

**CIT Program – A Perspective*

Camps offering leadership development programs are sometimes surprised at choices young people make — even if they were known as campers. The responsibility of training young adults is clearly one of the biggest challenges camp administrators face. Many aspects of running a camp change from year to year, but few are as complex as teaching the group who are no longer campers and yet not old enough to be paid staff. It is common for senior staff to express frustration at seemingly unexplained behavior or poor choices on the part of an aspiring Counselor-in-Training or CIT. What can be done to alleviate this dilemma and what should camps include in a quality program?

Are you prepared for this AGE GROUP?

Whether you have an existing leadership development program or are thinking about starting one, (similar programs may be called Leaders in Training, Leaders in Development, Counselor Assistants), you must decide how much time you are willing to devote to these special people. The complexities of being successful when dealing with this age group are often dependent upon having someone on staff with the unique ability to communicate with young people using language they understand. As the priorities change for this age group, so do the methods for teaching them.

An Environment That Rewards Effort

One of the great things about being a CIT is working in an environment that rewards effort. Since the underlying camper responsibility is always someone else's, it is the perfect opportunity for young people to try different leadership techniques without the fear of failure. By allowing CITs to work only with certain age groups or areas, you are creating a safe environment that allows them to develop their own individual leadership styles.

When outlining a quality program, it is extremely important that potential applicants understand the process of gaining leadership qualities is not exact. Take a moment and explain the type of decision-making they will do and what will happen as a result of their actions. Often CITs make great choices and when it happens, compliments should be both immediate and specific. Let them know beforehand while all their decisions will not be right, they will have an opportunity to correct them. Unfortunately, when situations arise which are not handled well, it reflects poorly on you and your staff. To assure the success of this process, it is very important CITs be placed into situations where lead staff control the level of decision-making.

Take the Risk

This sounds very risky, so why would a camp start or continue a program that could potentially lead to problems based on inexperience? The answer lies in the importance of how information is transferred. Since the age group you are training is closest to the campers, it stands to reason their experiences are invaluable in the process of camper development. Providing this program will ensure each link on the staff development chain will be represented. CITs are typically eager to learn and feel extremely empowered when asked what their opinion is in certain situations. Sometimes the best way to solve a camper problem is to combine your wisdom and knowledge with CIT ideas and terminology.

New or Existing Program?

Even though the rewards of a well-run program will far outweigh any potential problems, you still have to start a new program or improve an existing one. New programs do not have any pre-existing bias so it is a matter of finding applicants, developing a curriculum, and implementing it. If you have an existing program, challenge yourself to make it more relevant by including former staff in content development. You can partially fix any problems from last year by reviewing what areas need to be improved, but you can vault ahead of that one-sided perspective by looking at it from another direction. To dramatically increase your productivity, try developing your curriculum using outcome-based objectives. First determine the expected outcomes you wish to achieve then work backwards in program development. Always keep in mind every activity or task they are given should support the original mission — what will they be better able to accomplish as a result of completing your leadership program?

Make It Meaningful

To meet the programmatic needs of CIT development, you must determine how to transfer pertinent information. If you begin with the premise — you are training them to do your job — the purpose for this position will be more meaningful. Examine what has occurred in their lives over the past year and relate that to what will change in terms of camp function. This is best accomplished by defining areas requiring explanation.

To keep this process simple, topics will be divided into two areas: camp and personal. Depending on your organization's goals and objectives, these may differ, but some general camp topics might include philosophy, safety, clientele, program, physical plant, natural barriers, emergency procedures, team building and the like. Personal questions may include no longer being a camper, camp status, peer explanations, first-time job doubts, or understanding camp responsibility. The director's ability to blend these concepts will go a long way in determining the success of a CIT's performance.

Personalize the Components

Training is further personalized by describing program components. Be sure to include subjects like readiness requirements, group placement, skill levels to be obtained, camp job knowledge, and the actual experience. To accomplish these on a consistent basis, you will create or refine a curriculum, which will include the teaching of each individual concept. This is the core material or manual by which all experiences are based. It should include all the important topics you deem necessary for someone to complete in order to advance. Each lesson should be interactive and include some type of response on the part of each CIT. Typical

examples would be to define the role of a CIT, understanding camp philosophy, dealing with diversity, learning about specialty area requirements, how to set goals and objectives, or defining leadership techniques.

