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Healthy Culture. Happy Campers.

WHITE PAPER

The Healthy Camp Operating Model (HCOM™)

A Four-Layer Framework for Building Camp Cultures That Don't Depend on Luck

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The Problem: Why Camp Cultures Drift

Most camps don't collapse overnight. They drift.

Not loudly. Not dramatically. Gradually — through a hundred small misalignments that no one addresses because no one can quite name them.

I've spent more than thirty years in the camp world. Since 1992, across twenty-five camps on four continents, I've watched the same pattern repeat itself with remarkable consistency. A camp opens the summer with strong vision, clear expectations, and a leadership team that believes deeply in its mission. By week three, the tone has shifted. By mid-summer, the director feels something is off but can't pinpoint exactly what changed. By the end of the season, staff turnover is higher than it should be, parents are asking harder questions, and the leadership team is exhausted.

The director didn't stop caring. The mission statement didn't change. What changed was the gap — the distance between what the leadership team believed and what the staff actually did, day after day, in the moments no one was watching.

That gap is where culture drift lives.

And it is the single most dangerous force in camp leadership — not because it causes immediate harm, but because it accumulates silently until the cost becomes visible. Staff turnover. Safety incidents. Reputation damage. Board tension. Parent distrust. Director burnout.

Every camp director I've ever worked with can name the feeling. That unsettled sense that your values are on the wall but not in the cabin. That your training was thorough but your follow-through was thin. That your best counselors carry the culture while the rest coast on proximity to it.

If something makes you go... *hmmmmm* — then it is important to pay attention to it.

The Real Cost of Drift

Culture drift is not a theoretical risk. It carries specific, measurable consequences that compound over time.

Staff turnover increases because talented people don't leave bad jobs — they leave inconsistent ones. When the standard changes depending on which supervisor is watching, when correction feels arbitrary, when effort goes unrecognized because nobody is looking for the right things, the best counselors leave first. They have options. The ones who stay are often the ones with nowhere else to go.

Safety incidents rise not because camp leaders don't care about safety, but because the gap between policy and practice creates blind spots. A camp can have every protocol documented and still be operationally vulnerable if staff haven't been formed to report early, escalate quickly, and speak up without fear.

Reputation damage follows. Parents talk. Board members listen. Community trust, once eroded, takes years to rebuild. And in the age of social media and online reviews, a single incident amplified by cultural drift can define a camp's story for a generation.

Director burnout accelerates. When the culture isn't holding, everything falls on the director. Every problem becomes their problem. Every gap becomes their gap to fill. The weight of leadership, which is already significant, becomes crushing when the system beneath it isn't sound.

The problem isn't intention. Camp leaders are some of the most mission-driven, sacrificial, and passionate people I've ever worked with. The problem is that intention without structure produces inconsistency. And inconsistency, left unaddressed, becomes the culture — whether you designed it that way or not.

A behavior is a value in action. When the behaviors don't match the values, the values become decoration.

This is why I built the Healthy Camp Operating Model.

The Framework: HCOM™ — Four Layers of Healthy Camp Culture

The Healthy Camp Operating Model — HCOM™ — is a four-layer framework for building, maintaining, and protecting camp culture. It is not a curriculum. It is not a checklist. It is an operating model — a way of seeing how the pieces of your camp's culture connect, where they break down, and what to do about it.

HCOM™ emerged from twenty-six years of camp leadership. Not twenty-six years of studying camps from the outside — twenty-six years of leading them. Hiring counselors. Training supervisors. Sitting in rooms with parents who were angry, frightened, or heartbroken. Building systems that worked and watching systems that didn't. Making mistakes and learning from them. Doing the work.

The four layers are: **Structure, Translation, Formation, and Protection.**

Each layer builds on the one before it. Each depends on the others to function. And each addresses a specific failure point that I've watched derail camp cultures again and again.

Layer 1: Structure — The Foundation You Build On

Structure is where culture begins. It answers the questions that everything else depends on: *Who are we? Why do we exist? What do we believe? How are we organized?*

Structure includes your mission, your values, your organizational design, and the purpose that drives your camp's existence. It is the philosophical and organizational foundation that gives everything else its meaning.

