

## Understanding The Way Campers Learn

With the stars peeking through the pines and the campfire crackling in the background, the speaker is about to make his third and most powerful point. As you glance down your row of campers seated on logs, you notice all seem to be attentive... except Jeremy. He's off his log, with his back to the speaker, building little roads in the sawdust.

Not wanting him to miss the message, you lean over and motion him back onto the log with the other guys. "Sit still and listen, "are your well-meaning, whispered words.

In your mind, you've maintained order and made it easier for Jeremy to listen. In actuality, you've disordered his world and made him a prisoner. He's now sitting there with his hands folded, thinking, and "I can't move. I'm confused. I have to escape." Needless to say, he's not hearing the speaker's third point.

Just as there are different personality styles, there are also different learning styles. Some learn best by reading and writing. Some by listening to a lecture in an organized environment. Others are observers who learn by watching demonstrations or particular behavior. And then there are those who hear with their hands; they have to participate, or at least be occupied – like Jeremy –in order to concentrate.

That's why in school you have students who are readers and /or meticulous note-takers. You have student who wait for discussion groups –where they can listen to and observe the positions and reactions of others – to really understand the subject. And then there are students who live for the lab portion of class, where they can experiment and draw their own conclusions. All may be "A" students, but each travels a different path to get there.

Camp is an expanded classroom. As a counselor, one of your greatest challenges will be to discern the learning styles of campers in your care then create or permit an environment that will allow learning to take place.

Start by identifying your own learning style. (Use the test in the sidebar on the next page.) Next, become aware of the learning style of other staff.

That will prepare you for the final step: identifying the styles of your campers. Indeed, the more you are aware of style differences, the more you will be able to maximize the overall camp experience of those around you.

### How We Perceive Information

Perception shapes what we think, how we make decisions, and how we define what is important to us. There are two types of perceptual qualities within each mind:

**Concrete** – Registers information through the five senses. Deals with the here and now. Considers the tangible, the obvious. "It is what it is".

**Abstract** – Visualizes and conceives ideas, understands what cannot be seen.

Uses intuition, intellect. Considers the more subtle implications. "It is not always what it seems."

Although everyone has concrete and abstract qualities, each person is more comfortable using one over the other. These qualities are neither good nor bad, but any strength overused can become a weakness.

### How We Order Information

Ordering has to do with the way we organize the information we perceive. We all order information in one of two ways;

**Sequential** – A linear, step-by-step manner. Follows a logical train of thought. May prefer a plan rather than impulse. "Follow the steps."

**Random** – The mind organizes information by chunks, with no particular sequence. May appear impulsive or spontaneous, generally still accomplishes desired results. "Just get it done."

Everyone has both sequential and random qualities, but each person relies more on one than the other.

By combining the way we perceive and order information, four learning styles emerge. While no person is only one style, each has a dominate or preferred style. They are concrete sequential, abstract sequential, concrete random, and abstract random. Which style are you?

### Which Style Are You?

In each of the following style categories, place a check mark beside the phrases that you feel *strongly* describe you *most of the time*. Then add up your checks and write them on the corresponding total line. It is likely that one style will be dominant, even though you might have check marks in several of the categories.

#### Concrete Sequential

I almost *always*:

- prefer doing things the same way.
- work best with people who won't hesitate to take immediate action.
- am more interested in obvious facts than in finding hidden meanings.
- prefer a neat and orderly environment.
- as first "How do I do it?"

Total \_\_\_\_\_

#### Abstract Sequential

I almost *always*:

- want as much information as possible before making a decision.
- need enough time to do a thorough job.
- prefer to get directions in writing.
- am interested in where a person got the facts.
- ask "Where do I find more information?"

Total \_\_\_\_\_

#### Abstract Random:

I almost *always*:

- prefer to check with others before making final decisions.
- try to be sensitive to other people's feelings.
- work well with others.
- am not bothered by a cluttered environment.
- ask the advice of others when in doubt.

Total \_\_\_\_\_

#### Concrete Random:

I almost *always*:

- solve problems creatively.
- act on the spur of the moment.
- work best with those who can keep up.
- like frequent changes in the environment.
- prefer to learn only what's necessary to know.

Total \_\_\_\_\_

## How to Identify Campers' Styles

With this information, as soon as your campers arrive, begin to observe their traits and determine their learning styles. How do they unpack and organize their bunk areas? In this area, it's pretty easy to tell the sequential from the randoms!

