

# Investment in Leadership Training— The Payoff for Early Childhood Education

Leadership is a vital component of any thriving organization (Yukl 1998; Kouzes & Posner 2002). Like the zoom lens of a camera, leaders must be able to shift from one perspective to another, view the same situation from different vantage points when making decisions, build systems, mentor colleagues, evaluate actions, and serve as agents of change. This means having the ability to step back and look at the big picture to determine the impact of different actions while simultaneously being cognizant of the small details that influence people's reactions.

In early childhood programs, strong leadership is particularly critical because directors are the gatekeepers of quality. They are responsible for creating the climate that promotes optimal growth and development of children as well as for implementing the systems that ensure quality is maintained (Bloom 1992; Rood 1994; Kagan & Bowman 1997; Culkin 2000). While there is consensus among policy makers and practitioners alike about the importance of strong leadership in early childhood programs, few states have

made leadership training a high priority in implementing career development systems. Illinois is a notable exception.

For over 10 years Illinois has made a focused investment in the professional development of leaders of early childhood organizations. It has implemented one of the most comprehensive and rigorous director credentialing program in the country and has forged public and private partnerships to secure funding for leadership training. Two well-known leadership training initiatives are based in Illinois: the McCormick Fellows Leadership Training



Program and the Taking Charge of Change Leadership Training Program. Both initiatives are conducted by the McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National-Louis University. This article provides an overview of these two training models, a summary of the empirical evidence documenting training outcomes, and lessons learned about the design and delivery of leadership training that may be useful to other states or professional organizations engaged in similar leadership development endeavors.

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## Two models of leadership training

The McCormick Fellows Leadership Training Program, funded by the McCormick Tribune Foundation, provided two years of graduate-level leadership training. Thirty directors of center-based programs



in Chicago selected as McCormick fellows met weekly for four hours of instruction, engaged in on-site program improvements to achieve accreditation for their centers, and conducted research projects documenting their efforts. At the completion of the program, McCormick fellows received an MEd in early childhood administration from National-Louis University.

Taking Charge of Change (TCC), currently funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS), is a more streamlined leadership training program. Center directors receive approximately 110 contact hours of training and technical assistance over a 10-month period. With the support of a mentor, each participant develops a Program Improvement Plan and documents personal progress in achieving desired organizational changes. At the culmination of the training, participants receive six semester hours of college credit. Since 1993 a total of 285 individuals in 11 TCC cohorts have completed training.

### The impact of leadership training

Data on training outcomes have been collected at the culmination of training of each cohort of McCormick fellows and TCC participants, including measures of participant satisfaction and changes in their perceived levels of knowledge and skill. In addition, pre and post measures of the organizational climate documented employees' perceptions of

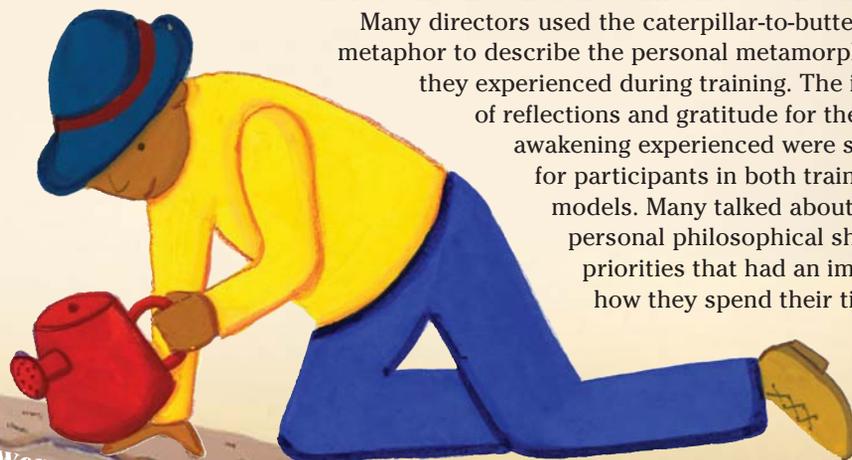
**Individuals describe the sense of empowerment they felt after completing leadership training and the way a heightened sense of self-esteem literally transformed how they thought about their directorship role.**

the quality of work life at participants' centers and observational data documented changes in actual teaching practices at the classroom level. In 2003 a comprehensive follow-up study conducted of 182 participants of these leadership training initiatives tracked changes in participants' role perceptions, job performance, and career decisions since completing their training (Bella & Bloom 2003).

