

Should You Offer Camp Staff a Retention Bonus?

Emily Golinsky, MS | March 27, 2023

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In the camp world, we love to use bonuses. Returning staff bonus. Early hire bonus. And many of us are currently finding the retention bonus an intriguing option.

What is it? A retention bonus is money offered to staff with the goal of giving them incentive to stick around. Literally, it's offering them extra cash to be retained. In the non-camp world, where employees generally are hired with longer-term work in mind, the goal of the retention bonus is to keep key talent, to encourage folks to stay through a certain date, or to entice staff if there's been high turnover in a particular job role ("stick it out for six months and we'll give you an extra month's salary"). According to an article published in *Harvard Business Review* (HBR), the use of retention bonuses has spiked since the pandemic and is at an all-time high, with "almost 60 percent of organizations making the investment" (Barnard-Bahn, 2023).

In the camp world, retention bonuses are more frequently used to "stop the bleeding" and make sure camper ratios can be maintained through the heat of the early August staff doldrums.

Without mincing words or dressing it up in fancy language, a retention bonus can in some ways be compared to a bribe. Theoretically, staff should not need such a gift to be willing to complete the contracted dates they've already agreed to. And let's be honest — they aren't going to do more or better work for that extra money. We're basically

asking them to “stay, please! Just stay!” for more than we previously offered them. But theoreticals don’t help when staff are enacting The Great Escape with a full session of enrolled campers about to arrive.

To be clear: there is *no* judgment here. Our industry is digging deep into the solution bag for ways to hire, onboard, and retain staff. If it works, it works! The concern is that retention bonuses, though they look like a shiny solution at first glance, don’t actually work the way we think they do. According to HBR and several studies of workplace behavior, there’s actually no evidence that retention bonuses increase engagement or long-term loyalty.

But if long-term loyalty isn’t our goal (it is, after all, a stretch to call a summer position long-term), then can they help us make it through the season? Very possibly. As long as our eyes are open and we know what we’re getting into.

So . . . what are we getting into? Here are some questions and considerations to noodle as you’re contemplating if retention bonuses can work for your program.

1. What Motivates and Demotivates Each Staff Member?

Many of us who are making pay policies hail from an earlier generation, where giving our all in exchange for a paycheck was both expected and motivating. With Gen Z (which likely makes up most of our frontline staff), money is not the only motivator; in fact, their mental well-being is much more frequently a primary factor in their workplace happiness index than income.

So we need to start by getting to know the staff we have and those who we are attracting to work for us. Are they drawn in by the mission, the population of campers, the diversity of the community, the cool swag?

Just as important as knowing what they’re drawn in by is knowing what might push them away. Do they have an unaddressed conflict with another staff member? Do they feel undervalued? Did we deliver on the promises made to them upon hiring? Very few camps can afford the kind of bonuses that would work to overcome such concerns. And worse — if someone isn’t in it for the money, offering them more to stay could actually offend them. For maximum retention effectiveness, if money isn’t the motivator, highlight and boost what is instead.

2. End-Dating

When we offer a bonus for reaching a point prior to the last day of their agreed-upon dates, does that unintentionally indicate to staff that it’s actually not important to fulfill their whole contract? Is the message “just get us through session X and then we don’t care what you do?” If so, are we OK with that? We might need to do some massaging so we don’t make morale worse in the moment.

3. Everybody Talks

Everyone — *everyone* — talks about their pay with coworkers. So what happens when a consistently good returner “goes along to get along” and accepts the base salary plus a small bump for another year of service, and then finds out that the newbie staff member — untested, unproven — is being offered hundreds of dollars more because they threatened to walk out?

Looking at the current situation in the nursing industry, this exact issue is causing low morale and affecting patient care. Hospital sign-on bonuses are in the tens of thousands of dollars, encouraging nurses to switch employers, and yet loyal employees are sticking it out and making significantly less for their resolve. What’s to stop the same challenges from happening at camp? We’re stronger when we work together, and we can’t cannibalize others’ staff teams to fill our own needs. (Well, we can, but we shouldn’t.)

4. Is It a Tiny Bandage on a Critical Injury?

Is sharing around some money just a cover-up for a bigger problem? If we’re already seeing staff turnover concerns a few weeks into a nine-week season, we need to be asking “Is it me?” Turning the spotlight on our hiring abilities, camp policies, staff experience, and organization morale isn’t ever fun, but it is routinely necessary. We might convince folks to stick out a bad situation for enough dough, but we need to be honest with ourselves if we’re using a very temporary, tiny bandage to cover a long-term, deeper problem.

Retention bonuses work best to keep staff on board in short-term, stop-the-bleeding scenarios, so this may actually work out OK in the moment. But don't expect to ignore the underlying issue and keep finding success with these bonuses year over year.

5. Are We Opening Pandora's Box?

Are we offering recruitment bonuses ad hoc, as a straw to grab at when someone says they are planning to leave? Not to put too fine a point on it, but that reeks of desperation. And I get it — all is fair in love and camp; in that moment, we may truly be desperate and have few other options.

What happens to the staff that don't necessarily need the money, or who weren't considering leaving, but heard that so-and-so went in to the director's office and came out with the promise of extra cash? Why *not* ask, if it's that easy? Oof — brace for a never-ending onslaught of requests!

A word to the wise: a retention bonus should be just that — a bonus. We shouldn't open ourselves up to staff ultimatums because we have no other options. Cross-training our team whenever possible can protect us from a staff person saying, "you don't want to pay me more? Good luck running archery for the rest of the season."

In Conclusion: To Bonus or Not to Bonus?

TL;DR: Retention bonuses can be beneficial in the short term — and that is good news for the camp industry. We only need seasonal people for a little while, and if a retention bonus gives them the will to dig deep and pull out that last bit of hidden energy to cross the finish line, it's a good option in our retention toolbox. People will stay with an organization for many things other than money — and, if we can use a little money to get people to stay long enough to buy in (pun totally intended) to the mission and fall in love with the job, then that's money well spent. When we keep these kind of bonuses to their intended use, they can be helpful. If we're trying to gain long-term staff, we need a number of creative, well-thought-out retention strategies.

Source

Barnard-Bahn, A. (2023, February 6) Do retention bonuses pay off? *Harvard Business Review*. hbr.org/2023/02/do-retention-bonuses-pay-off

This blog was written on behalf of [Project Real Job](#), whose purpose is to support camps in their efforts to recruit, hire, and retain staff.

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