

Authority Embers

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Theme: Processing the concept of authority through an active metaphor

Age of campers: 12-15

Time allotted/actual: 45-60 minutes

Location: Anywhere outside where the campers can walk around and follow simple instructions

Props/Materials/Symbols: Hats, bandanas, weird costumes or anything else that you may want to use in order to present your odd instructions. This can also be done just as easily with instruction only and no props at all.

Prep done: Gather the materials and meet everyone.

Opening/Mood set: Announce that embers is about to begin but do not mention anything about the topic or answer any questions about why or what direction things are going in. Lead the campers to a new location in silence, and say nothing about the destination in advance.

Questions/Activities:

1st activity: Begin by giving the group a series of strange and seemingly disconnected instructions to perform small and irregular tasks. Use telling style (imperative commands given as direct orders) and do not answer any why questions.

Ex: "Take off your shoes and put each one on the wrong foot. Now, tie the laces up on the left on but not the right one. Ok, now tie this bandana around your chin with a knot on top of your head. Then, put one arm inside your shirt and use the other one to hold firmly on to your opposite ear. Now, you're all going to follow me in a conga line and jump on every third step chanting the word 'rutabaga' with each leap." Play this game, continuing to add weird instructions and commands as you go, for about 5-7 minutes. In almost all instances, the campers will go along with it and follow your instructions--however, if any one questions you forcefully or refuses, it is excellent fodder for the later discussion. Here is an opportunity to see what happens.

2nd activity: Next, sit everyone down and start asking some questions. How did they feel seeing this use of authoritative dictation in you (especially if this is far from your usual methodology)? Why on earth did they follow (or not follow) those insanely weird commands? Would it have been different if someone else (school teacher, relative, etc.) had tried the same thing? What makes you and the instructions that you give different?

3rd activity: Who are the real authority figures in our lives? Who are we likely to follow? To challenge? To obey without question? To exercise authority over ourselves? Why? What kind of leadership engenders enough loyalty, trust or respect that we each are willing to recognize it without the need for legitimate power?

Closing: Ask the campers to be silent and reflect on the discussion as they walk back.

Were other people involved? A guest presence from a specifically selected person that the group may have a known trust or respect-based relationship with can be powerful as a discussion point.

Thoughts on pacing? Don't cut out on the instruction phase too early. Give the campers JUST enough time to get a little bit confused and frustrated and start questioning what they are doing. Too fast, and it may seem novel and not carry as much weight into the discussion.

What would you change next time / what did you learn / how would you enhance it? This can be especially powerful as an issue resolution embers for a sticky situation involving authority challenges, if implemented directly after a real life situation in which a camper is challenging the process or showing signs of struggle with instructions.

Camper feedback: Tried and true, with many positive reviews over several years.