful story where their “yes” moves something important forward.

To do that, you need to name three things simply.

1. The problem

Describe the real tension your project addresses in plain language.

Examples:

- “We have campers who love camp but cannot fully participate in our loud evening programs. Right now they are choosing between meltdown and missing out.”
- “Our staff are incredible with campers, but many finish the summer exhausted and unsure if they can come back. We are losing great people.”

- “Our retreat center sits empty most of the year, even while teachers and social workers in our community are burning out.”

Stay specific. Avoid vague “we need to improve camp” language. Help the listener feel why this matters.

2. The simple solution

Keep your innovation clear and concrete. One idea at a time.

Examples:

- “We want to pilot a sensory friendly program track for two evenings each session this summer.”
- “We want to design and test a mid summer staff rest and support plan, including one extra overnight off and guided debrief spaces.”
- “We want to launch a weekend retreat for teachers and school staff focused on rest, reflection, and community.”

You are not promising to fix everything. You are inviting them to help test one thoughtful response to a real problem.

3. A three step plan for the funder

Make it easy to see how they can engage. For example:

- Partner with us: “Decide that this is your corner of camp’s mission. We will keep the project focused and manageable.”
- Fuel the pilot: “Make a gift of \$X (or join a small circle of donors) to cover the costs of testing this idea for one season.”
- See the impact: “We will share stories, data, and next steps at the end of the summer so you can see what your gift made possible.”



Funding Sources: Where the Fuel Comes From

Once you can tell the story of your project clearly, the next step is simple: decide who might care enough to help move it from idea to reality.

Often, the first place to look is closer than we think. You may have an alum who still talks about the moment camp changed their life, a parent who has quietly said “I wish more kids could have this,” or a board member who lights up every time you describe a new idea. For people like this, an innovation project is not a distraction. It is exactly the kind of thing they hope you are dreaming about.

When you approach an individual, you are not asking them to “fund camp.” You are inviting them into a specific story:

“Here is a problem we see. Here is what we want to try. Here is what your gift could unlock and how we will circle back to show you what happened.”

Sometimes the scale of the idea is bigger than one person’s capacity. That is when groups come in.

A handful of alumni who each give a manageable amount can easily fund a pilot project together. A

Sunday school class, book club, or civic group that already cares about kids or community can rally around a weekend retreat or an inclusion initiative.

When you frame the project well, people often appreciate doing something concrete together.

And then there are grants.

For projects with a clear learning component or broader impact, grant funding can be the right kind of fuel. The American Camp Association’s **Innovative and Special Projects grants** are designed exactly for this: focused experiments that help camps try new approaches to programming, safety, access, or evaluation. Regional foundations and family foundations often have a similar appetite for well framed pilots that serve young people, mental health, education, or outdoor learning.

In every case, whether you are talking to an alum, a small group, or a grant maker, the heart of the invitation is the same:

- We see something that is not yet what it could be.
- We have a thoughtful idea about how to move it forward.
- We would like you to help us test that idea and learn from it.



A Gift for You

We've laid out the steps to asking for a gift for your innovative project. But, sometimes getting started feels really overwhelming.

So, we took it a step further. We've created a template (Canva) for you to use to create your case statement.

This case statement template is a simple document focused on a problem/solution/ask for a specific project.

To use this template:

1. [Go Here.](#)
2. Make a copy of the file and save it in your canva docs.
3. Edit the document

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Need Help?

Whether it's facilitating a conversation around innovation, ramping up your marketing efforts, or coaching your team, our team can help!

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