When you give a tour, explain the rules, or make chore assignments, watch and listen for other traits to emerge. By the end of the first full day, an observant counselor can pretty much determine, with a high degree of accuracy, each camper's learning style.

## Taming Your Wild Kingdom

Now, let's couple the four learning styles with the animal styles – beaver, golden retriever, lion and otter – developed by Gary Smalley and John Trent, from their book *The Two Sides of Love*. (Published by Focus on the Family. Copyright 1992. Uses permission) Use of animal names makes the learning styles much easier to remember and refer to.



## THE BEAVER

### The Concrete Sequential Learning Style

**Traits:** *Details, accurate, consistent, factual, organized, hard working, dependable.*

Campers with a concrete sequential learning style live life in a straight-forward manner. There are no-nonsense communications, and may sometimes be received as cold and impersonal. The concrete sequential prefers direct interaction and does not pick up on hints or hidden meanings.

Much like a beaver in the pond, this style is able to maximize efficiency, always looking to improve and streamline operations. These individuals actually read directions and complete projects using all the designated parts. Concrete sequential are natural list-makers, and good at keeping schedules.

It is a challenge for a concrete sequential to participate in group projects, especially if there are unclear directions and open timelines. This individual has difficulty being spontaneous and using their imagination.

Concrete sequential campers are very conscientious. It is important for them to complete tasks correctly, with much attention to detail. They are very literal, and will hold staff accountable to promises and expectations. Such as campers will uphold the letter of the communication, not the intent or unspoken message.

Concrete sequential campers are stressed by unclear expectations, vague or general directions. They are overwhelmed when they perceive too much to do, or do not know where to start. Giving advance notice of change as well as clear expectations can help concrete sequential campers adjust most easily.

**How to handle beavers:** Respect their need for detailed information. Keep in mind that questions for detailed information. Keep in mind that questions are asked for clarification, and are not intended to drive you crazy. It is very important for beaver campers to feel they understand expectations and can do things right.

**How to counsel beavers:** Be consistent. Beaver campers will remember promises made and recognize missed steps in routines. They need to be encouraged to take risks and try new activities. Counselors must be sensitive to campers' need for advanced notice so they can prepare themselves.

## THE GOLDEN

### The Abstract



## RETRIEVER

### Sequential Learning Style

**Traits:** *Analytic, objective, knowledgeable, structured, deliberate, systematic.*

Campers with an abstract sequential learning style deliberate very carefully on most issues and decisions. They evaluate and analyze all options thoroughly. The abstract sequential is constantly searching for more information.

The golden retriever is typical of man's best friend, loyal and steady. These individuals keep their emotions in check, while searching for why they are experiencing their feelings. They also expect others to be able to justify their emotions. It is difficult for individuals with the abstract sequential style to share emotions, preferring to guard their personal responses.

Abstract sequential campers are very sensitive; they have difficulty expressing feelings. Campers may be more quiet and appear withdrawn. Their minds are busy processing information and sorting for meaning.

**How to handle golden retrievers:** Golden retriever campers need time to complete tasks and assignments. They would rather not do something at all than to be rushed and do it completely. Golden retrievers thrive when given opportunities to use their intuitive, analytic abilities.

**How to counsel golden retrievers:** As much as possible, use reason and logic when communicating. Give thorough and complete information; keep things more factual than emotional. Allow campers time to process. Don't pressure for quick responses to emotional issues. When they are ready to talk, use good listening skills to hear what they are truly saying.

## The LION

### The Concrete Random



### Learning Style

**Traits:** *Quick intuitive, adventurous, realistic, creative, instinctive.*

Individual with a concrete random learning style must experience life to believe it. They are the least likely to take someone's word for anything. The concrete random style is a natural risk-taker, wanting to receive all life has to offer.

Taking after the lion in the wild, campers with this style are quick-thinking and resourceful. They concrete random style is a natural risk-taker, wanting to receive all life has to offer.

Taking after the lion in the wild, campers with this style are quick-thinking and resourceful. They perceive new possibilities and make them a reality. It is difficult for the concrete random style to accept limits, especially if they don't seem to make sense to them or are outdated. Such campers rebel at "power" moves, not liking to be given dictates.

