

## Camp Kesem MIT: A Three Lens Analysis

### **HISTORY OF CAMP KESEM**

Kesem in Hebrew means “magic,” a name indicative of the mission of Camp Kesem. The first Camp Kesem was founded in 2001 at Stanford University as a summer camp program for children whose parents have or have had cancer. The idea was to provide one week of magical memories to last campers through the difficult doctors visits, chemotherapy, and often deaths faced by their families. Today, Camp Kesem is a non-denominational camp free for all interested families. The dual mission of Camp Kesem is to serve youth in the community while developing leadership skills in college students in planning and executing a non-profit camp. As a Stanford staff member, founder Iris Rave initially helped four students establish a program that hosted 37 campers in its first year. They chose the name “Kesem” to reflect the magical atmosphere that summer camp provides. Building off the momentum of a successful local program, Camp Kesem quickly spread to other college campuses and became a national organization. In 2010, 23 college campuses nationwide hosted camps totaling 1,206 campers and 822 student leaders.<sup>i</sup> Camp Kesem National was started in 2002 to meet the need for an umbrella organization to unify local chapters.

The MIT chapter of Camp Kesem was founded in 2006 by a freshman, Caroline Huang. Huang had participated in summer camps all through her youth and also had personal ties to cancer advocacy.<sup>ii</sup> As a result she initiated the first Camp Kesem MIT in 2007. Since then, the MIT chapter has become one of Camp Kesem National’s strongest programs, serving 60 campers and over 30 counselors in 2010. The remarkable success of Camp Kesem in just ten years at the local and national levels reveals an organization built on a strong foundation that was readily duplicated in other regions. Camp Kesem can also serve as a valuable model for other non-

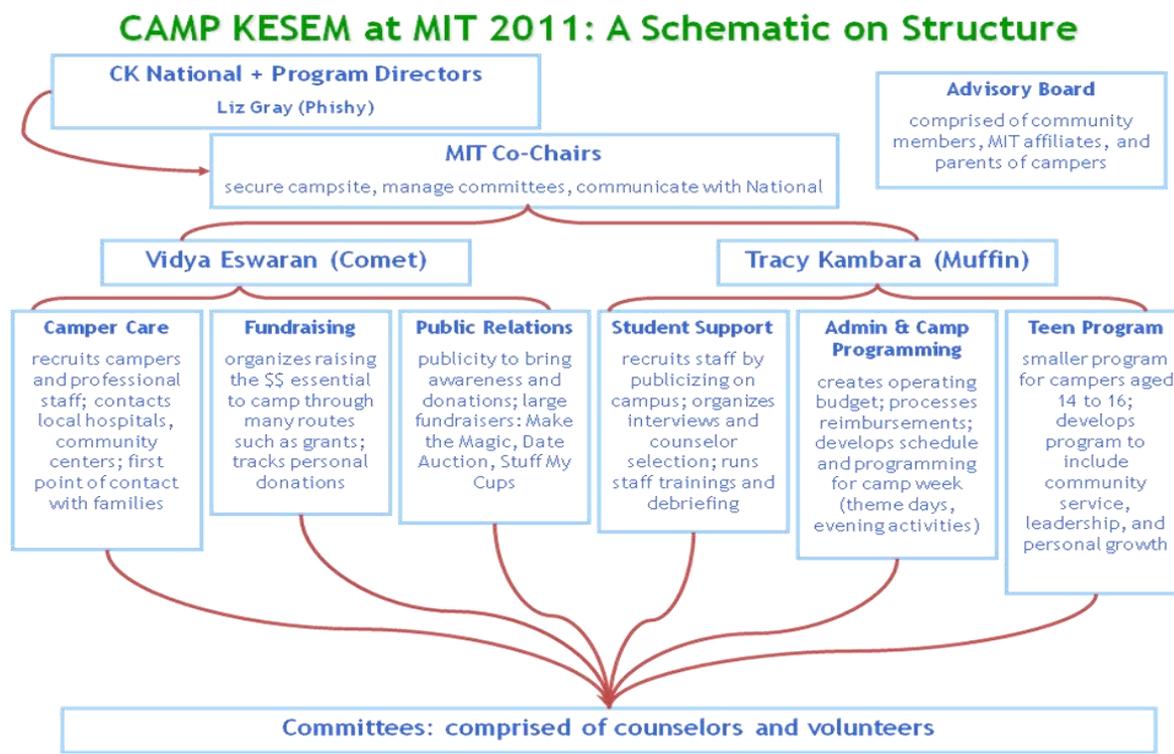
profits seeking to expand or develop their organizations. Here, the organization of Camp Kesem is studied to provide insight into the operations and logistics of a successful national non-profit.

