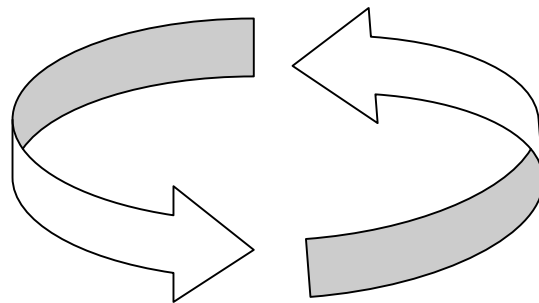


What in the WORD is So Important?!

Michael Brandwein

We've just completed the "Story Pass" game.

So the question is "Why?" Why did we play it? It was fun, but we always remember that at camp, fun is not our mission. Fun is going to happen while we're here, but it's not the *reason* we're here. We can say the following sentence out loud, together, to always keep it fresh in our minds:



"Fun is what it *feels like* as we accomplish the mission."

There are three reasons that we did "Story Pass."

Number One

The first reason we did the game is because we wanted to think about the power of a single word. Each of us had only one word we could say. But in only one word, we could change the entire direction of the story. That's a lot of power. And it's a lot of responsibility, too. If the story is going along great, and people are saying, 'The / man / left / his / house / and / went / for / a / walk / with / his /... pickle,' the person who said 'pickle' has made an important decision that affects the whole group.

1. Sometimes a single word has negative power.

A single put-down has power. If we, as the leader of a group, let members of that group use the word 'retard' to call another person a name, even if they say they are joking about it, how does that affect the group? What does that say about the group—what message does it send about the group members? Are we warm or cold people? Are we caring people or not caring people? Do we keep people in our group safe, or do we make them always wonder whether they're going to be the next person to be called a name?

Suppose a camper tries to do something and fails. Someone looks that camper right in the eyes and says just one word: "Stupid." How long will that camper remember that word? Could it be for the rest of the time she or he is at camp? Could it be for the rest of the year? Here's the really impressive question—could it be for the rest of a life? If you think that's possible, please raise your hand. Thank you. How many of you believe that there are some people in this room who can remember one negative word that was said about them from a long time ago—please raise your hand. Thank you.

A single word can have other negative power. When a young person goes up to other campers and says ‘Can I play?’ think please about the power of the single word ‘No.’ A really good camp leader—someone who is really sharp and knows why she or he is here—this leader knows this single word “No” was the most important word that any camper said during the entire day. It’s a word that will call that leader to action. It may prompt a conversation with the campers who said it and with the campers who heard it. It will help us teach campers to be thoughtful about each other’s feelings. It will help us teach them that when there are times when we don’t want to do things with other people, there are ways to say it that are respectful and there are ways that are hurtful. A single word has power.

2. A single word can have positive power.

Think please about the effect of praise. Can you think back to a time where someone said just a word or two to you as a compliment after you accomplished something that was important to you? Please do that now for a moment.... Please raise your hand if you went back over one year. How about two years? Five? Ten? Over ten years? Think about how incredible it is that someone in this room could say a single word or two to a camper and that camper would remember this, with a warm feeling in her or his heart, long enough to tell their own children.

One word = Awesome power.

Number Two

In our “Story Pass” game, we listened to one hundred percent of what every person said in our group. Not one person missed one word. Please think about how different that is from the world of a child. Think for a moment about how few times young people have an older person in their life just sit and listen to what they are saying. Not to criticize. Not to correct. Just to hear them. Just to understand them. Just to be an audience. The game lasted only about three minutes. By a show of hands please: How many of you believe that some of our campers—not all, but some—don’t get listened to with care for a full three minutes very often when they are at home or at school?

If our answer is yes, then we can appreciate the power of really listening to another person.

We don’t have to listen to every single word all day, or for an hour, or for even ten minutes. Just think what three minutes or two or even just one minute—listening without interruption—can do for a young person. This is power.

Number Three

The third reason we played this game is because we wanted to try an experiment. It looked like this game was about creating a story. It was. But the important thing we were creating wasn't a story—it was an environment. We created in our groups an environment that was different than any other place in the world. For those three minutes, we created a place where every single person had *equal power*.

Every person. It didn't matter who we were. What we looked like. Our height, our weight, whether we've been here before or not—none of this mattered. If we were a member of the group, everyone considered what we had to say. It doesn't mean everybody liked it. Let's remember the person who said "pickle." But because of the rules of our game, everybody in our groups could say three words:

"I've been heard."

That's a key goal for us as leaders. We want every person in our group to be able to say, "I've been heard." We'd like all of us to say those three words together now out loud to help them stick: "I've been heard."

When people don't get what they want because the rest of the group doesn't want to do it their way or play what they want to play, there's a lot less anger and disappointment when people can say, "Well, it didn't go my way, but I know people took me seriously. They understood me. They heard what I had to say."

In every camp group there are some people who are more invisible than others. They may not speak up or they may try to talk but they don't get much attention from others. It's our job as the leader to work as hard as we can to make our groups like the places we created in our game. Places where people feel safe to say what they really think. Places where they know that we won't always agree. But we will always listen.

The word "Leadership" begins with the letter "L." So does the word "Listen."

At our camp, let's make our best efforts to assure that this is more than just a coincidence.

Let's also make it our commitment.

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