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KARIN KIRK

CARE AND FEEDING OF SECOND-YEAR INSTRUCTORS: STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORT, INCLUSION, AND GROWTH

By Karin Kirk

Remember all those instructors you hired last year? Many are coming back for another round. So, now what do you do with them? First-year instructors are generally consumed with learning the tricks of the trade, getting their Level

I certification, and trying not to drown while drinking from the fire hose of the new-hire experience. Instructors in their fourth year and onward have generally set their paths and are working toward earning more certifications or specialist credentials.

But what about those who are in the middle? How can you help those ski and snowboard instructors transition from new-hire to career pro? As snowsports schools strive to boost employee retention, supporting second-year instructors can be a key opportunity to help new instructors become committed professionals.

PITFALLS AND CHALLENGES FOR SECOND-YEAR INSTRUCTORS

Instructors with one season of teaching under their belts have demonstrated basic proficiency of the job. They survived the whirlwind of their first season, and they returned for more. It's tempting to have high

expectations for these instructors – maybe too high. A supervisor may inadvertently hand off a lesson that's more challenging than a second-year instructor is ready for. Maybe it's a higher ability level or different age group than they've worked with before. “Essentially these instructors are entering virgin territory with the expectation that they can make it work,” explains Nate Gardner, training manager and examiner at Vermont's Stowe Mountain Resort.

Some instructors may be able to call on their past experience, limited though it is, and pull off teaching a challenging lesson. But it's a tough situation, and they risk making a mistake or coming up short. The flip side of that same situation is that returning instructors are keen to move up to higher-level lessons. Supervisors need to offer just enough challenge to keep instructors motivated, while keeping them well within their abilities. This can be a tricky balance.

Along the same lines, some second-year instructors may return to the locker room feeling like they've already learned enough. After all, they survived last year, so now they're pretty much set to go, right? Sure, they know how to get the basic job done, but in reality they've only scratched the surface. “They have just enough knowledge to stop asking questions,” says Gates Lloyd, the snowsports director for Colorado's Arapahoe Basin. For example, some instructors may think that the way to teach higher-level lessons is simply to go to harder terrain. But without a strong working knowledge of the fundamentals, they'll be at a loss for how to guide their students' progress.

Second-year instructors – regardless of the discipline they teach – may feel rudderless. They were under close watch during their first season but now they will need to be self-directed. In a perfect world, they'd find mentors, pursue training, and continue their development. But there's no guarantee of that. In a sense, the second year is the make-or-break season. Will these instructors venture off into their own orbits, or will they stay engaged with the school's professional development programs?

ADVICE FOR TRAINERS, SUPERVISORS, AND SCHOOL DIRECTORS

There are likely different driving forces behind each instructor's decision to return to your operation, whether in a fulltime or part-time capacity. By learning what motivates and appeals to your instructors, you can plan how to keep them happy and growing. To lay the groundwork for instructors to return year after year, Maggie Loring, the director of Utah's Snowbird Mountain School, recommends pre-planning and direct communication. "As soon as you know they are coming back, get a plan together," she advises. "Hopefully, as they made the exit stage left in the spring, you had the opportunity to ask them why they would like to return."

Loring describes some common factors that motivate instructors to return.

- The excitement and challenge of the job: "Wow, I like getting up in the morning for this!"
- Opportunities for personal growth and recognition: "This year I'm going to start training for my Level II. My trainers

encouraged me to start on it, my skiing/riding is improving, and I'm looking forward to learning more and getting better at helping my students."

- Friends they have made in the locker room and on the hill: "We had some great times together on the mountain and after work. I can't wait to see _____ again and go for a run!"
- The culture of pride for the resort and the school: "I like that the area and school are professionally run, have high standards, and value staff and the work we do. It's a great school, and I want to be part of that!"

"Once you know the motivations," Loring says, "you can address each one as an individual, yet provide the needed support system to keep them going."

Start with Goal-Setting

Most of us don't get better at our jobs by accident. We set goals, make plans, and get to work. Instructors in their second year are poised to begin this process. Help instruc-



Supervisors can strive to keep instructors in their "sweet spot" by assigning lessons that help them grow, while not throwing them to the lions.

tors learn the difference between extrinsic (achievement-oriented) and intrinsic (mastery-oriented) motivations and goals. Dis-

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cuss what makes a reasonable goal, and how to measure progress. "Having your goals 'go public' makes you more accountable to working towards them," says Gardner. At Bridger Bowl, instructors begin the season by using a goal-setting worksheet to identify their priorities and make a concrete plan for improvement.

Help Second-Year Instructors Feel Valued

Nicholas Herrin, who, before becoming CEO of PSIA-AASI, was the assistant general manager at Colorado's Crested Butte Mountain Resort, notes, "Second-year instructors get overlooked at the beginning of the year. They are leaned on hard because everyone is focused on training the new instructor, so, at times, they're getting lost in the shuffle."

This situation can't be completely prevented but it can be alleviated, he says, by helping these instructors feel included as part of a larger team. For example, second-year instructors were new hires not long ago, so they can offer sage advice to this year's

new crop. Clinics specifically designed for second-year staff can help them continue to bond as a group and help them translate last year's accomplishments to this year's growth.