### **Participant outcomes**

Leadership starts in the mind. It is a way of thinking about oneself in the context of different personal and professional interactions. This certainly appears to be the case with the directors who have participated in the McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership's training initiatives. In posttraining interviews, individuals describe the sense of empowerment they felt after completing leadership training and the way a heightened sense of self-esteem literally transformed how they thought about their directorship role. Data from the 2003 study confirm that heightened feelings of self-efficacy have been sustained, empowering leadership participants to assume new challenges they might otherwise not have had the confidence to take on.

Many directors used the caterpillar-to-butterfly metaphor to describe the personal metamorphosis they experienced during training. The intensity of reflections and gratitude for the awakening experienced were similar for participants in both training models. Many talked about the personal philosophical shift in priorities that had an impact on how they spend their time.



reflection

vision

confidence

empowerment

While participants continued to focus on management issues such as balancing the budget or planning a fundraiser, they consciously began to think about broader, more abstract leadership challenges, such as envisioning goals, affirming values, motivating staff, and achieving a unity of purpose in their programs.

Respondents commented on the power of the cohort in helping them shape their role perceptions. One director stated, “I learned I was not alone. There are other directors who face the same issues I do.” The network of support that participants experienced clearly helped to sustain their initial feelings of empowerment and confidence.

Zooming in and out and shifting focus while maintaining position is something leaders must be able to do on many different levels. Leadership training that empowers participants to view themselves from different vantage points strongly impacts role perceptions. Participants in both training models say the experience gave them a new perspective on their administrative role. They viewed the lens through which they previously saw themselves as limited in scope, concentrating mostly on details or nitty-gritty management issues of administering a program. Leadership training gave them the capacity to step back and take the broader view—the vision of what they wanted their programs to become. This approach helped them see themselves and their programs more clearly in the context of both their community and the early childhood profession.

Respondents repeatedly noted an increase in their advocacy efforts as a result of their participation in training. Although a passion for social justice and support of children and families was always there, respondents indicated that their perceptions of themselves as leaders and ardent advocates for children needed to be nurtured. Learning new communication and presentation skills during training and being supported by colleagues and instructors helped participants bolster their confidence and expand their role to more actively advocate for children, staff, families, and themselves.

From the evaluations conducted at the culmination of each cohort’s training, data show that respondents felt strongly that leadership training improved their knowledge and skill by helping them become more reflective about their leadership behavior and providing them with concrete resources to better perform their jobs. Participants noted four clusters of skills that have particularly helped them in their management and leadership roles: interpersonal communication, group facilitation (mostly conducting effective meetings), decision making

(particularly participative management), and staff development.



**If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader.**

— John Quincy Adams,  
U.S. President, 1825–29

(particularly participative management), and staff development.

Helping participants achieve the capacity to appreciate another person’s point of view is an important component of both training models. Perspective taking begins with self-awareness. Learning about one’s communication style, learning style, temperament, and decision-making preferences provides the foundation for understanding others who may have a different style or point of view. This ability to perform better in the role of director by taking the perspectives of others was demonstrated again and again by participants during the posttraining interviews. “It’s about learning to walk in someone else’s shoes,” said one participant. Taking on new perspectives is an essential piece of implementing shared decision making and participative management processes. Many directors viewed their ability to let go, not having to be in control of all decisions, as the accomplishment for which they were most proud.

### Program outcomes

The policy makers who fund training for center directors are particularly interested in the degree to which such training trickles down to the classroom level. Training in centerwide management issues can change actual teaching practices that impact child outcomes at

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the classroom level as well as the quality of work life for teaching and support staff.

In both the Taking Charge of Change training model and the McCormick Fellows training model, two instruments were used to measure changes in program quality. The Early Childhood Work Environment Survey (ECWES) (Bloom 1996) was used to measure changes in staffs' perceptions of 10 dimensions of the organizational climate at their centers, and a modified version of Early Childhood Classroom Observation (NAEYC 1998) was used to assess classroom quality.

Data collected from each cohort of TCC training since 1993 has shown that even a short 10-month leadership training program can yield modest improvements in a center's organizational climate and classroom quality as reflected in teacher-child interactions, the curriculum, the arrangement of the physical environment, and health, safety, and nutritional practices. Evaluation data from participants in the two-year McCormick Fellows model show substantial results on both measures. These findings underscore the prevailing wisdom that director training over longer periods of time and with sustained support results in increased program quality. They also suggest that it may take time for organizational systems, such as supervision, performance appraisal, shared decision making, and mentoring, to take hold before lasting

changes in the quality of work life for staff and teaching performance can be realized.