Most camps have this layer — at least on paper. They have a mission statement. They have a list of values. They may even have a vision statement framed in the dining hall.

But having a mission statement is not the same as having structural clarity. Structural clarity means your staff can articulate your mission in their own words. It means your values are specific enough to generate observable behavior. It means your organizational design creates clear lines of authority, communication, and accountability.

Structure also includes the deeper question of purpose — not just what your camp does, but why it matters. Growth happens when young people feel safe, connected, and free to explore. Leaders don't force

transformation. They create conditions for it. When staff understand this at a foundational level, everything that follows has meaning.

Without structure, you have activity without alignment. And activity without alignment is just motion.

Layer 2: Translation — Turning Values into Visible Behavior

This is the layer where most camps fail.

They have values. They believe in them. They talk about them in training week. But they never translate those values into observable, coachable, correctable behavior.

Translation is the bridge between what you believe and what people do. It answers the question: *What does this value look like in action — and what does it sound like when someone drifts from it?*

Every value needs three legs to stand on: the value statement itself, the observable behavior that demonstrates it, and the coaching language that leaders use when drift occurs. Without all three, the value is aspirational at best and meaningless at worst.

Consider a camp that says it values respect. What does respect look like when a counselor is correcting a camper? What does it sound like? What does a supervisor say when they observe a counselor correcting a camper in a way that doesn't reflect respect? If your leadership team cannot answer those questions clearly and consistently, then respect is a word on a wall — not a cultural standard.

Translation is where values become operational. It's where the coaching language is defined. It's where supervisors learn not just what to look for, but what to say when they see drift — and how to say it in a way that builds the counselor up rather than tearing them down.

This is the layer that separates camps that *talk* about culture from camps that *build* it.

Layer 3: Formation — The Daily Practices That Shape Who You Become

Formation is where culture becomes real. Not in the orientation manual. Not in the training session. In the daily, repeated practices that shape how your staff think, respond, and lead.

Formation includes how you correct behavior, how you maintain discipline, how you calibrate your leadership team, and how you reinforce standards when the energy of opening week has faded and the grind of mid-summer has set in.

This is the layer where the phrase "loving campers well" stops being a slogan and starts being a discipline. Correction that builds identity rather than attacking it. Discipline that creates safety rather than fear. Calibration that keeps supervisors aligned so that the culture doesn't drift at the mid-level — which is exactly where drift most often begins.

Culture doesn't drift at the director level. It drifts at the supervisor level. Supervisors determine tone consistency. They must coach quickly, reinforce expectations daily, and correct privately. When supervisors are calibrated, the entire organization holds together. When they're not, culture fractures along invisible fault lines that the director may not see until the damage is done.

Formation is daily work. It is not glamorous. It is not inspirational. It is the repeated investment in clarity, coaching, and correction that makes the difference between a camp that has a good training week and a camp that has a healthy culture.

When counselors believe honest mistakes will be punished, they learn to hide them. When they believe that early honesty will be met with grace and growth, they learn to report — and that changes everything.

The only mistake you can make at this camp is not loving your campers. Everything else — we can walk through together.

Layer 4: Protection — Safeguarding What You've Built

Protection is the layer that most camps think about first but build last — if they build it at all.

Protection includes your safety systems, your escalation protocols, your reporting culture, your incident response, and your staff retention practices. It is everything that safeguards the culture you've worked to build.

Safety is hospitality. It is not a bureaucratic burden. It is how you communicate care before risk ever appears. A camp that takes safety seriously is a camp that takes people seriously — and everyone in the organization can feel the difference.

Protection operates across four dimensions: physical, emotional, social, and structural. Physical safety is the one most camps address. Emotional, social, and structural safety are the ones most camps assume.

We can't manage a secret. The more information leadership has, the more they can help. Hidden information is not protection — it is liability. For the camper. For the counselor. For the camp.

Protection also includes retention — the systems and practices that keep your best people coming back. Retention isn't about perks. It's about whether staff feel seen, supported, and growing. Daily reflection builds maturity. Staff who feel invested in stay longer and lead better.

And ultimately, protection includes the director's own role. The director sets the ceiling. Everything in the system lives or dies by the director's commitment to it. Culture is not delegated. It is modeled, reinforced, and protected by the person at the top.

