

# Creating a Leadership Mentality: Camp Twin Lakes' Approach to Developing Leaders



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Eric Robbins is the CEO of [Camp Twin Lakes](#) (CTL), a nonprofit organization in Georgia with campsites and hospital-based camp programs designed specifically for children with serious illnesses, disabilities, and life challenges. In collaboration with its [Camp Partners](#), Camp Twin Lakes provides life-changing camp experiences for children who might otherwise be unable to attend camp.

During a 2013 strategic planning initiative, Robbins knew he wanted to do more to develop the organization's future leaders. With the support of a board member, he embarked on what became a multiyear journey toward achieving this goal, which included working with Bridgespan through its [Leading for Impact](#)<sup>®</sup> program. While in the program his team created competency maps to better define the skills CTL's emerging leaders would need down the road and addressed how to develop them in their current roles.

Recently, we spoke with Robbins about the organization's journey, the tools it used, and his personal reflections on the importance of personal and professional growth in leadership development.

**“Growth isn’t just about a particular job function or area of responsibility. It’s about becoming an active learner and a servant leader.”**

*- Eric Robbins, CEO, Camp Twin Lakes*

## Why is leadership development important to your organization?

First of all, it's important to us because one of our mottos here is "every child deserves all we have." If we are not the very best leaders that we absolutely can be, then we're not giving our campers everything that they deserve.

And it doesn't stop there because we're not an organization that operates in a vacuum. We're an organization that operates in several spheres: with partners, the nonprofit sector, and even in the larger sphere of the independent sector. We feel an obligation that the people who work here may not work here forever. They will go on and do other things. It may not be in other nonprofits. They may go on to be physicians, nurses, social workers; they may run for-profit companies. But we have them for a period of time, and while they're here, we feel an obligation to invest in them and move them along in their own leadership journeys.

## How did you jumpstart CTL's leadership development process?

It began during our strategic planning in 2013. We realized that one of the pillars of the organization was leadership, not just for our professional team, but leadership throughout all aspects of the organization, really starting with our campers. We were taking children who, in many ways, were patients and giving them the chance to become leaders among their peers. And then we saw that leadership was a central theme throughout the organization, all the way up to the staff, to the managers, and to the board.

One of the first things we did was to employ a talent matrix that allowed our supervisors to plot how each staff member had grown in their positions and their potential for future growth. From there, supervisors and their direct reports met to develop individual development plans that included stretch goals, new opportunities, training, and other professional development opportunities. What emerged from these exercises was, first, a general feeling among staff that the organization was invested in them and, second, a much better understanding of what our leadership competencies were.

## In year two of building your leadership development approach, you took additional steps to improve the process. What major improvements did you make during this time and why?

After we implemented the talent matrix tools, we began to work with Bridgespan through its Leading for Impact program in Atlanta. It helped us implement leadership development more consistently throughout the organization.

For instance, the work we did through the program helped us clarify with staff the difference between performance management and leadership development plans. Oftentimes, performance reviews are tied to merit increases that reflect performance of specific job-related duties. We didn't want that to be confused with individual leadership development plans, which reflect our organizational commitment to grow our leadership capacity. Deciding to conduct performance reviews in Q4 and leadership development plans in Q1 helped us reduce anxiety around performance reviews.

We also began to explore what were key indicators of strong leaders at CTL. We defined a shared sense of what constitutes "good" as opposed to "best" leadership competencies. We asked ourselves, "What are the competencies that are putting people into the upper right-hand quadrant of our talent matrices?" We use these competencies not just for leadership development, but we also use them for recruitment and in our performance reviews, to help individual team members understand what our leadership competencies are, look at themselves in light of them, and then decide on how we might plan on developing them.



Camp Twin Lakes and Children's Healthcare of Atlanta installed a new, fully accessible walking trail at Camp Twin Lakes-Will-A-Way, thanks to funding from UnitedHealthcare. Here they celebrate its grand opening with a ribbon-cutting ceremony.

## How have you instilled a leadership mentality into CTL's culture?

We look at CTL as giving people transformational experiences as they provide transformational experiences for children in their career development. So, it's in the water. It's very important in our programming that our children not just have a phenomenal experience, but they too emerge as leaders among their peers. In that we discovered we needed to be much more intentional about our professional staff. And when I say professional staff, I mean everyone because we're all professionals here, regardless of our responsibilities. Everybody in this organization either has or is working on a development plan right now. And we check in on those plans and look at those plans to make sure that everybody here feels like there's an investment in them as leaders, or future leaders, in this organization or in another organization.

We also make sure that everybody who works at CTL—and that includes housekeepers, cooks, facilities people, and interns—attends a two-day retreat. Retreats ensure that we create a leadership culture that is about everybody rather than just those at the top. The message of these retreats is basically that if you're going to work at Camp Twin Lakes, you're going to have to be invested in looking at yourself and saying, "Where can I get better?" Growth isn't just about a particular job function or area of responsibility. It's about becoming an active learner and helpful person.

## How does this culture impact staff recruitment and retention?

I think our training really helps individuals and even teams of people appreciate how they can make every moment count. Much of it has to do with feeling more confident. When you immerse yourself proactively in your development and in what we do, you feel like an actor when the curtain goes up, and you have an opportunity to make a lasting difference in kids' lives. We encourage staffers who seldom see children to spend a week as a volunteer at camp.

When we have an opening, we look internally to see if somebody has an interest and capacity to move into the position, even if they aren't doing that kind of work now. We had a special events director who had been doing her job for four years and felt she wanted to learn to do something different. So, she applied for a communications director position that opened up, and we invested in helping her grow into that position.

On the flipside, we have encouraged people to leave—not because they were poor performers but because they had promising skills and talent, and needed more than we could offer. A staff member in our Development department recently left to take a position running the foundation group at the University of Georgia. That, to us, is going to only help us to recruit the person behind her because she was able to learn and grow enough here to move on to a bigger position.

## How can small nonprofits with little budget and few advancement opportunities embark on leadership development?

While there can be challenges for smaller organizations, I wouldn't say they're insurmountable. The beauty of smaller organizations is that you really have to do it all. Smaller organizations expose you to a diversity of skills and areas that you need to understand and connect to.

In a small organization, you also often have to work with a range of stakeholders—clients, partners, board members, and colleagues—and take ownership of the organization's success.

My advice to small nonprofits is to make a commitment to your staff to develop their skillsets and human networks, even if your firm offers little or no actual career ladder for them to climb. Doing so will help you attract terrific staff and improve your organization's reputation when staff leave to work elsewhere. As nonprofit leaders, we have an obligation to help others grow whether our organization has two, 10, or 200 people.

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