## STRATEGIC DESIGN

### Strategic Grouping

Operation of Camp Kesem at MIT can be split into two areas: year-round preparation for camp and the week-long camp program. Because each division uses different strategic grouping, MIT Camp Kesem can be considered to have a unique hybrid structure. During the preparation phase, the camp hierarchy is functional but during the implementation phase camp uses a matrix structure.

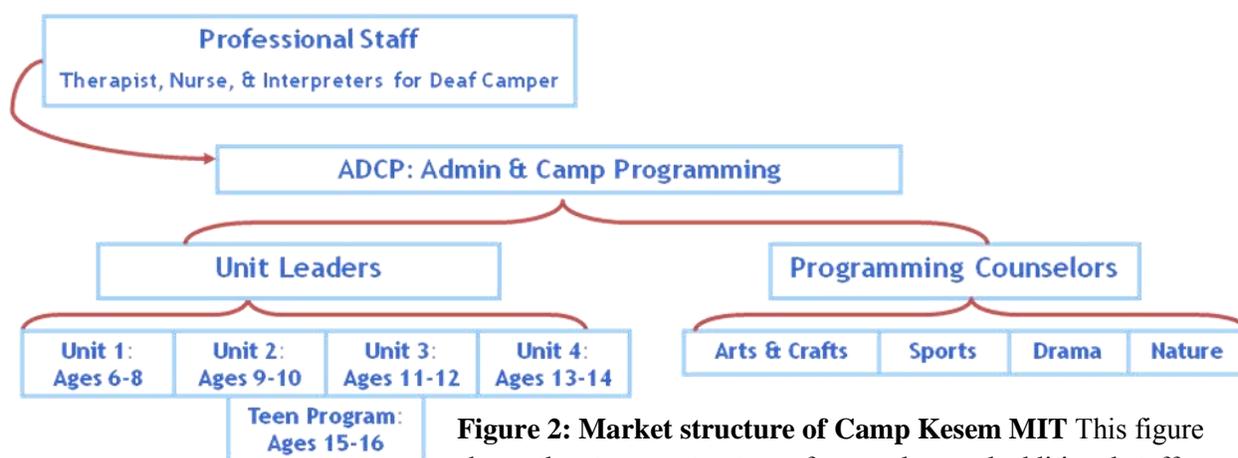
The majority of the year is spent in preparation for camp and a functional structure is used (Figure 1). At the top of the local chapter are the two co-chairs who report to their assigned



**Figure 1: Functional Structure of Camp Kesem MIT** This figure shows the pre-camp hierarchy used to structurally organize staff for counselors to the nation director *Source: MIT Camp Kesem Training Documents*