How the Layers Connect: The HCOM™ Model in Practice

HCOM™ is not a menu. You don't pick the layers you like and skip the ones that feel inconvenient.

The layers are sequential and interdependent. Each builds on the one before it. Each enables the one after it. And skipping a layer doesn't save time — it creates the illusion of progress while building on a gap that will eventually give way.

You can't translate what you haven't structured. If your values aren't clear and specific, there's nothing to translate into behavior. You'll have coaching conversations that feel directionless because there's no shared standard to coach toward.

You can't form what you haven't translated. If you haven't defined what values look like in observable behavior, your daily formation practices have no anchor. Supervisors will calibrate to their own instincts rather than to a shared standard. Correction will be inconsistent — too harsh from one leader, too lenient from another — because there's no defined language for what "right" looks like.

You can't protect what you haven't formed. If your staff haven't been formed through daily coaching, calibration, and correction, your safety systems are policies on paper rather than practices in the field. Reporting culture only works when people have been formed to value transparency. Escalation only works when people have been trained in what to escalate and when.

This is the central insight of HCOM™: camp culture is a system, not a collection of parts. And like any system, it only works when the parts are connected in the right order.

Think of it like building a house. Structure is the foundation. Translation is the framing. Formation is the daily work of construction. Protection is the roof, the locks, the systems that keep everyone safe inside. You wouldn't install a roof on a house with no frame. You wouldn't frame a house with no foundation. But this is exactly what many camps try to do — investing heavily in safety policies (protection) without first building the formation practices that make those policies operational, the translation work that makes those practices coherent, or the structural clarity that gives everything meaning.

The result is a camp that looks complete from the outside but has structural gaps that only become visible under pressure. And in the camp world, pressure always comes.

Field Evidence: Why This Framework Works

HCOM™ is not an academic model. It was not developed in a research lab or derived from management theory applied sideways to camp life. It was developed in the field — across more than thirty years in the camp world, twenty-six of those in direct camp leadership.

I have worked with twenty-five camps across four continents. I have built camp cultures from scratch and inherited ones that were deeply broken. I have trained staff in the United States, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and beyond. I have sat with directors in moments of crisis and moments of celebration. I have watched camps transform — and I have watched camps repeat the same mistakes year after year because they never addressed the system, only the symptoms.

What I've learned is this: every camp culture problem I've ever encountered can be traced to a gap in one of these four layers. Every one.

The camp with high staff turnover but great training materials has a Formation gap — training week was strong, but daily coaching and calibration were absent. Staff didn't leave because training was bad. They left because the mid-summer experience didn't match the opening-week promise.

The camp with a beautiful mission statement but inconsistent counselor behavior has a Translation gap — the values exist but were never converted into observable, coachable standards. When two supervisors watched the same counselor interaction and gave contradictory feedback, the problem wasn't the supervisors. It was the missing translation layer between values and behavior.

The camp where incidents keep escalating has a Protection gap — not because policies are missing, but because the reporting culture was never formed. Staff hesitated to escalate because they'd never been shown how, never been told what mattered, never been reassured that early reporting would be met with support rather than blame.

The camp where the director is exhausted and the board is frustrated has a Structure gap — organizational clarity never existed, so every decision requires more energy than it should. Communication lines are tangled. Authority is ambiguous. The director carries weight that should be distributed across a clearly designed system.

These are not hypothetical camps. They are real organizations, led by good people, doing meaningful work — and struggling because no one had ever given them a framework to see the system whole.

What Makes HCOM™ Different

The camp industry has no shortage of training resources, conference workshops, and well-meaning advice. What it lacks is a comprehensive operating model — a framework that connects all the pieces into a coherent, diagnosable, improvable system.

Most camp training focuses on individual competencies: how to lead a devotional, how to manage a homesick camper, how to run an activity safely. Those competencies matter. But they exist in isolation unless they're woven into a larger cultural framework.

HCOM™ doesn't replace skill training. It provides the operating system that skill training plugs into. It answers the question that no individual workshop can: *How do all the pieces of our camp's culture connect — and where are they disconnected?*

HCOM™ doesn't prescribe what your values should be. It doesn't impose a particular philosophy of camp. What it does is provide a diagnostic framework that reveals where your culture is strong and where it's running on hope.