Concrete random campers are usually full of energy, curiosity, and new ideas. They are seekers of action, and boredom is their worst enemy.

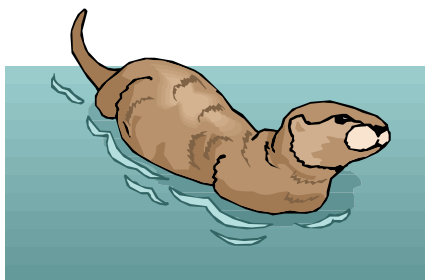
They have a strong-willed determination, and accept rules best when allowed involvement in their establishment and input into the consequences. The concrete random style may defy ultimatums, rebelling at being controlled. While concrete random campers challenge the structure, they still expect adults to be in authority. They respond to the facts that there are boundaries and consequences will be enforced.

**How to handle lions:** Give lion campers opportunities to use their natural leadership abilities. When presenting tasks, tell "what" needs to be accomplished, and allow campers to determine "how" to get there. Be open to campers' suggestions for better methods and efficiency.

**How to counsel lions:** Be creative in communicating. They will best relate to the bold, adventurous side of Jesus. Don't overact when campers throw out ideas or answers that at first appear to be "off the wall". Spend as much time questions. This presents a challenge to lions and helps them to refine their ideas.

## THE OTTER

### The Abstract Random



### Learning Style

**Traits:** *Compassionate, sentimental, perceptive, imaginative, spontaneous, and idealistic.*

Those with an abstract random learning style are able to intuitively read situations and understand people without any verbal interaction. They believe people are the essence of life, and they're driven by relationships.

Campers with the abstract random style are very uncomfortable with conflict. They often find themselves as peacemakers, resolving the conflicts of others, and will give up their own desires to see someone else happy.

Just a like a perceptive, playful otter, swimming in a stream with its young, those with this style enjoy the lighter side of life. (An otter is known to swim just for recreation.) They thrive on being around people. It is important that they feel included and "in" on happenings. They desire to be valued for their caring and concern for others.

Abstract random campers are most eager to please others. They may have a difficult adjustment at camp if they don't feel liked and accepted. They respond positively to other taking a personal interest in them. It doesn't take other campers long to appreciate the compassion of the abstract sequential camper. It is often this individual who provides the comfort and caring to those in need.

**How to handle otters:** Otter campers need to have verbal assurance of their acceptance and value to others. They thrive on opportunities to work with others, especially if they can be creative.

**How to counsel otters:** When communicating with otters, share the sensitive, compassionate side of Jesus. Also, use your relationship to your advantage; affirm otters, yet challenge them to go further. Be careful not to brush off their emotional intensity, but show appreciation for their deep level of feeling and caring.

## The Value of Understanding Learning Styles

Here are three distinct ways you can benefit from understanding the ways people learn:

1. Understand self. Learn to recognize your own strengths. This will allow you to capitalize on situations in which you can use your gifts.

It is equally important to learn which styles are most different from your own. People with these "opposite" styles may pose the greatest challenge in the area of compatibility. Understanding learning styles will allow you to recognize that differences are inherent.

2. Understand other staff. Camping is a team effort. You will need to work alongside others who may be totally different from you. By recognizing and accepting their learning styles, your team is strengthened.

Understanding way people learn also allows a common language for conflict resolution. It can be a communication tool for discussing different moods and stresses. During the intense moments in camping, it is good to know as much as possible about those with whom you are working, and how to support each other.

3. Provide the best environment for campers. As a counselor, you'll want to establish an environment for all campers to feel respected and appreciated, and to get their most out of their camp experience. Campers have different styles and need different opportunities to learn and express themselves. It is your job to make sure each camper has the maximum number of opportunities for growth and development.

## "Jeremy, Sit Still and Listen!"

Let's return to Jeremy. The counselor defined "listening" as sitting straight on the log, eyes focused forward, hands still (probably resembling the counselor's own style of optimal learning). Had he flexed and recognized Jeremy's internal concentration, the counselor may have accepted the "distracting" behaviors that were part of Jeremy's optimal learning style.

Understanding campers' learning style may be the key to unlocking the most fulfilling camp experience for campers. Each style requires distinct factors, which, when respected, accelerated growth and personal development.

One of the greatest challenges of camp counseling is not just allowing for the different styles, but encouraging each to thrive!