national program director. Currently, the co-chairs are MIT senior Tracy Kambara and MIT junior Vidya Eswaran. As a completely college-student run organization, there are numerous sustainability issues that arise. One way that Camp Kesem ensures that the crucial co-chairs positions are filled by qualified and experienced leaders is by mandating that at least one co-chair is a junior who will not graduate after serving the position. Further, co-chairs are appointed by the co-chairs and national program director from the previous year. There are 12 coordinators who report directly to one of the co-chairs. Each co-chair performs a subset of the planning process and collaborates with others on joint projects. For example, the Student Support team works on counselor recruitment in the fall and counselor selection and training in the spring. Camper Care's major role is recruitment of regular program campers in the greater Boston area but they are also a point of contact for parents during camp and a liaison to MIT's advisory board. The Teen Program coordinators serve a similar function but recruit specifically teen campers and are also tasked with programming for the teen program such as planning an independent camping trip. Finally, each coordinator pair receives a portion of the remaining 30-40 counselors to serve on their committee. The committees are primarily mobilized for large events. Because Camp Kesem has no treasurer, finances are handled in a somewhat ad hoc manner. The fundraising team tracks all money raised and how much money is in the bank and the ADCP Administration and Camp Programming) coordinators handle reimbursements and all expenditures. No problems have arisen with this setup so far because there have always been surplus funds to draw on while money is being raised. The disconnect between money in and money out may cause problems for Camp Kesem in the future if expenditures begin to increase beyond current savings.

During camp itself, counselors are grouped by “market” or by camper age group (Figure 2). Most often, the co-chairs are joined by ADCP (to form the “Admin Team” which coordinates the day-to-day programming of camp including daily activities, meals, and major ceremonies. There are typically four camper units and one teen unit, each with a unit leader that reports to Admin. Unit leaders direct the 6-8 cabin counselors and are in charge of the campers for their age group. As a sub-structure, there are four programming counselors, one each for arts and crafts, sports, nature, and drama. Programming counselors are selected among the cabin counselors but simultaneously report to Admin forming a matrix-like sub-structure. Completing the camp staff are the camp nurse and therapist. Both are hired or volunteer professionals who provide expertise beyond what can be expected of college students. In 2010, Camp Kesem served a deaf camper and two interpreters were brought on for additional help. Though these experts are available to all campers and counselors, they ultimately report to the Admin team.



Courtesy of Camp Kesem National. Used with permission.

Camp Kesem effectively uses two different structures to suit the needs of its program. For example, grouping counselors by camper age group allows each counselor to form closer bonds with their assigned unit and is crucial to maintaining what could be considered “customer trust.” At camp, it would not make sense to group counselors by function yet during camp preparation functional grouping is highly effective. Tasks are distributed appropriately across the

coordinator pairs and roles are clearly defined. Yet, when new tasks arise, especially those that could fall under the duties of two coordinator pairs, work becomes hard to delegate or coordinate. To resolve this issue, Camp Kesem has established several methods of linking.

### Linking

Linking closes the gaps in the structure of Camp Kesem. Most importantly, since most students on the coordinator board are part of numerous organizations they have expertise that can be applied to different positions. It is important to provide opportunities for these counselors to share their knowledge. To this end, there are several formal and informal means of linking, especially among the coordinators.

Biweekly ACM's (All Coordinator Meetings) are an important form of linking. During the one hour meetings, each coordinator pair gives a report on their progress over the previous two weeks. Many coordinator pairs use this time to solicit help or advice on events they are planning or ideas they are testing. It is also useful for coordinating projects across teams and making sure that planned events do not conflict with other camp related activities. During the planning phase of camp, counselors who are not on the coordinator board often have little to no role. If ACMs were open, other counselors would have greater opportunity to contribute to the development of camp.

One temporary cross-unit group that arose in Spring 2010 was a committee formed between Fundraising and the Major Events Coordinators (now the Public Relations Coordinators). Both pairs focused primarily on raising money for camp and the largest task in the spring is helping each counselor raise their required \$300. Rather than only one pair supervising all 35 counselors, each member of the team was assigned 8 counselors who they tracked and

assisted. There are rare occasions in which tasks are too large for any one individual pair; here linking can play a pivotal role in distributing work so that tasks do not fall between the cracks.

A potential area for a permanent cross-unit group would be between Teen Program and ADCP. One critique from Camp Kesem 2010 was that the programming for the teen program was so different from that of the rest of camp that the teens seemed to be a separate camp altogether. If Teen Program and ADCP were to meet periodically or increase their communication, it may be possible to find programming that is appropriate for both younger kids and older kids. This would unify camp and foster a better sense of community.