And in my experience, hope is not a strategy.

Application: Diagnosing Your Camp's Culture

HCOM™ is designed to be practical. Not theoretical. Not abstract. Something you can use right now to assess where your camp stands.

Below are diagnostic questions for each layer. Answer them honestly. Not aspirationally — honestly. The gap between what you aspire to and what actually happens is where drift lives.

Structure

- Can every staff member articulate your camp's mission in their own words — without reading it from a wall?
- Are your values specific enough to generate observable behavior, or are they broad enough to mean anything?
- Does your organizational design create clear lines of authority and communication?
- Do staff understand not just what the camp does, but why it matters?

Translation

- For each value your camp holds, can you describe three observable behaviors that demonstrate it?
- Do your supervisors have shared coaching language — specific phrases and approaches — for when they observe drift?
- If two different supervisors watched the same counselor interaction, would they describe the same standard and the same correction?
- Is your correction language designed to build identity, or does it default to criticism?

Formation

- Do your supervisors meet daily to calibrate on what they're seeing?
- Is correction handled privately and promptly, or does it accumulate until frustration forces a conversation?
- Do staff experience consistent standards from every supervisor, or do they learn which leaders are "strict" and which ones let things slide?
- Are mid-summer standards as clear as opening-week standards?

Protection

- If a counselor noticed something concerning at 9pm tonight, do they know exactly who to tell and exactly how to report it?
- Does your reporting culture reward early disclosure, or does it create anxiety about overreacting?
- When a parent calls with a concern, does the director already know — or is that phone call the first they've heard?
- Do your best staff come back? If not, do you know why — specifically?

Where is your camp strong? Where is it running on hope?

The answers to those questions don't represent failure. They represent clarity. And clarity is where healthy culture begins.

The Path Forward

If the diagnostic questions above surfaced gaps you already suspected — or ones you hadn't named yet — that's exactly what they're designed to do.

The honest truth is that most camps are strong in one or two layers and weak in the others. That isn't failure. That's the natural result of building a camp without a model that shows you the whole system. You invest in what you understand and what feels urgent. The layers you don't see are the ones that drift.

The good news is that once you can see the layers, you can address them — deliberately, methodically, and in the right order. You don't have to fix everything at once. You just have to stop building on gaps.

The Camp Health Snapshot™

The Camp Health Snapshot™ is a structured diagnostic conversation designed to take these questions deeper. It gives camp directors a clear, honest picture of where their culture is strong and where it needs attention — without judgment, without sales pressure, and without pretending that every camp needs the same solution.

Because they don't. Every camp has its own mission, its own context, its own history, its own strengths. What every camp shares is the need for an operating model that connects values to behavior, behavior to daily practice, and daily practice to the systems that protect it all.

The Snapshot is the first step. Not a commitment. Not a sales process. Just clarity — the foundation of every healthy culture.

Healthy Culture. Happy Campers.

That's not a slogan. It's a sequence.

When culture is healthy — when structure, translation, formation, and protection are aligned and connected — the campers are the beneficiaries. Their experience is richer. Their safety is stronger. Their growth is deeper. The staff who serve them are more confident, more consistent, and more likely to return next year. The parents who entrust their children to your care sleep easier. The boards who govern your organization have the visibility they need to lead well.

And the directors who lead those camps sleep better at night. Not because nothing goes wrong — but because when something does, the system catches it. Early. Before the parent calls. Before the incident escalates. Before the counselor hides the mistake instead of reporting it.

That's what a healthy camp operating model produces. Not perfection — readiness.

If you're ready to see where your camp stands, the Camp Health Snapshot™ is the first step. Schedule a conversation at happycamperconsultant.com, or reach out directly.

The strongest camps don't wait for strain. They strengthen before it.

Jeff Rorabaugh is the Founder and Principal Consultant of Happy Camper Consulting. With twenty-six years of camp leadership experience across twenty-five camps on four continents, Jeff helps camp directors build cultures that are structurally sound, behaviorally consistent, and built to last. He is the creator of the Healthy Camp Operating Model (HCOM™), the Counselor-Proof Camp Culture System™, and Camp VDMS™. Jeff lives in Wilmington, North Carolina, and still believes that what happens at camp can shape a life for generations.

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