



For Missouri Field Support Manager, it's all About Relationships

For Dana Jones, relationships are the most important professional investment one can make. As the Field Support and Training Manager for the Northern Region of Missouri, Dana knows a thing or two about what draws people to work in child welfare, and what keeps them there. With almost twenty years in the field, she has seen time and time again how investing in people can be the key to weathering changes in administration, policy, and organizational climate. By paying attention to people's needs, both in and out of the workplace, agencies like Dana's are able to build stronger and more loyal teams. At the end of the day, it is not just the agency that benefits through higher satisfaction and retention of staff, but children and families, who experience better outcomes.

According to Dana, these ideals had taken a back seat in Missouri child welfare over the past decade, as they were tangled up in a data-driven, documentation-heavy system. This resulted in social workers spending less than 25% of their time in the field interacting with children and families. On top of that, the workforce was not feeling particularly satisfied with their jobs. But things started to change across the state in 2013, when Tim Decker became director of the Children's Division of the Missouri Department of Social Services. Decker, already a respected leader and innovator in the state's juvenile justice system, wasted no time in connecting with all levels of the workforce to look for ways to improve the system and increase job satisfaction and retention. He soon got the state involved with the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI), and according to Jones, ultimately "changed the whole face of the division and how we do practice."

Prior to these changes, Missouri wasn't doing a great job of meeting their required monthly contacts between children and caseworkers, resulting in poor relationships with families. But Decker made visiting children out in the field a priority. As the Field Support and Training Manager for the largest region in the state, Jones saw some real resistance from the frontline staff to the changes being rolled out from the top. As she explains, while this was a significant positive change in policy, it was hard for staff members who already felt stretched too thin with their caseloads to embrace the practice of spending more time on the road, away from their own families.

As these tensions continued to simmer, Jones along with colleagues from across the state began their work with NCWWI through its Leadership Academy for Middle Managers, or LAMM. In



Dana Z. Jones | MSW, LCSW

Real Stories From the Field



the LAMM program, participants are challenged to implement sustainable change projects in their organizations designed to improve outcomes for children, youth, and families. Jones decided to use the LAMM opportunity to address this frontline reluctance to change, and ultimately find ways to support what she knew was a sound approach to effective child welfare practice. In order to gain the support of staff in the field, she first had to address what she saw as the root of the problem - poor staff retention and all of the underlying issues that contributed to it.

As Jones saw it, one of the main challenges in their region was that they were not able to offer staff better salaries, which made it hard to attract and retain good workers. In addition, she saw a double standard related to acceptable work hours. Prior to her LAMM change initiative, staff had to work a standard 8-5 schedule, but were expected to stay late when emergencies arose. Jones thought, "Why do we expect flexibility from them, when we don't offer it in return?" To start developing her initiative and address these problems, Jones reflected back on her own experiences, and what things really made a difference for her professional development. The answer? Relationships with good bosses and flexible schedules.

During her own career path, Jones realized that she could cite several examples of when she needed to work non-traditional hours, such as when she was a caregiver for her ailing brother or when she was working toward her MSW. And in all of these instances, she always had the support of her supervisors. "That meant a lot to me. In fact, if I hadn't have been able to pick my schedule, I might have moved on," says Jones. Thinking about how she could draw upon these experiences and her LAMM training to impact retention, Jones developed a *Life Balance Change Initiative* to allow for flexible scheduling for employees.

Once approved (by Tim Decker himself), the Initiative resulted in a real change in the organizational culture of her region. Jones now has several employees that work nontraditional schedules, and can attest to the positive effect that this seemingly small change has made on staff loyalty. She relayed a story about one employee who works a late



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shift to allow her to watch her grandchildren in the mornings. If the agency didn't offer this flexibility, she would have left for another job. "It doesn't cost us anything" says Jones, "and it provides benefits to the state". This staff member who elected to work her hours at night now covers all of the on-call shifts when she works, meaning that they don't have to pay someone comp time to cover those hours.

Jones' experience with LAMM has also further developed her leadership skills as a manager to help her be a better boss. "I always feel like no matter how old you are you can always change the way you think if you just put the effort forth, and that is what LAMM has done for me. Instead of thinking about how we need to change everybody, I've thought how can I change as a manager to get more buy-in?" She recalls one experience observing how their director, Tim Decker, in her opinion a good boss, applied his leadership skills when diffusing a difficult situation by highlighting the individual's many attributes rather than coming at them punitively. She has since applied this same approach in her supervision and has found that this positive approach to management empowers the person on the receiving end to take ownership while keeping their morale high.

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All of this focus on retention has shined a spotlight on another “R” word: Relationships. As Jones says, “one thing that I’ve learned from LAMM is the importance of relationships. Relationships are what keep people.” She now makes it a priority to attend one session of each of their 3-week basic trainings for new employees to start fostering those relationships right out of the gate. She acknowledges that showing up at a new worker training doesn't necessarily build friendships, but it sends the message right at the outset that “people care here. People value me here.” This focus on relationships has become a real team effort, with managers at all levels prioritizing face to face time with staff.

Building a supportive environment and focusing on the people have helped Jones and her team move the needle toward greater staff retention. And Jones has observed that keeping staff members is only the beginning ... “Retention spreads to other things, because the longer people stay, the more skillful they become in working with families.” While Jones's *Life Balance Change Initiative* wasn't huge, it had a huge impact. And change projects like it are what can truly re-ignite the passion of the workforce. And when the workforce feels involved and respected, they are more likely to stay in their jobs and gain the skills and confidence to do what is most important - help facilitate lasting change with the children and families they serve.

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