Informal linking gently reinforces the structure of Camp Kesem by bringing together experienced coordinators and new ideas. Since coordinators are selected annually, they may choose to apply for different positions each year. Previous coordinators for any given position may then still be on the board and are a unique source of information for current coordinators. Each coordinator pair is required to hold a transitioning meeting with the previous coordinators of their position but when new problems arise, it is useful to have direct access to old data.

Finally, another source of linking is that between chapters nationwide. Periodically, Nationals compiles “best practices” documentation and distributes it to all chapters. This helps to generate and share ideas that are proven to work for the unique needs of Camp Kesem. Additionally, National hosts a weekend conference each year where representatives can meet to discuss their programs. There are several opportunities to meet people who hold the same position at other camps. Yet linking between campuses outside these two areas is quite scarce. Each year when coordinators are selected, contact information should be made available especially so that new campuses can benefit from the experience of old campuses.

## Alignment

One aspect of alignment is motivation. Although Camp Kesem is an amazing cause, it is often difficult to motivate counselors to raise their mandatory \$400. This is especially true for new counselors who are required to raise money before they attend camp; how can you attest to the benefits of camp to a donor when you have never experienced it first-hand? Thus far, the fundraising team has relied on the appeal of camp as a worthwhile experience to motivate counselors to raise money but there may be more concrete ways to align the interests of counselors with the need to financially support camp. There could potentially be a reward for the top counselor fundraiser. Alternatively, interests could be grouped by units and counselors could fundraise as a team. This way, any counselor who underperforms is accountable to their unit rather than just the fundraising team.

As a non-profit organization run almost entirely by volunteers, there is strong alignment of goals among coordinators and counselors. All parties involved work towards the ultimate goal of achieving a fun and safe environment for all campers. Competing interests are usually resolved based on what is best for camp on the rare occasions that they arise. Members of the coordinator board are guaranteed a counselor spot at camp. All other counselors are required to reapply each year and may or may not be invited back based on previous performance and the needs of camp that year. The ultimate decision to accept or reject counselor is Student Support's though they rely heavily on advice from the other coordinators. Still, the only incentive for coordinators to use in motivating counselors to fundraise and assist in camp preparation is the desire to make camp better. This has caused problems in the past because once a counselor is selected and trained in the Spring, they cannot be replaced by the August camp dates if they do

not fulfill their duties. As a result, some counselors do not complete their fundraising or do not attend mandatory meetings without ramifications.

Evaluations are the final component of Camp used in alignment. Each year, Kesem National Program Directors visits the week of camp and spends time assessing performance based on a list of standards. These evaluations hold local chapters nationwide accountable to the mission and priorities of Nationals. Evaluation requirements are met not only by the chapter overall but also by individual coordinator pairs. These evaluations seek to align chapters with National. According to Caroline Huang<sup>ii</sup>, local to national alignment is difficult because most counselors feel stronger allegiance to their camp than the national organization. At the local level, camps are evaluated by camper and counselor retention rates and through pre- and post-camp surveys of campers, parents, and counselors. These evaluations provide incentives for coordinators and counselors to meet and exceed expectations.

## **POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT**

### **Stakeholders**

There are numerous stakeholders with vested interest in camp at both the national and chapter level. First, at the local level, two major stakeholders are the parents and campers. Because camp is a service provided for these groups, their interests often trump those of other stakeholders. For example, in the first years of Camp Kesem MIT, buses were provided to transport campers from Boston to the New Hampshire campsite. Because buses cost \$3,000, a significant portion of the \$50,000 budget, they were cut in the third year of camp. Due to complaints from parents who were inconvenienced with the budget cut, fundraising efforts had to include the cost of buses in the fourth year of camp. This conflict of interest brings to light an additional stakeholder, the coordinators and counselors. These parties constrain the growth of

camp and the service provided with logistical considerations and quality control. Although rapid growth of camp would meet the demands of campers and parents, the coordinators and counselors limit expansion so that national standards are met and so that safety of all parties is ensured. Similarly, Camp Kesem Nationals is most concerned with maintaining high standards for local chapters for branding of the Camp Kesem name. The credibility of Camp Kesem is important to donors who wish to see their money put to good use. Ultimately, donors look to parent and camper satisfaction to assess the value of their contributions. Thus, the stakeholders show not only a network of dependency but also a circular relationship between interests.

