

Title: Growing Interpretive Staff through Coaching Online, Individually, and in a Community

Author Name 1: Sharon Miyako, M.S.

Professional Title: park ranger, education and interpretation

Organization: National Park Service

Street Address/P.O. Box: 117

City, State, Zip: Yosemite, CA 95389

Phone number: 408-685-7688

E-mail Address: Sharon_miyako@nps.gov

Author Name 2: Margaret Styles, M.S.

Professional Title: Interpretation Coach

Organization: National Park Service

Street Address/P.O. Box: 5560 E Whitlock Rd

City, State, Zip: Mariposa, CA 95338

Phone number: 209-966-7822

E-mail Address: mestyles.nps88@yahoo.com

Abstract - Approximately 100 words

Yosemite National Park has a long history of visitor services being provided by both National Park Service (NPS) and park partner staff—including interpretive programs. It is important to ensure there is a consistent quality regardless of which agency provides interpretation. Peer coaching, partner coaching, and on-line coaching have elevated interpretive skills and enhanced the visitor experience. Key elements of success include staff and partner commitment, relationship building, and effective communication.

Keywords

Coach, evaluation, partnership, National Park Service, Yosemite, Interpretive Development Program

The introduction, body, and conclusion must not exceed 1,000 words combined. The subhead “Body” should be changed to reflect the content of your submission.

Introduction

The National Park Service (NPS) Interpretive Development Program (IDP) was established to professionalize interpretation services and products throughout the park system. Since its inception, NPS personnel, volunteers, and partners who recognize the value of this model have been incorporating the IDP philosophy and techniques into their programs and services.

In Yosemite, there is a peer coaching program, a partner coaching program, and local registered coaches to work with people completing their on-line interpretation courses through Eppley Institute. All three programs help to elevate the interpretation skills throughout the park staff and ultimately enhance the visitor experience.

Coaching Park Partners

Yosemite National Park works with partners to accomplish its mission. These partners can provide interpretive programming to help audiences make meaningful connections to Yosemite. In 2006, the NPS created an *Interpretation and Education Renaissance Action Plan* articulating the need to “Embrace Interpretation and Education Partners,” “Develop and Implement Professional Standards,” and “Create a Culture of Evaluation” (National Park Service 2006, 6).

In keeping with these goals, and with the financial support of The Yosemite Conservancy, NPS hired a full-performance, seasonal interpretation coach with the sole purpose of working with partners providing public programs. The new *Long Range Interpretive Plan*, which was developed based on a shared vision of the partners, included coaching. The coaching program strives to

satisfy this plan by professionalizing interpretation and reaching established interpretive themes and audience experience goals.

Since its inception in 2009, the Partner Coaching Program has evolved to best meet the needs of both NPS and the partner organizations. In 2009, the first step was to assess interpretive quality of the partner programs and the understanding of interpretation. There was a heavy emphasis on building a supportive relationship with the partners. This investment in time created a non-threatening and safe environment in which to have open and honest discussions.

In 2010, the assessment from the prior year directed the program to develop a true coaching environment. This meant programs were re-observed several times to measure advancement and complete continuous coaching sessions after each re-observation. This allowed for interpretation skills to build over time, rather than just a point-in-time assessment. In 2011, a variety of coaching was initiated including informal interpretation coaching and a coach-the-coach program.

The program challenges include coaching presenters with limited or no formal training, point-in-time skills assessment vs. coaching, and limited or lack of time for partner professional development. The successes include advancement of skills in 79% of the re-observed programs, on-line course demonstrates improved skills, partner group implements recommendation, and the program adapts to the needs of each organization's operations. The lessons learned include; inconsistent definition of interpretation among partners, public programs concentrate in natural history and there is a gap in cultural history topics, and formal interpretive training is needed for coaching to be more effective.

In 2012 season, the program will continue to evolve, It is recommended the NPS partner coach participates in partner spring trainings to better understand the education experience of the coachees. The coach will focus on enhancing informal interpretation skills for specific partner groups. And to enhance professional development and better ensure skill advancement, the coach will pursue buy-in from each of the presenters being coached rather than just rely on mentor feedback.

Peer Coaching Program

In 2010 Yosemite National Park's Valley field interpretation staff piloted a peer coaching program, which continued in 2011. The program focused primarily on seasonal employees. It included a 2 hour training, handbook, and coaching sessions throughout the season. Also in 2010, peer coaching participants filled out pre and post program surveys to estimate comfort level with interpretive concepts as well as perceptions of the peer coaching program. Additionally, seasonal and supervisor in depth interviews were conducted to expand on peer coaching perceptions.

Based on the surveys, interviews and interactions from the 2010 Yosemite Valley peer coaching program, similar programs may be able to boost camaraderie, employee confidence in programs, and individual abilities to identify as well as utilize basic interpretive concepts. Three elements that appear to play a large role in the success in reaching these results: training, purposely assigned peer coaching groups, and time. Comprehensive up front training sets the stage for the peer coaching experience. Both the supervisor and employees recognize the import of purposefully dividing staff into peer coaching groups. The groups can result in a stronger coaching experience, or detract from the sessions. Groupings may also impact casual staff discussions and perceptions of the program, which may impact morale. Finally, time serves as the largest limiting as well as expanding factor in peer coaching. Time is the resource least available in many interpretive field schedules. However, addition of time means more tools to support employees, and more tools can mean more impactful peer coaching experiences.

Surveys overwhelmingly wanted the program back the following season. Peer coaching continued in 2011, and will continue again in 2012.

Eppley Institute On-line Interpretation Coaching

It became evident that many partners offered no formal training in interpretation. The less experienced presenters were encouraged to complete a basic certificate for the NPS on-line course Foundations of Interpretation (www.intertraining.org). Those who completed the course demonstrated enhanced interpretation skills.

All seasonal interpreters for National Park Service are currently required to complete two basic certificates in the same online courses listed above. Additionally, these Eppley Institute courses provide a self-driven way for seasonal interpreters to practice and elevate interpretive skills. The courses ensure consistency in basic foundations, and give supervisors a platform to build off of and enhance, rather than starting from the very beginning.

Conclusion

Interpretation coaching in Yosemite is a valuable tool to advance the profession. Whether it is with peers, a dedicated coach, or through self-directed training with on-line courses, coaching ultimately enhances the visitor experience.

References

National Park Service. *Interpretation and Education Renaissance Action Plan*. Washington, D.C.: Department of the Interior. 2006.

National Park Service Interpretive Development Program. <http://www.nps.gov/idp/interp/>.

Training for Park, Recreation & Public Land Management Professionals.
<http://www.parktraining.org/>.

Yosemite National Park. *Long Range Interpretive Plan*. California: National Park Service. 2012.