Make Skill Development Fun and Rewarding

"Show them that improving their skiing is rewarding," says Gardner. "When you can get a group of second- and third-year instructors together, clinics should emphasize fun and movement. Take them on exploratory missions to find new terrain for both teaching and freeskiing, while also exploring new tactics and better technique. Keep the energy high and show them that training can be fun as well as informative."

Some schools even reimburse instructors for clinics and certification exams, which is a pretty cool way to help drive staff retention.

Show How Different Ideas Are Connected and Organized

Movement analysis can be an unwieldy task for new instructors. Trainers can help

connect the dots between what instructors are working on in their own riding and how those same themes are tied to what their students will be learning. By using the fundamentals of good skiing and riding, instructors can begin to understand that different movements can be organized under the same umbrella.

Loring adds, "Make sure they have a trainer who can show them how to analyze their own skiing or snowboarding and then apply it to teaching others. This provides both challenge and personal connection, with the goal of improving the service they provide the guests."

Encourage Lateral Learning

Last year these new instructors had no choice but to digest a ton of new information. Now, they need to develop depth. They can learn about movement analysis, bootfitting, communication skills, or the differences between kids and adults.

There are huge worlds for these instructors to uncover. Keep the learning


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relevant and engaging, and make it obvious how a bigger toolbox makes their job easier and makes them more successful. Gates sums it up tidily: “Learning prevents burnout.”

Communicate the ‘Why’ Of Drills and Tasks

Gail Setlock, the snowsports school director at New York’s Gore Mountain, advises that newer instructors need to understand what’s behind a given drill before they incorporate it into lessons. “Sometimes instructors work on a task with students, but may not really know what to look for or why things are happening. They may use the drill because they saw a seasoned staff doing it, or they were given the task to perform in a training clinic.” Introduce the fun and challenge of drills in clinics, but be sure to impart a solid understanding of when to use it, why, and results to watch for with students.

Use Peer Learning and Mentoring for a Healthy Dynamics

Peer-to-peer learning is a natural complement to traditional clinics. Trainers and supervisors can pair newer instructors with more seasoned coaches in a way that benefits both parties.

For example, an instructor prepping for Level III certification can help newer pros dial in their demos. Your best “Children’s



JIM DRIVER

Having a tight-knit group of instructors makes it less likely that newer instructors will fall through the cracks.

PSIA-AASI UNVEILS FIRST STAGE OF NEW LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

New for the 2017-18 season, PSIA-AASI is launching an online Learning Management System (LMS), a new tool instructors can use to take their professional develop up several notches. The LMS is an exciting new platform PSIA-AASI will use to deliver its E-learning Course for New Instructors this fall, which covers the basic information instructors new to snowsports need to know.

This course walks new instructors through what it means to be a snow pro, including expectations for the professionalism they should embody when working for ski and ride schools and resorts. The course also covers educational theory and best practices in teaching, various elements of the Learning Partnership, and how to use PSIA-AASI’s Teaching Cycle to

prepare for and conduct lessons. In addition, new instructors will also benefit from various safety tips regarding lift and helmet use, terrain selection, and ways to avoid collisions. To help check for understanding, the course incorporates various quizzes on the material covered, and those who pass the quizzes receive a certificate heralding their newfound knowledge.

The E-Learning Course for New Instructors is the first of many resources that will be rolled into the Learning Management System, so instructors of all disciplines in all stages of their careers can look forward to even more content in the coming months. Stay tuned for updates at TheSnowPros.org and the PSIA-AASI e-newsletter as new material is added.

Whisperer” can team-teach with a new instructor, share strategies, and take turns chasing down wayward kids. Peer learning also helps ease an overly hierarchical structure within a snowsports school and can improve buy-in from instructors.

Notice, Recognize, and Reward Good Work

“Recognition for a job well done is so important for staff retention,” notes Loring. “People want to be noticed for the work they put in.” She hits on one of the key components to employee happiness. Just about everyone likes to know their work is appreciated. Second-year instructors are still navigating their way through the system, so public examples of employee recognition send a clear message of the type of work that’s admired.

Many schools reward things like frequent participation in training, working extra shifts, or generating repeat clients. But instructors can also be recognized for less-traditional feats, like finding a lost student, being the last one to come inside on an epic powder day, helping clean the locker room, or being an unfailing good sport, despite back-to-back lessons with crying 4-year-olds. Loring advises, “Be sure your team has a system that triggers the reward or acknowledgment or you may miss it in the heat of the moment.”

Make Time for Play Time


The season is long and, at times, the mood in the locker room can be serious. Even skiing

bumps can become un-fun if an instructor is worried about being criticized. Make time for some pure fun, and encourage participation. Loring advises, “It might be just free skiing with a group or a meet-up after work, or even a community race series – whatever the event, make sure they feel welcome.”

Don’t Let These Instructors Fall through the Cracks

A little bit of outreach can go a long way with this group. Take the time to recognize specific examples of praise-worthy performance, such as saying “I liked how you had your class working on skidded short turns right before the steeper section of that run. Good use of terrain.”

In addition, check in with instructors to ask how things are going for them. What questions do they have? What types of lessons are they enjoying most? What challenges would they like help with? This can help catch small issues before they become larger problems, and it reinforces a supportive work environment.

Above all, the very best thing to do with second-year instructors is to keep them learning, let them know they are supported, and help them create opportunities for success. 

Karin Kirk is a Level III alpine instructor, staff trainer, and Ridge Guide at Montana’s Bridger Bowl. Off snow, she’s a freelance writer specializing in science and education.

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