Changes in NAEYC Accreditation status speak directly to the question of impact that individuals have on their centers as a result of their participation in leadership training. Only 20 percent of the early childhood programs of participants were accredited by NAEYC when they began their training. The 2003 study of the same group found that 43 percent of directors' programs were accredited. It is clear that leadership training effectively increases participants' awareness of the importance of accreditation and assists them with the resources and support to help make it happen.

### **Outcomes for the profession**

Perhaps the most encouraging data resulting from this work relates to the career decisions made by participants in either the McCormick Fellows or the TCC training models. Leadership training appears to have a positive impact on the early childhood profession by supporting a more stable and educated workforce. Of the 182 training participants interviewed in 2003,

- 86 percent continue to work in the field of early childhood either as a center director or in a related position supporting children and families;
- 65 percent of those continuing in the early childhood field work for the same organization for which they worked when they participated in training; and
- 97 percent of the directors see themselves as continuing to work in early childhood five years from now.

In the context of an early childhood profession in which annual turnover across the country still hovers around 30 percent, this picture of workforce stability in Illinois presents a very promising development.

An equally promising development is the number of individuals who have gone on to take additional college coursework. Only 19 percent of the survey respondents had advanced degrees when they began the TCC program; 46 percent currently have a master's or doctorate. Forty-two percent of those with associate or bachelor's degrees report that they are enrolled in an advanced degree program. Virtually all of the participants indicated that their leadership training experience served as a stepping-stone to other professional development opportunities.



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## Designing effective leadership training programs

Training for directors of early care and education programs must be well planned, not haphazard. As administrators, directors have extraordinarily frenetic lives, and their time should not be wasted on training experiences that do not meet their personal and professional needs. It is incumbent on professional organizations and institutions of higher education to design training experiences that are coherent, cumulative, and comprehensive.

Drawing on our experiences in working with directors at the McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership and from the collective wisdom of other organizations that have conducted leadership training (Epstein 1993; Guskey 2000; Killion 2002; Day & Smith 2004), we offer 14 key elements that can serve as a framework for planning professional development experiences for early childhood directors. These elements relate to the content, structure, and delivery of training.

### Content of training

The content of training refers to the key concepts, conceptual frameworks, and specific knowledge and skills learned during the training experience.

**1. Address both management and leadership functions of the director's role.** The competencies needed to effectively administer an early care and education program cut across the director's multifaceted role—budget analyst, facility manager, supervisor, public relations coordinator, community liaison, curriculum specialist, and fund-raiser, to name a few. Professional development programs must balance the emphasis on management and leadership and equip directors to competently handle multiple responsibilities.

Successful administrators pay attention to both leadership and management issues. Leadership relates to the broad goal of helping the organization clarify and affirm its values, set goals, articulate a vision, and chart a course of action. Management includes orchestration of tasks and setting up systems to carry out the organization's mission (Bloom 2003).

For trainers this distinction between management and leadership presents a challenge. Short-term, focused training that is skill based works well for many manage-

ment issues. It can be easily packaged and evaluated. Training for leadership, however, is more intense and takes longer because it involves fundamental changes in the way people think and view their roles. Hence it is neither easily packaged nor conducive to precise evaluation methods. The distinction is similar to the difference that Kegan (2000) refers to between informational learning and transformational learning. Informational learning focuses on what a person knows, transformational learning on how a person knows what he or she knows. Good professional development programs for early childhood administrators incorporate both aspects—moving individuals to higher levels of knowledge and skill (what they know) while altering the very thought processes by which they deepen their understanding of their professional practice (how they know).

**2. Base training on participants' assessed needs.** Early childhood educators are well versed in developmentally appropriate experiences for young children. But when it comes to adults, cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all training experiences are often the norm (Vartuli & Fyfe 1993). Such an approach is ineffective because directors' levels of knowledge and skill vary considerably. Adults learn

best that which they feel a need to learn, and they forget or do not use knowledge that seems less relevant to their needs. Assessing each director's place on the continuum of competence should be a precursor to all training regardless of content area. Effective needs assessments do not have to be elaborate but should identify problems and concerns that directors encounter in their daily practice.