### Power

The structure of Camp Kesem establishes an inherent hierarchy of power. Starting at the top, the national Board of Directors has the power to mandate policy for all local chapters (Elizabeth Gray<sup>iii</sup>). This power is enforced through the two program directors who work directly with campuses. Still, there is potential for students to influence policy through the National Student Advisory Board. At the local chapter level, the co-chairs have ultimate authority in resolving issues but coordinators are more directly responsible for the operations of camp. Counselors remain at the bottom of the positional hierarchy though they maintain authority over campers.

Positional power is muddled by the experience of different counselors. For example, because one co-chair must be a junior, they may be in charge of coordinators who are seniors. This could result in tense relationships when interests conflict. Additionally, now that Camp Kesem MIT is in its fifth year of existence, there are some counselors who have been with the program from the start. Their experience gives them knowledge based power over others, especially new counselors. As a result, although one counselor may hold a coordinator position,

they may have less influence in their unit at camp than another counselor who has served for three years. Conversely, the track record of counselor performance may be held against them if they had poor evaluations in previous years. Because the application rate for counselors is very high, this likely will mean that these counselors would not be invited back to camp the next year but poor performance throughout the year can also diminish their power at camp. Thus far, word of mouth has been sufficient to recruit the requisite female counselors. Recruiting male counselors is typically more difficult. Past Student Support teams have tried to use on campus recruiting such as emails, posters, and information sessions in addition to off campus recruiting through fraternities. Most male counselors are recruited by past counselors who refer close friends. Few counselors leave the program once they have attended camp. In the past, the only counselors who have not returned if they qualified did not do so because of illness or conflicts with sports or jobs<sup>ii</sup>.

Imbalances in power also arise from the dual nature of Camp Kesem positions. Because all coordinators are chosen in pairs, there are often cases in which one coordinator exerts greater power over the other. In fact, since coordinator pairs usually have one experience and one less experienced member, this is a likely scenario. This power dynamic will likely influence the way the coordinator position operates. Similarly, because there are two co-chairs each year at camp, decisions must be cleared by both co-chairs. Any imbalances in power between the two co-chairs become readily apparent when coordinators attempt to make changes in camp operations. Likewise, coordinators are offered two avenues to bring about change and can use the co-chair dynamic to their advantage.

Finally, a number of informal networks exist among Camp Kesem counselors. For example, most volunteers are recruited through fraternities and sororities on campus. Since some

fraternities and sororities are over-represented, certain counselors may exert greater influence at camp because of their shared network. Similar relationships arise from living group affiliation. These informal networks shape the way counselors interact with one another and the way information is spread through camp. The importance of informal networks is most important when selecting co-coordinators because some individuals may be chosen because they know the co-chairs through other organizations or their co-coordinator may be chosen based on compatibility. Co-coordinator positions are highly competitive with many more applicants than can be selected so these informal connections may be pivotal in securing a position.

## **CULTURE**

### Values

Because Camp Kesem serves a disadvantaged youth population, the values upheld are important in determining the structure of camp. The first value of camp is safety. Camp Kesem MIT abides by a two-to-one camper-to-counselor ratio so that special attention can be given to all campers. Safety measures trump all other considerations since the risk of injury could jeopardize the existence of the organization at both the local and national level. Counselor-camper trust also factors into decisions made at camp. All counselors live in the same cabin as their campers so that they are available at all times. One poignant example of the importance of counselor-camper trust occurred two years ago when a visiting camp advisor decided to steal all the sleeping bags of one of the boys' cabins. This caused the boys to raid a girl's cabin in playful retaliation. Although no one was hurt, there was minor property damage to a counselor's laptop and several girls felt that their privacy had been violated. The prank caused a division among counselors, half of whom thought that pranks should be allowed at camp. The remaining

counselors felt that the sense of security fostered at Camp Kesem was too valuable. Ultimately, pranks were banned in the next year of camp to maintain trust among counselors and campers.

