



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Wilderness Classroom: A New Resource for Staff Development

Espiritu Santa, an uninhabited island in the Sea of Cortez, graced with numerous sandy beaches and warm, clear water, was the site of a unique Palomar College staff development program. Away from the stresses of everyday living, a small group of educators participated in a nine-day program which combined camping in the wilderness, kayaking along the shoreline of the island, and team-building workshops. The program was designed to assist educators in identifying principles of effective team-building and to "test out" their learnings in a real life situation. That goal was attained by challenging the group to spend a week living together on a desert island where team-building skills were crucial.

In the wilderness, participants met in a different environment and began relating to each other outside of established roles. The intensive daily interaction facilitated supportive and open communication within the group. Interpersonal barriers were lowered, and individuals let their truer selves emerge. As the week progressed, interactions became more genuine and spontaneous. The group had formed a bond and developed a cooperative attitude.

A series of workshops were offered to enhance the team-building skills. On the island, workshops were held in "wilderness classrooms": a rock quarry nestled in a grove of fig trees, a protected cove facing the emerald sea, and around the evening campfire. The 20 hours of workshops focused on important ingredients that make groups work, such as: "Understanding Behavioral Styles and Personality Types," "Effective Communication," "Leadership and Problem Solving," "Goal Setting," and "The Creativity Process."

Experiential exercises were utilized throughout the program. Working in dyads, one person in each pair was blindfolded; and the group took a "trust walk," negotiating difficult terrain. The experience stimulated a discussion of establishing trust and introduced a series of communication exercises. Participants remarked, "I learned the importance of being specific and descriptive in directing others," and "I learned how vulnerable I feel trusting another person with my safety."

Other experiential activities involved art materials, initiative tasks, visualization exercises, journal writing, and group presentations. The learning gained from these activities was applied to responsibilities and relationships in the workplace.

One challenge the group faced was passing the "dunk test," a drill where two people sitting in a kayak intentionally capsized the boat and practiced working together to escape. The drill was used to prevent panic in case a boat really did capsize at sea. This was put to a test one day when two- to four-foot swells and stiff headwinds made paddling difficult. Despite the fear experienced as kayaks rocked sideways and one boat snapped a rudder cable, the group effectively dealt with the situation and returned safely to shore.

Regarding their learnings, participants wrote:

"This was an excellent program to help individuals learn more about themselves. As the week progressed, team feedback and sharing developed a solid level of trust and an understanding of group dynamics."

"I was really forced to concentrate and had to effectively communicate."

"The presentation of behavioral styles and personality types was the most worthwhile activity in regards to improving teacher-student and personnel relationships."

"The right brain activities were beneficial...I usually do not seek them out...they were effective for investigation, creativity, and reflection."

"I have discovered a new approach toward accomplishing my work."

Outdoor experience was not required for participation in this program. The only prerequisite was an adventurous attitude.

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Adding Life to Employee Orientation

Orientation sessions always seemed so lifeless and boring when we gathered all new employees and had various administrators and department representatives "talk at them" about the college's programs and operations. In an effort to add some life to the process, Kirkwood Community College developed a most successful format for new employee orientation.

Orientation: Part I

KCC holds two separate orientation sessions: one session for new faculty and one for new support staff (including administrators). Each session begins with the president's address—an informal discussion about the history of Kirkwood, the mission and philosophy of the community college, and many of the programs and activities currently under way. Because the president is not actively involved in many of the hiring activities, this format provides an opportunity for him to meet new employees and to market Kirkwood. The fact that this activity has priority status with the president speaks for itself; the value of this time and attention is immeasurable. The informal climate created by the president, as well as the enthusiasm and energy he generates, make new employees feel instantly welcome, comfortable, and glad to be at Kirkwood.

Also at the session, current staff employees (two support staff personnel and two faculty members, for their respective groups) address the new employees and share their personal experiences and feelings about Kirkwood. These speakers are encouraged to discuss not only the positive and beneficial aspects of their experiences but also some of their frustrations. These sessions have proven to be particularly useful in establishing an identity for Kirkwood with our new employees and helping them "picture" themselves here.

Orientation: Part II

The second part of the program involves the participants in a self-selection process. Tables and booths are arranged conveniently in a large, open room; they are staffed by various department representatives, offering written information describing a wide variety of college services and procedures. Payroll, personnel, affirmative action, media services, library services, counseling services, wellness programs, insurance programs, staff development activities, employee unions, bookstore services, and graphics/printing services are examples of the information available at this "fair."

Participants are free to choose program/service areas in which they have interest and to move at their own pace, according to their own priorities. This activity provides them with an opportunity to meet one-on-one with department representatives, ask questions, begin to develop a familiarity and ease with other personnel on campus, and share their "new" status with each other. Refreshments are served throughout this portion of the program; the climate is social, active, and participatory.

Evaluation

The response to this format has been very positive from both new and experienced employees. Feedback from new employees is that they leave the orientation feeling good about their decision to be at Kirkwood and excited about their future here. Experienced employees tell us they learn something new at every session and feel a resurgence of enthusiasm for what Kirkwood is all about.

Summary

We believe that it is important to orient new employees to Kirkwood—where we've come from, what we do, how we do it, where we're going—and train them in terms of service to the students and the community. We believe that if we can instill the "sense of Kirkwood" in new employees, we will gain not only functionally-qualified personnel but also employees who will *feel* the essence of Kirkwood and will begin to develop loyalty and dedication at an early stage of the employment experience.

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