**3. Make training problem centered and site specific.** One frustration that many adult learners encounter in training is the inevitable gap between the theoretical ideas in their studies and their ability to apply these ideas in their work. Successful training models build on the



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**Management works in the system;  
leadership works on the system.**

— Stephen R. Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*

premise that immediate application of new learning to real-life situations reinforces what is learned. Adult learners are not a captive audience. They tend to be impatient in the pursuit of learning objectives and less tolerant of busy work not having immediate and direct application. For training to be effective, examples used should relate to real issues and concerns participants face in their work. Training must weave theory into the idiosyncratic issues that confront directors and enlighten and enlarge experience. Case studies, program improvement plans, and action research are but three instructional strategies for making these practical connections.

**4. Focus training on the director as change agent.** Every day directors confront issues and concerns that need attention. Training should help directors understand that striving for quality is an ongoing, continuous process. Opportunities for growth and program renewal are the gifts change brings. Helping directors define their role as change agent is crucial to instilling norms of continuous program improvement. Directors create a vision, serving as the catalyst for change. They create a conducive climate for change by providing resources and encouragement as needed. Exposure to different models of change and having opportunities to build the skills to make the change process successful are training essentials.

**5. Stress a systems perspective.** Early childhood directors often view nettlesome everyday problems as isolated occurrences needing to be solved. Such a narrow perspective can hamper a director's ability to respond appropriately. Centers are organizations and as such are complex social systems. Becoming an effective director necessitates taking a broad, systems view and understanding the interplay between different program components.

Centers do not exist in a vacuum; they are influenced by funding and regulatory agencies, the social and political climates, professional organizations, and a host of other external influences that serve as both opportunities and constraints to program effectiveness. Developing a broad perspective allows directors to look at the whole as well as the parts and view their centers as true ecosystems (Oshry 1996).



### Structure of training

The structure of training relates to how the content is organized and whether it supports the broader goals of the early childhood career development system.

**6. Meet the needs of working professionals.** Early childhood administrators are busy people often juggling multiple responsibilities—family, and outside commitments. Few can commit to the full-time pursuit of an advanced degree. Directors need training models that use a variety of face-to-face and online formats, are structured to achieve different short-term and long-term goals, and provide maximum flexibility in scheduling and logistics.

**7. Encourage and support the professional advancement of participants.** Many early childhood directors have accumulated hundreds of hours of inservice but still lack college degrees. While workshops offered by sponsoring agencies are valuable in the short run for increasing competency, in the long run they may undermine professional advancement. Whenever possible, training should lead to college credit and should support horizontal and vertical advancement of participants on the early childhood career lattice.

**8. Promote participation that reflects the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity of the early childhood field.** Research by the National Black Child Development Institute (1994) reveals a disturbing underrepresentation of African Americans in leadership roles in early childhood education, including center directors. Ensuring diversity in the ranks of center directors is essential to guaranteeing educational equity for America's children

## Selecting a Leadership Training Program

Enrolling in a leadership training program is a serious commitment. Programs often involve a financial obligation and require an investment of time. Make sure the fit is right for you. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What kind of a time commitment will the training require?
- Will the training advance my career goals?
- Will I receive college credit for attending the training?
- Is the training schedule sensitive to my needs as a working professional?
- Does the structure and delivery of training accommodate my learning style?
- Will the training address the specific administrative issues I face in my type of early childhood program?
- What are the technology competency expectations for this training?
- What type of follow-up is incorporated into the training model to ensure that the knowledge and skills I learn will be put into practice?
- Will the training provide collegial networking to support my work?
- Will the training connect me to the kinds of professional resources I need to improve the quality of my program?
- How will my learning be assessed?
- Will the training experience expose me to a diverse group of participants who will expand my perspective of the early childhood profession?
- Can I afford the training? Are there any scholarships or financial stipends available to help cover registration fees, tuition, and books?
- How many other participants will be in the training? Will I receive the kind of individualized instruction I need?
- Does the training content cover the leadership and management issues that will help me administer a high-quality early childhood program?

and reversing low levels of educational achievement of children from racial and ethnic minorities (Elliott et al. 1999). In its framework for early childhood professional development, NAEYC states that barriers such as a lack of financial resources as well as institutional racism and classism must be challenged and removed (NAEYC 1994).

Leadership programs offered by institutions of higher education, professional organizations, and resource and referral agencies must take aggressive steps to address this imbalance in training. Mentoring training and financial assistance through scholarships and loan forgiveness are essential. Training may also need restructuring to accommodate more individualized support such as academic tutoring. These approaches can help increase recruitment into training and rates of completion.

