

Case XXX: The Tweeting Camp Counselors

Kate Sullivan just graduated from college with a bachelor's degree in public relations and landed a job as the public relations director at her local recreation department. It has a number of recreation programs for children, teens, and adults, including a popular, profitable summer day camp, Camp AdventurePlay, for children ages 5-14. The program has 12 college students, ages 18-22, as camp counselors, supervised by an experienced day camp director. There are 70 children enrolled each week in the program, which runs for 10 weeks; the registration fee is \$160 per week.

Kate loves her job, the recreation department and its programs, and the families whose children are enrolled in the program. During the summer, she has spent most of her time working with the day camp director, Scott Alexander, to promote the camp program. One Sunday afternoon in mid-August, with just two weeks left in the program, Scott called Kate in a panic.

"Kate, we have a major problem at the camp," he began.

"What's wrong, Scott? The season is almost over."

"Right, and the parents and kids have been satisfied so far," he said. "But I've just learned that four of the camp counselors have been making negative, false comments about me, other counselors and the day camp program on Twitter during the workday."

"What have they been saying?"

"They don't like one counselor, Jennifer, so they have been saying, on Twitter, that Jennifer isn't doing a good job with the kids that she is supervising. They also used the camp's name negatively in a hashtag, #CampAdventurePlayProblems."

"What kind of camp problems?"

"Minor stuff – one counselor didn't like one of the field trips that we took. They also tweeted a picture of the assistant camp director outside of work and tweeted that with the hashtag #CampAdventurePlayProblems when he wasn't involved with any problems."

"What did they tweet about you?" Kate asked.

"One counselor said I took too many photos, so he tweeted that with the hashtag #toomuch. But I'm right there with a good camera and I want to promote our camp since it's only a year old! I'm also upset because the same counselor allowed a camper to use his phone to tweet."

"Isn't there a policy about employees not being on Twitter during the workday?"

"No, not yet," Scott admitted. "During the counselors' training program in June, I reviewed the recreation department's existing policy with the counselors. It forbids them from using their cell phones during the workday, but it doesn't specifically mention social media. This is the first time we've dealt with this situation, so I need some advice."

Discussion Topics

1. Identify the ethical issues and/or conflicts.
2. Determine internal/external factors likely to influence your decision.
3. Choose key values and provisions from the PRSA Code of Ethics that apply.
4. Consider parties who will be affected by your decision and evaluate the public relations professional's obligation to each one.
5. Select ethical principles to guide your decision-making.
6. Make a decision and offer a brief rationale.

Answer Key

1. **Identify the ethical issues and/or conflicts.** The camp counselors are making damaging, false statements on social media about their employer (the recreation department summer day camp program) and their co-workers. These statements could be libelous, harming the reputations of both individuals (a counselor and the day camp director) and the summer day camp program.

both individuals (co-workers and the day camp director) and the summer day camp program.

2. **Determine internal/external factors likely to influence your decision.** Internal Factors: Given the popularity of social media, it may not be surprising that the camp counselors were on Twitter. But this recreation department has a stated policy banning cell phone use by employees during the workday, although the policy doesn't specifically mention social media use. Still, the day camp director reviewed the existing policy with the camp counselors during their training program in June. The recreation department has never previously dealt with this situation among its employees, an indication of the rising popularity of social media. External Factors: Negative responses from key publics: 1) Parents who might see the negative comments on Twitter; why would they want to send their children to such a camp? 2) Other recreation department employees or future camp counselors, who might not want to work there if negative, false comments might be made about them. 3) Taxpayers who would question the quality of the day camp program and would want the municipality to stop funding it, erroneously believing these negative comments on Twitter to be true. 4) News media, who might follow up on the negative Twitter comments to write stories about the supposed problems at the camp.

3. **Choose key values and provisions from the PRSA Code of Ethics that apply.**

Values: 1. **Honesty** (We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with the public). The tweeting camp counselors weren't honest in their comments; they were bashing co-workers they didn't like and making false (dishonest) statements about the day camp program. 2. **Loyalty** (We are faithful to those we represent, while honoring our obligation to serve the public interest). As employees of the recreation department, the camp counselors were not loyal to the organization. 3. **Fairness** (We deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media, and the general public. We respect all opinions and support the right of free expression.) The tweeting counselors were not being fair towards their employer (the recreation department and its programs) or their peers (their co-workers).

Code Provisions: 1. **Free Flow of Information** (Core Principle: Protecting and advancing the free flow of accurate and truthful information is essential to serving the public interest and contributing to informed decision making in a democratic society). The tweeting counselors were disseminating untrue, inaccurate information about the camp and their co-workers. 2.

Competition (Core Principle: Promoting healthy and fair competition among professionals preserves an ethical climate while fostering a robust business environment.) The camp counselors were spreading malicious, unfounded rumors about their co-workers and camp, which could undermine the future success of the camp (causing parents to place their children in a competitor's camp).

4. **Consider parties who will be affected by your decision and evaluate the public relations professional's obligation to each one.** 1. The camp counselors who were the target of the negative, false tweets. The recreation department has an ethical and legal obligation to protect them from harassment and false charges made to a potentially large audience on Twitter. 2. Parents of current and future campers – they should be receiving true information about the camp where their children will be spending time. 3. Recreation department administrators - they need to be reassured about the integrity of the summer day camp program and to understand that lies were being spread by some camp counselors on Twitter.

5. **Select ethical principles to guide your decision-making.** The ethical principles of honesty, loyalty and fairness should provide guidance here. The tweeting camp counselors were dishonest, inaccurate and malicious in their Twitter statements about their co-workers, supervisor and the camp program; disloyal to their employer and co-workers; and unfair in their characterizations (with possible legal implications for libel, if harm to their co-workers' reputations could be proven in court).

6. **Make a decision and offer a brief rationale.** The public relations director should advise several things: 1.) The day camp director should notify his superiors at the recreation department immediately about the negative Twitter comments and ask for clarification on personnel actions

that he could take (suspension of the tweeting counselors, etc.). 2.) The day camp director should meet first thing Monday morning with the tweeting camp counselors, before the campers arrive, to tell them that he found out about their activities. Depending on the existing recreation department policies, the tweeting camp counselors could be suspended for several days, fired, have a note placed in their personnel files about this incident, or have a “Do Not Rehire for Next Season” memo in their personnel files. 3.) The public relations director and day camp director should continue to monitor Twitter, other social media, and other forms of communication (e.g., phone calls to the recreation department, emails, etc.) from parents or other camp counselors for any complaints, then take action as necessary. 4.) The recreation department should develop a policy regarding social media use during the workday by its employees and monitor Twitter, Facebook, and other social media for negative tweets and posts. This is a topic that is widely being discussed by many organizations: what policies should be implemented regarding social media usage by their employees?