



The Director Institute (DI) is a three-day series of professional development workshops held annually by LAUP from January through May. The workshops offer training in effective leadership skills to attendees, who are typically directors and administrators at preschool providers throughout Los Angeles County. Effective leadership skills include: understanding and improving upon organizational strengths, noting areas for improvement, managing employees, and assisting administrators of early childhood education programs in making incremental changes to benefit the overall program. The purpose of the Director Institute is to empower directors and administrators with research-driven, hands-on experience to improve the quality of their preschool programs. The agenda for the DI was as follows: Day 1 - Leadership Management Training, Day 2- Systems Thinking Training, and Day 3 - Business Resource Seminar.

- In general, participants felt the DI was excellent, with day 3 being the highest rated day.
- Participants were most likely to use the Ladder of Inference tool in their daily routine.
- Participants would like to see more days of training, closer together.
- Attendance significantly dropped following day 1 of the DI.
- Participants want more realistic examples of high quality improvement strategies.
- Participants want more time to interact with colleagues.

### Overview

The Director Institute trainings were held at Magnolia Place Family Center in Los Angeles in three separate workshops held between January and May 2015. In total, 40 directors and administrators from 40 sites were invited to participate. The following figure illustrates the attendance from participants on days 1, 2 and 3 of the DI.

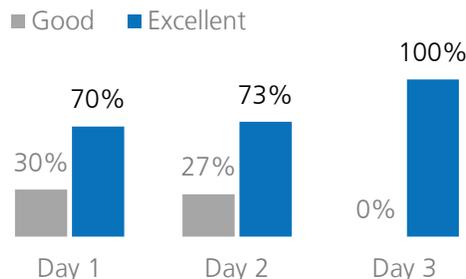
Attendance declined from Day 1 to Day 3 of the Director's Institute



### In general, participants felt the DI was "excellent," with day 3 being the highest-rated day.

Overall, participants' enjoyment and perceived quality of the DI rose throughout the three-day series. A substantial part of day 1 focused on introducing the participants to new and challenging ideas about Systems Thinking and management. On day 1, a participant reported their mind feeling "numb" from all of the information presented; perhaps the influx of new information led to a slightly lower quality score on day 1. By day 3 many of the participants were familiar with each other through storytelling, networking opportunities, and multiple Systems-Thinking-based games. Figure 1 represents the participants' perception of quality from day 1 to day 3.

Percentage of "excellent" session quality responses rose from day 1 to day 3



Note: Day 1 is out of 23 attendees, day 2 is out of 15 attendees, and day 3 is out of 13 attendees.

## Participants were most likely to use the Ladder of Inference tool in their daily routine.

In an open-ended question, participants were asked, “What idea are you most excited about, and how will you implement it?” Participants reported that the “Ladder of Inference” was the most exciting tool that could be used in their daily routine. The Ladder of Inference is a theory that helps individuals draw better conclusions, or challenge others’ conclusions, based on reality and facts. Some of the steps to drawing conclusions include selecting data, interpreting its meaning, making or testing assumptions, forming or testing conclusions, and deciding what to do and why. Participants reported that this tool will help them critically analyze data and situations that may arise in their preschools.

## Participants would like to see more days of training, with dates closer together.

When asked an open-ended question about what they would like to see in future Director Institutes, the majority of respondents wished to see more training sessions. Participants felt the information needed several more days to be understood and processed. Similarly, participants reported a desire for the days to be closer together, in order to keep the new concepts fresh in their minds.

## Planners should address factors contributing to significant drop in attendance after day 1.

On day 1, 58% of invited participants attended the workshop. On day 2, only 38% of the invited directors attended. And lastly, day 3 only saw 33% attendance. Several directors reported that staff turnover and new information in their field were the most important topics they wanted to see out of the DI. However, on day 1 of the DI, the main focus was on implementing a brand new system of thinking and approach to running a child care facility. While directors felt the information was very high quality, there seemed to be a lack of direct, tangible information that could be utilized right away in their programs. Similarly, several games were played that acted as physical metaphors for communication and teamwork. Although the games were effective in their message, the directors needed take-away information that could immediately result in improvements to their program. The drop in director retention from day 1 could be a result of a missed opportunity to demonstrate how Systems Thinking can improve programs right away. To further this point, one director that stayed all 3 days felt the last 2 days were most useful and important to enhancing their program right away. For future DIs, planners should place great importance on providing tangible information on day 1 of the series, because this may lead to greater retention throughout the 3 days.

## Participants want more realistic examples of high quality improvement strategies.

While participants noted they enjoyed the interactive games and exercises, many hoped to receive more direct instruction on improvement strategies. Concepts and examples at times felt too abstract. Although participants appreciated the big picture, and acknowledged its importance, they still felt they needed take-home information for their programs. For example, one activity had at least five participants each hold one end of a string, forming a circle. In the middle of the circle was a tennis ball that was to be transferred from one area to another. The difficulty lay in the cohesive movements between participants. The objective of the activity was to demonstrate the importance of communication and cooperation in order to be successful on a given task. However, once the task was done, all the participants had was an abstract message about communication, instead of tangible steps towards improving practice that could be shared with staff.