### Symbols



**Figure 3: Camp Kesem Logo** The blue and green caterpillar is now a national symbol that unifies all local chapters.

Courtesy of Camp Kesem National. Used with permission.

The major symbol of Camp Kesem nation-wide is a green and blue caterpillar (Figure 3). The cartoon symbol creates playful imagery that is intended to represent the lighthearted nature of camp and its focus on children’s rights. Another symbol at camp are the nicknames that each camper and counselor goes by. From the second that camp commences every August, everyone abandons their name for a new chosen name such as “Captain,” “Peanut,” or “Baloo.” The idea is that for one week, counselors and campers can be a different person, separate from their difficulties at home. Counselors work hard to ensure that campers do not find out their real names and that campers do not reveal their real names to each other. These symbolic names are also meant to reinforce the safe atmosphere of Camp Kesem.

### Subcultures

Camp Kesem MIT has a subculture unique to our campus. First, returning counselors and campers help to retain the culture year after year at camp. For example, alumni are relied on to teach new counselors and campers the rules and to reinforce traditions. Additionally, on several

occasions, visitors from other sites or from Camp Kesem National have pointed out that the program at MIT has a different feel to it. For example, Camp Kesem MIT has a substantive curriculum in Nature. Unlike other campuses that have programming involved in hiking or enjoying the outdoors, Camp Kesem MIT actively educates campers on the environment. Furthermore, MIT places an emphasis on excellence, especially concerning the national operating standards evaluations. For two years now, MIT has scored a perfect 100% on the evaluation, one of only two campuses to accomplish this. Three years ago MIT scored a 98% only because counselors were not taking their mandatory breaks during the day. The consistent dedication of MIT counselors is supported by the words of Program Director Elizabeth Gray<sup>iii</sup>, “I have found that my MIT students always strive for camp to be the best, are constantly thinking of ways to change things and make things better and are very good at seeing the big picture of CK MIT and even Camp Kesem as an organization.”

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The dual purpose of Camp Kesem, to serve the children of cancer patients and to train leaders at MIT, frames the relationships within the organization. It becomes apparent that the structure, political atmosphere, and cultural components of Camp Kesem National and MIT are an outgrowth of this mission. Because the selection process is highly competitive for new counselors at MIT, an understanding of these components can give applicants an advantage. Moreover, prior knowledge of the organization will ensure a smooth transition into the individual’s roles as counselor or coordinator once selected. Furthermore, as Camp Kesem attempts to expand its services to more families and students in the coming years, an understanding of its current makeup will prevent potential blunders. In the past, Camp Kesem has increased the number of counselors and campers it serves each year by increasing the budget

and increasing fundraising efforts. Money raised has thus far been the only limit on the size of camp. Overall, Camp Kesem's rapid growth has been due in large part to the dedication of staff and to strong campus relations. Though only in its fourth year at MIT, Camp Kesem is a widely known organization because of its large scale fundraising events and competitive application process. Each counselor feels personal responsibility for the success of camp because they have seen the impact that it has on campers. Strong alignment of counselor and camp goals is likely crucial to the success and growth of camp. This key factor should both be appreciated and retained by Camp Kesem as it continues to grow and expand.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.campkesem.org/site/c.jvI0ImN0JuE/b.2468137/k.AFFB/Camps.htm>

<sup>ii</sup> Personal interview with Caroline Huang, Camp Kesem MIT founder 10/26/10

<sup>iii</sup> Personal interview with Elizabeth Gray, Camp Kesem National Program Director 10/26/10

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