



Australian Camps Association's quality win-win

The Australian Camps Association (ACA) is a national membership based organisation that has been supporting camp and outdoor activity providers to provide quality outdoor recreation experiences since 1983.

Employing 10 staff and over 170 volunteers, ACA's services enable children, teenagers and adults with disabilities to participate in outdoor adventure programs and weekend camping experiences.

"The Australian Camps Association is recognised as the national peak body for residential camps and outdoor activity providers in Australia" (ACA web site)

ACA's nationally recognised accreditation program promotes the safe and reasonable operation of campsites that provide accommodation for groups and ensures that operations are conducted in a manner where the safety of participants and staff is paramount.

ACA also operates People Outdoors, established in 1989, which strives to provide recreation activities to all people with disabilities.



Background

ACA's funding contract requires compliance with the Standards for Disability Services in Victoria.

David Petherick, CEO, is currently working towards an organisational self assessment against the standards.

David is confident that ACA delivers a quality service and that ACA's work practices, documentation and records will meet the requirements of most of the Standards for Disability Services in Victoria. He is also expecting to identify some gaps, mostly likely administrative in nature, that will need attention.

"We deliver good programs with good outcomes" (David Petherick, CEO)

ACA is the administrator of a national camping and outdoor activity accreditation program, Camping with Confidence, that was developed by ACA in conjunction with the Victorian Department of Education and is endorsed by the Tourism Accreditation Board of Victoria and Tourism Accreditation Australia Ltd.

Camping with Confidence offers a framework for members to demonstrate compliance with core industry requirements of campsite operations. Members seeking accreditation must complete detailed checklists for safe and professional practice in camping and are regularly visited by ACA Accreditation Consultants to review practices.

"If you choose an accredited camp, you can be confident that the camp is working hard to meet its duty of care and to provide you and your group with an experience that is consistent with the high standards of the camping profession" (ACA's Guide to Camping 2009-2010)

Working well

After 20 years administering compliance, ACA is no stranger to quality systems and accreditation processes and this wealth of experience is informing their preparation for Standards for Disability Services in Victoria accreditation. Adopting the Standards for Disability Services in Victoria is also adding value to their Camping with Confidence program. It's a quality win-win.

"This 20 years of experience represents the strength of the program and is one of the reasons that we believe we have the most respected and credible accreditation program in the sector" (ACA Annual Report 2007-2008)

ACA has a strong continuous improvement philosophy underpinning its quality system. Organisations like ACA, with effective continuous improvement processes in place, don't assume that a procedure is working well because "that's the way we've always done it". They are continuously seeking feedback and asking themselves if there is a better way.

"ACA is your organisation. As such, your ideas are always welcome" (ACA Annual Report 2007-2008)

For example accredited members submit their policies and procedures in hard copy to ACA every three years. This worked well in the past but with members increasingly moving towards electronic systems, ACA is looking at alternative methods.

Also for the past 20 years, reaccreditation has been conducted ever three years. ACA is asking why three years. Why not every two years or every four years? Why is it the same interval for all members? Why not look at an interval based on a risk assessment that takes into account the nature of the services offered, clients served and past performance?

Challenges

ACA's main challenge is ensuring that accredited members don't lose sight of their full responsibility for the quality and safety of the services they provide on a day to day basis.

Accredited members deliver a diverse range of activities such as canoeing, horse riding and rock climbing. Many of these activities require specialist equipment which presents a challenge to ACA's Accreditation Consultants. Consultants are concerned about their level of expertise and feel that if they miss something, they'll be held accountable. They are also concerned that if the operators also think this way, they may not be taking full responsibility.

ACA is also concerned that some sites only review and update their policies and procedures once every three years for the purposes of accreditation.

After careful analysis ACA identified the root cause of the problem and decided that the accreditation process needs to be improved to promote greater site responsibility.

In response ACA is looking at developing self assessment checklists not unlike that used by WorkSafe and the Standards for Disability Services in Victoria. Sites will be required to submit a self assessment at agreed times clarifying quality and safety compliance responsibilities as the sites' responsibility.

Internally ACA's challenge is to find the best way to communicate policies and procedures to those that don't have access to the shared drive including the Board and the volunteers. They are looking at placing everything on a web based wiki so that everyone has access.

Quality culture

Quality is so much an integral part of the organisational culture at ACA that it is difficult for David to explain how the organisation has promoted the idea of quality.

"We did not have to promote quality. People are on board" (David Petherick, CEO)

ACA has an organisational culture of continuously wanting to make things better. The Board, management, staff and volunteers believe that you can never get to the stage where you're doing things perfectly.

"We're all committed to quality" (David Petherick, CEO)



To maintain a strong quality culture ACA keeps quality and continuous improvement continuously on the radar. The proof is in the positive feedback received from clients.

"People Outdoors continues to grow and to attract positive feedback from both government and families who benefit from the program" (ACA Annual Report 2007-2008)

Messages

David has the following advice for other organisations looking at developing a quality system and introducing a quality culture:

- Don't see it as a huge project – take it one step at a time.
- It doesn't have to be overwhelming – work through a little at a time with the staff and know that it will lead to a better quality service.

Finally, a word of warning. In organisations that employ large numbers of volunteers it is easy to lose focus and think that the organisation is running a volunteer program. They are not – they are running a client service program. Therefore the organisation needs to train and support volunteers for the purpose of ensuring good quality client services. Keep the focus on the client and the end game.



*"Keep your focus on the end game – quality service delivery to clients"
(David Petherick, CEO)*

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