## Participants want more time to interact with colleagues.

Interview data revealed that time to interact and discuss common challenges with other directors was one of the most valuable experiences during the DI. Directors revealed that they do not have the opportunity to interact with other directors and share experiences. They want more opportunities to freely interact with the colleagues in both structured and non-structured formats. Given the complexity of learning new systems and practices, having time to discuss experiences and learn from one another is beneficial to implementation and understanding.

## Barriers to program implementation

In an open-ended question, as well as in direct interviews, participants were asked to discuss the barriers to their program that they felt were out of their control. Barriers include processes or factors that prevent proper

implementation or strategies and affect the quality of their program. Coding of their responses yielded the following barriers:

- **Staff retention.** Directors consistently mention staff retention as their greatest barrier to high quality program implementation. Inability to pay staff, staff seeking advancement, and staff seeking higher education result in the fluctuation in a program's staff. Participants felt conflicted because they want to keep staff on board in the long term, but they also want their staff to pursue a higher education.
- **Lack of staff.** Staffing requires money, which several participants felt they did not have enough of. In order to properly staff their program, many directors felt they could not survive. Lack of staff directly relates to staff turnover—inability to adequately pay staff results in turnover, which participants felt was out of their control.
- **Communication.** Several directors noted that basic communication was lacking between themselves and several staff members. Issues included missing work (not calling in), miscommunication following an incident, and directors not clearly setting guidelines and expectations. Several directors said they are developing a concrete staff manual that will hopefully decrease instances of miscommunication.
- **Lack of time.** A common complaint among directors was a lack of time to plan, prepare, and meet all the demands of running a high quality program. Directors felt that time was often spent filling out paperwork, ensuring a full staff, and solving normal issues that arise throughout the day. Little time was available to complete professional development.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations should be considered for future DI trainings:

1. Participants' rating of the DI improved each day of training. Participants noted that they enjoyed speaking to each other and networking throughout the course of the trainings. For future DIs, trainers should spend a considerable amount of time getting participants acclimated to each other; this will allow for greater relationship building and continued high quality.
2. Participants were most excited about using the "Ladder of Inference" tool in their daily routine. They felt the tool gave them the best chance to improve their programs right away. The tool focused on critical thought, communication, and making data-driven decisions. Trainers should make this tool a focal point during the three-day training series.
3. Participants want to have more days of training, with the sessions being close together. Logistically, this may be difficult, but participants strongly felt more days would help improve the quality of their program. Moreover, the distance between the trainings, mixed with heavy content, made the participants feel as if they lost some of the information in the gaps between trainings. Perhaps a compromise of one extra day of training would meet their needs.
4. Participants need an immediate take-away from day 1 of the DI. Attendance significantly dropped off following day 1 of the DI. Some felt the information was too heavy to digest right away. Perhaps chunking the information and focusing on highly relevant topics at the start will help alleviate attrition from participants. In addition, trainers should provide insights into the upcoming days and explain the immediate relevance of the information that will be discussed.
5. Keep the games and activities focused on direct, tangible ways to improve programs. While directors reported having fun during the games, at times they felt as though there was a disconnect between the game and its application to their program. Keep the activities focused on areas in which directors want the most improvement. For example, directors want step-by-step ideas for improving staff turnover. In order for professional development to be effective, programs need to be aligned to the participants' professional practice, and should allow the opportunity to enact instructional or organizational strategies during training (Van Driel & Berry, 2012).

6. Provide more time and opportunities for participants to interact with their colleagues. In open-ended questions, participants noted how much they enjoyed having time to interact with their colleagues on a personal and professional level. They felt as though opportunities to interact with other directors were few and far between. Thus, it is important to provide structured time for personal conversations, professional conversations, and networking opportunities.

## References

Van Driel, H. J., & Berry, A. (2012). Teacher professional development focusing on pedagogical content knowledge. *Journal of Teacher Education, 1*, 63.

## Appendix - Methodology

### Evaluation Study Questions

The following questions helped guide the evaluation of the DI. In order to answer these questions, participants were asked to complete a brief survey at the end of each day. In addition, directors were interviewed via telephone and asked about their experience and the quality of the DI. For the purpose of informing future programs and practices at LAUP, it was necessary to inquire about the quality, content, and relevance of the DI from the perspective of the directors. The following questions will influence the future planning of director institutes to be offered by LAUP.

1. Overall, how did the directors rate the quality of the DI?
2. What concepts are the directors most likely to utilize once the DI is completed?
3. Is the DI content relevant to the work of the directors?
4. What would directors want to see in next year's DI?

### Evaluation Procedures

The evaluation of the DI consisted of survey results, open-ended questions, observations, and director interviews. At the beginning of each day, participants were asked to sign in upon arrival. Full-day observations of the DI helped shed light on the attitudes and engagement of the participants, as well as areas for improvement and increased retention for upcoming events. At the end of each day, participants were asked to complete a brief survey that asked about their experience and the quality of the DI. In addition, they were asked about the concepts learned, and how relevant the concepts were to their program. Lastly, they were asked to discuss what they would like to see at future DI trainings. In addition, five directors were interviewed on the phone and asked about their experiences while attending the DI. A mixed methods approach was used to conduct the analysis of the DI. IBM SPSS Statistics Version 21 was used to analyze basic statistics. Interviews and open-ended questions were coded using Atlas.Ti qualitative software. All data were compiled at the end of day 3 and analyzed for the purpose of this evaluation.

For more information about this evaluation please contact [researchmail@laup.net](mailto:researchmail@laup.net).