**9. Include training follow-up.** Research provides strong evidence that onetime workshops on broad, global topics have little lasting impact on behavior (Showers, Joyce, & Bennett 1987). In summarizing the research on the High/Scope Training of Trainers programs, Epstein (1993) underscores the importance of follow-up, as real questions tend to surface when participants attempt to implement what they have learned. With no forum where their questions can be addressed, individuals lack the help they need to apply their training.

Follow-up can involve on-site coaching, journal writing, practicum experiences, online discussions, or specific field assignments that help individuals integrate newly acquired knowledge into their professional repertoire of skills and competencies. Planning training that spreads out over many months helps to promote adaptation and problem solving and highlights the progression of skill development over time.

**10. Promote cross-fertilization in the field.** The early childhood profession has become increasingly specialized. Some early childhood practitioners spend their entire adult careers in one type of program like Head Start, military child care, or hospital-based; or in a single role such as infant-toddler educator or bilingual specialist. While there are benefits, specialization can result in tunnel vision.

Training is needed that brings together early childhood educators from a range of programs—public/private, for-profit/nonprofit, part-day/full-day, independent/agency-affiliated, faith-based/corporate sponsored, or Head Start. This promotes a broader perspective, appreciation of differences, and cross-fertilization of ideas resulting in fresh approaches to problem solving and interagency collaboration.

**11. Build in an evaluation component.** Good intentions alone do not ensure success. An evaluation of training outcomes belongs in every leadership training program. The design will vary depending on the time and resources available. Most professional development experts (Kirkpatrick 1998; Guskey 2000) agree that evaluation should include several levels: (1) participants' reactions to the training—their level of satisfaction with the experience; (2) learning outcomes—new knowledge gained or skills learned; (3) changes in behavior—new on-the-job practices; and (4) results for key stakeholders (for example, change in a program's organizational climate, teacher turnover, quality of teaching practices, or parent satisfaction).

In the leadership training conducted at the McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership, we use a variety of informal and formal evaluation tools, including the Early Childhood Work Environment Survey (Bloom 1996) and the Program Administration Scale (Talan & Bloom 2004), to assess outcomes at the fourth level

### Delivery of training

The delivery of training refers to the instructional strategies used, how participants are grouped, and whether technology is incorporated into the training model.

**12. Promote active learning.** From the wealth of research on learning styles, we know that how individuals learn is strongly influenced by emotional, biological, and psychological factors. In planning professional development programs for adults, designs need to consider all factors that may potentially impinge on learning. For example, adult learners are likely to be more set in their thinking. Learning new patterns of behavior takes time.

Many adult learners require good light for study, find external temperature changes in the learning environment distracting, and may fatigue easily when attending training. Adult learners need to take active rather than passive roles in structuring their own learning experiences. They

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need opportunities to learn via multiple modes of instruction (for example, lectures, small-group exercises, media, independent work, role-playing). It is also important for adults to see the relationship between how they are evaluated and the objectives of instruction and to receive immediate feedback about their performance.

**13. Ensure collegiality and networking.** The professional role of the early childhood director is often a lonely one, so training experiences should weave in opportunities for collegial support. When training is provided to a cohort of individuals remaining intact over a period of time, powerful dynamics can develop. The collegial model fosters an atmosphere of mutual trust that encourages idea sharing and collaborative learning. Well-designed instructional activities can facilitate cooperation and the exchange of ideas and insights. Each training session should exemplify a model of staff development and a professional learning community (Roberts & Pruitt 2003).

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**14. Incorporate high-tech modes of instruction.** For directors, administering an effective and efficient early care and education program requires a working knowledge of existing and emerging technologies (Donohue 2003). Leadership training provides an excellent opportunity for directors to learn and refine their knowledge and skill in computers and digital technologies. Training can include synchronous and asynchronous chats, Webcasts, and discussion forums; exchanging information via e-mail attachments and PDF files; and researching information on the Internet. Tapping into the potential of online instruction can expand access to professional development for individuals who live in geographically remote areas.

### A final word

Among the recommendations in the final draft of the NAEYC early childhood program standards and accreditation performance criteria is the recommendation that directors have at least a baccalaureate degree by 2010 and nine credit-bearing hours of specialized college level coursework in the administration of early childhood programs (NAEYC 2004). This change will clearly strengthen the leadership capacity of early care and education programs across the country.

The rich empirical and anecdotal evidence we have collected over the past two decades provides compelling evidence that leadership training can change the early childhood profession from the inside out and from the bottom up through changes in early childhood educators themselves. Investing in leadership development nets a significant payoff.



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