REAL STORIES from the Field

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TOOL KIT
Get inspired by NCWWI’s multi-media collection, Real Stories from the Field.

Learn about leaders in agencies and universities that took an innovative approach to improve the organizational culture, support the child welfare workforce, and achieve better outcomes for the families they serve. Then, bring together colleagues, staff, students, and/or community members to have a rich discussion about innovative workforce development initiatives. To ensure these discussions are productive, participants will prepare by using these steps:

PRIOR TO THE DISCUSSION

1. Determine the desired outcome/goal of the session.
2. Select a real story that will inspire discussion on how to reach the desired outcome. To assist with this process, each real story includes a list of the topics covered.
3. Select the key themes that will move participants toward the desired outcome.
4. Determine the starting prompt—either one you came up with on your own or one selected from the discussion starters below.
5. Set and execute a plan for scheduled meetings.
6. Ask participants to review the real story before the meeting. Provide discussion questions in advance to promote reflection and application to current work; ask them to bring their own questions; and/or ask them to identify the most important point(s) presented. This reflection prior to coming together will stimulate discussion.

DURING THE DISCUSSION

1. Before starting the discussion, have the participants re-watch/listen/read the real story being discussed to ensure it is fresh in their mind.
2. Explain the goal of the conversation and state your starting prompt.
3. Have someone record responses.
4. The facilitator should use open-ended questions to deepen the conversation and to help participants think critically. Remember to give adequate time for participants to reflect and respond before speaking again.
5. Debrief the conversation.
6. Determine next steps.

AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Several NCWWI products available on MyNCWWI.org can support your work after the discussion. These include our Leadership Competency Framework and Leadership Tool Kit; NCWWI’s Workforce Development Framework, Planning and Assessment Tool Kit and Facilitator’s Guide; our free online courses, 1-pagers, infographics, and recorded webinars; and a massive resource library that includes websites/webpages, reference/resource lists, reports/papers, overviews/summaries, tools/guides/manuals, curricula/training materials, webinars/presentations/videos, podcasts and examples from the field.
**OVERVIEW:** For decades, the approach to workforce issues in child welfare was crisis-driven. Workers were not sufficiently supported, and states struggled to meet outcomes. In 2008, this began to change when the Children’s Bureau funded the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI). By bringing together tribes, states, agencies, and universities in partnership, NCWWI has transformed the field by developing purposeful interventions that have the workforce at the forefront of sustainable change.

**TOPICS**
- Change Implementation
- Leadership and Management
- Organizational Environment
- Retention
- Vision, Mission, and Values
- Workforce Development Planning Process

**THEMES**
- The workforce is our greatest asset.
- Agencies must invest in a strong, committed, and diverse workforce to achieve its outcomes.
- Child welfare work is taxing, so we must pay close attention to the people who are doing the caring.
- Workforce development is so much more than addressing practice issues. An agency must combine the best of training, ongoing learning opportunities, just-in-time tools and information, resource sharing, and partnerships for sustainable change.
- Differentiating between leadership and management creates a powerful shift in workers.

**DISCUSSION STARTERS**
- What does your agency currently do to support the workforce?
- What are your agency’s workforce challenges?
- What information do you need to address workforce issues?
- What relationships do you need to address workforce issues?
- How are race/equity issues addressed in your agency?
- What does positive organizational health look like at your agency?
**OVERVIEW:** Understanding the personal journey—or context—that leads people to a career in child welfare is an important part of being an effective leader. This story explores how the Director of Missouri’s Children’s Division has shaped his leadership style around understanding the life stories of workers.

**TOPICS**
- Change Implementation
- Community Context
- Cultural Responsiveness
- Trauma-Informed Practice
- Leadership and Management
- Organizational Environment
- Retention
- Vision, Mission, and Values

**THEMES**
Leading in context means understanding people’s life stories and how this impacts their motivation and interactions.

It can’t just be a job; there must be a sense of a personal mission in order for staff to endure the challenges, become resilient, and be determined to achieve the agency’s mission.

Approach families and workers from a place of curiosity. Understand where people are coming from by understanding their stories.

Avoid a cookie-cutter approach to case planning; instead, individualize case practice by understanding context and the impact of trauma. To do this, amplify the voice of children, families, and workers.

Upper management should invest in spending time shadowing workers.

**DISCUSSION STARTERS**

What has led you to choose this work?

How does your agency communicate the importance of mission? How does your agency tie the agency’s mission to personal missions?

What opportunities do you have to listen to the stories of others (colleagues, children, families, or others)?