It is critical to pre-determine what these program components are going to look like in practice. Getting the most out of a potential applicant begins with the initial contact.

- Structure your conversations, letters, and visits so each applicant feels you are establishing an important working relationship.
- Take the time to go over the application process and explain what you are sending. Remember, this is a first-time process for them and young applicants need to know you care.
- Tell them what their timetable is for returning paperwork and be sure to inform them of upcoming CIT meetings. Preorientation interaction is extremely important even if it is electronic. This allows them to bond, have an outlet for nervous comments, and share ideas before the summer starts.

Don't Isolate Your CITs

Tell staff during orientation what this program means to camp and how everyone is expected to be treated. During times of general programming, purposely have the CITs solve problems using a "hands-on" approach. Let them have fun creating visual pictures, writing rules, and acting as a group. Put individual CITs in group activities with older staff and allow them to interact in situations where the outcome is not solely based on their participation. Begin to teach them communication skills and what they need to accomplish socially to feel included. This should carry over into each activity area by adding information about traditions, expectations, and an explanation of why they exist in your program.

Day Camps

Day camp routines are different for two reasons: time and daily parent interaction. In discussing day camp responsibilities, it is critical to emphasize how important transition times are in the minds of parents. A professional approach will impress other staff and will help immensely in the desire for self-generated mentoring. In addition to meals, medical concerns, and transportation, there are the daily pressures of knowing the logistics for extended hours, extra activities, and evening events. Aspiring leaders must be prepared for immediate feedback from both peers and parents.

Staff development, especially for applicants who have been campers, can be difficult. Explain the pitfalls of having friends who are still campers and neighbors

at the same time. Having them wear their own official camp CIT shirt will go a long way towards creating an identity. They will feel empowered and proud once they know a few tricks such as different teaching techniques, time-filler games, how to convey ideas, and the development of age-appropriate rules. Make sure the experience reflects what has been outlined to their parents so in times of hardship or camp-related stress they will support your mission.

Expectations

When training young men and women, make sure to alter your expectations so they reflect each gender's maturity level. Begin by predicting possible complications and be ready to modify core lessons when needed. Be patient when dealing with young men and remember their learning curve may not be as advanced as the women. Above all else, compliment each person for approaching you with the request to work. This is a HUGE step in their lives, and they need to be congratulated for wanting to advance in leadership development. Inside, you should be elated when former campers call you and ask to move into this new position. This request for more responsibility is the ultimate confirmation your camp is producing a meaningful experience. Embrace this moment and congratulate each applicant on being so responsible. Let them know their contributions have a defining role in the success of the program. Building this foundation now will pay big dividends toward the end of the summer when people are tired. Staff will want to stay committed and motivated because you made their relationship a priority.

Creating Quality Leaders

If you are not creating quality leaders from your program or you need to start a process to improve future staff, consider implementing some of these ideas. By taking the time to outline different aspects of program development, you can begin to actively introduce new staff into an existing program.

- Start by learning specifics pertaining to applicants and create a positive working environment by outlining the unique features of your program.
- Try and have one person oversee the CITs even if several assist with daily operations.
- Review each application with the understanding of gender and experience.
- Establish a working relationship with CIT parents by providing an avenue for their questions to be answered.
- Create preorientation meetings designed to alleviate potential nervous tension.
- Give CITs a chance to bond prior to the start of camp.

- Make sure the orientation schedule includes a few hands-on activities just for CITs.
- Determine what the important components are for your program and write them into core lessons.
- Thank each applicant for being responsible and discuss the kinds of responsibilities included in the program.
- To make the process more time effective, implement a year-round schedule of procedures designed to create a safe working environment.

Providing an opportunity for leadership development in a carefully structured environment is vital to today's young adults. With all the pressures of growing up in an instant information society, it is critical that CITs have an avenue supporting quality decision making through guided personal choice. In order to succeed, camps must offer programs which change with time yet stay true to their mission. By empowering CITs to meet this challenge, you are training future staff who will be motivated and dedicated to your camp for many years to come.