What have you learned from listening to the stories of others? How have the stories of others impacted your work? What leadership competencies do you use when listening to the stories of others?

From whom do you or your agency need to hear more stories?
**OVERVIEW:** Effective supervisors must zoom in and out to get the full picture of any situation. Twan Stokes from Indiana Department of Child Services wanted to do something about the big issue of retention, and she did it by zooming in and developing a mentor appreciation day. Learn more about her leadership journey and how it started when she participated in the Leadership Academy for Supervisors.

**TOPICS**
- Change Implementation
- Leadership and Management
- Organizational Environment
- Retention
- Supervision
- Recruitment, Screening, and Selection
- Incentives and Work Conditions

**THEMES**
- Effective leaders switch between micro and macro perspectives.
- Getting on the balcony helps to see the whole picture.
- Little interventions, like showing appreciation for mentors, can make a big difference in building a positive organizational environment.
- Positive organizational environments provide a culture of health and wellness.
- When staff receive leadership training, it can inspire new ways of thinking that set them on a path of facilitating change at their agency.

**DISCUSSION STARTERS**
- What did “getting on the balcony” mean for this real story?
- The real story discussed how people can get into their silos. What are the factors leading to that and how can you get out of it?
- The real story makes the point of a micro and macro perspective, why is it so hard to have both?
- When you “zoom” out at your agency, what workforce development–related issues do you see at your agency?
- When you “zoom” in at your agency, what workforce development interventions could be implemented?
**OVERVIEW:** The Missouri Children’s Division faced big challenges prior to 2014. Too many children were in out-of-home care, child welfare workers approached practice inconsistently, and the state was plagued by high staff turnover rates. This is the story of how the Division collaborated on a Workforce Excellence project to design and implement a new practice model to address these issues.

**Topics:**
- Change Implementation
- Leadership and Management
- Organizational Environment
- Vision, Mission, and Values
- Practice Models
- Workforce Development Planning Process

**Themes:**
- A compliance-based culture is counter to an emphasis on good practice.
- When addressing organizational culture, start with an assessment to find out what is really happening at the agency (like the in-depth assessment used to guide service delivery with families).
- Practice models offer a common dialogue to wrap service delivery and agency culture around.
- Distributive leadership happens when everyone at the agency engages in the change process.
- Leadership academies actively engage people throughout the system in implementing change, creating widespread momentum, developing shared philosophies, and ensuring distributive leadership.
- Use implementation science to guide the roll out of any significant change to ensure its success.

Agencies need widespread momentum for real change to occur.

Engage with universities, youth, families, and community partners to influence organizational culture and to provide additional support for change.

**Discussion Starters**
- What was learned during this project that can inform work in your agency/jurisdiction?
- The Real Story highlights the use of Distributive Leadership. What do you understand about this approach to leadership? Can you give examples of how this workforce excellence project used distributive leadership?
- How did this project lay a foundation for implementation of the practice model across the whole state?
- What can this project in Missouri teach us about change?
OVERVIEW: As an MSW student at the University of North Dakota, Skye Albert received a NCWWI traineeship that sent her to work in a rural part of the state that was facing a child welfare crisis. Skye not only tackled the unique challenges facing the county but inspired her MSW program to re-think how they prepare students to work in the field.

TOPICS

Community Context (rural social work)
Education/Professional Preparation and University-Agency Partnerships
Leadership and Management
Vision, Mission, and Values
Incentives and Work Conditions (technology and resilience)

THEMES

Stories can inspire change.
Seeds for a career in child welfare can be planted early and lead to a mission-driven career.
Rural social work presents a unique set of challenges requiring innovative approaches.
University partnerships can foster resilience, provide robust preparation through training and coaching, and support effective practice changes.
Creative use of technology can connect social workers in rural areas.
Distributive leadership includes encouraging students to lead.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

On a personal level, how have your experiences led to your current career path?

How can agencies employ personal stories in finding and keeping a committed workforce?

How can you inspire resiliency among students and/or staff?

What are the challenges of a rural workforce? What can schools of social work do to support a rural workforce? What can small, rural agencies do to support their workforce? What are the unique challenges in an urban setting?

How could some of the approaches mentioned in this story be implemented at your agency? What are the possibilities? What barriers need to be overcome?
OVERVIEW: Cherokee Nation Indian Child Welfare faced big challenges to move their agency forward. NCWWI signed on to assist, and to do so, NCWWI had to change the way they operated, too. Together they faced these challenges to make a difference for children and families.

TOPICS
- Change Implementation
- Community Context (Indian Country)
- Cultural Responsiveness
- Trauma-Informed Practice
- Organizational Environment
- Retention
- Vision, Mission, and Values
- Workforce Development Planning Process

THEMES
Effective workforce development requires a comprehensive approach.
Leaders need buy-in from all staff to effectively lead change.

When implementing any organizational intervention, adapt it for cultural context.

When partnering with American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN)–serving agencies, take time to develop mutual respect and be especially mindful of the significance of the community context and historical perspective.

Basket weaving offers a moving metaphor for how to inspire organizational change in some AI/AN–serving agencies.

DISCUSSION STARTERS
Nikki Baker-Limore talks about the Cherokee Nation suffering from significant stress due to the turnover of top leadership. What can organizational leaders at all levels do to mitigate the stress experienced when there is change in top leadership?

Identify the specific strategies that the NCWWI project and the Cherokee Nation Child Welfare used to engage and get buy-in from their workforce.

Basket weaving is a metaphor used throughout this Real Story to illustrate the work of the Cherokee Nation leadership. Review and summarize how this metaphor illustrates the work of these leaders to bring about change.
OVERVIEW: Anne Graham, a child welfare middle manager from New Hampshire, developed a much-needed change initiative during her participation in the LAMM. Although her project addressed a serious gap in worker pre-service training, it took several years until she was able to influence and enact change. This story explains how her preparation met the opportunity to be realized.

TOPICS
Change Implementation
Leadership and Management
Education/Professional Preparation
Recruitment, Screening, and Selection

THEMES
Change requires inspiration, dedication, and persistence.
When implementing change, navigate the internal and external political environment.
Adaptive leadership means knowing when an issue requires a different way of thinking about the problem and addressing it in creative ways.
Persistence means hanging onto an individual’s vision and knowing when to take advantage of opportunities.
When addressing change, be mindful of the implementation drivers that can make or break an initiative.

DISCUSSION STARTERS
Give some examples of how Anne used specific principles of Adaptive Leadership in implementing change.
Competing priorities and lack of influence were barriers for implementing the planned change. Anne waited for the right opportunity to be able to implement this change. In this podcast, it was said that “Success happens when preparation meets opportunity.” Identify how Anne was prepared to use the opportunity when it presented itself.
How was implementation science used to support Anne in implementing her change initiative (give specific examples)?
**OVERVIEW:** This is the story of 3 graduate students from the UC Berkeley School of Social Welfare who connected their research to practice through their NCWWI traineeships. After their research uncovered areas for improving local practice, they presented their findings to a group of managers from the field who were compelled to act on what the students had found.

**TOPICS**
- Data-Driven Decision-Making and Continuous Quality Improvement
- Education/Professional Preparation and University-Agency Partnerships
- Leadership and Management
- Evidence-Based Practices
- Incentives and Work Conditions (accountability)

**THEMES**
- Offer students the opportunity for practical, meaningful internships that make a real difference in practice and can inspire students to stay in the child welfare field.
- Students can become the teachers by asking thought-provoking questions, resulting in new connections contributing to change.
- Data provides the jet fuel to make meaningful change.
- Seeing the impact of research efforts and the results increases student motivation.

**DISCUSSION STARTERS**
What do you think led to these students’ success in sharing data and facilitating change?
Identify an issue in child welfare where data-driven decision-making would be useful. Identify a research question and the types of data that would be useful for affecting the issue.
OVERVIEW: Dana Jones, a Field Support and Training Manager in Missouri, was facing high staff turnover rates and an over-stressed child welfare system in her region. Through the LAMM, she developed a change initiative that has made a big impact on worker satisfaction and, ultimately, outcomes for children and families.

By focusing on relationship-building, agency leaders can improve organizational climate and retention.

Investing in people can help staff withstand the fluctuations of child welfare work.

Compliance-oriented agencies preclude positive organizational climates and negatively affect retention.

Good leaders will connect with all levels of the workforce to understand and implement change.

When staff resistance shows up as oppositional behavior it sometimes masks deeper issues, requiring honest scrutiny to understand the root causes.

Flexibility to use alternative work schedules should be beneficial to the staff and the agency.

Focusing on positive attributes of an employee can be more effective than focusing on negative ones. When unsuccessful in changing an employee’s behavior, good managers change their reaction to that behavior.

When workers feel involved and respected, they are more likely to stay in their jobs and gain the skills and confidence to work more effectively with families.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

What do you think is the recipe for investing in relationships in the workplace? What are the essential ingredients? Are specific conditions necessary?

In addition to flexibility and positive relationships with supervisors, what other workplace conditions would help to support your professional development?

Can you identify additional positive outcomes of investing in staff retention?