



## Commitments in Action: Great Circle Invests in Capacity with Robust Process Improvement Program

Impact is not about what you do—how many people you serve, how long you’ve been in existence, or how far your service area reaches. It’s about the positive change you achieve and whether or not it lasts.

This statement, which has long stood as an introduction to the **Alliance for Strong Families and Communities’ Commitments of High-Impact Nonprofit Organizations**, is in essence an affirmation of the value of strategic thinking and planning. Individual goals might be met through a burst of effort or a strike of good fortune but results that endure are generally the byproduct of thoughtful and intentional strategic processes.



For many organizations pursuing impactful change within their respective communities, the hardest strategies to build and execute aren’t just about how to do things better, but about how to do them differently. We are all susceptible to the time-worn ruts of repetition, and while an inspired swerve off a well-worn path may yield temporary results, the true challenge lies in forging an entirely new road forward.

**Great Circle** is a nonprofit organization that provides a unique spectrum of behavioral health services to children and families. With campuses, counseling centers, and home and community-based services located across Missouri and eastern Kansas, it reaches more than 43,000 children and families each year.

With its wide spectrum of programming and staff spread across a variety of service areas and physical locations, sustained change had proven to be elusive for Great Circle. The organization was adept at crafting strategic solutions for each new problem that arose, but often that work would fade away as quickly as it had emerged.

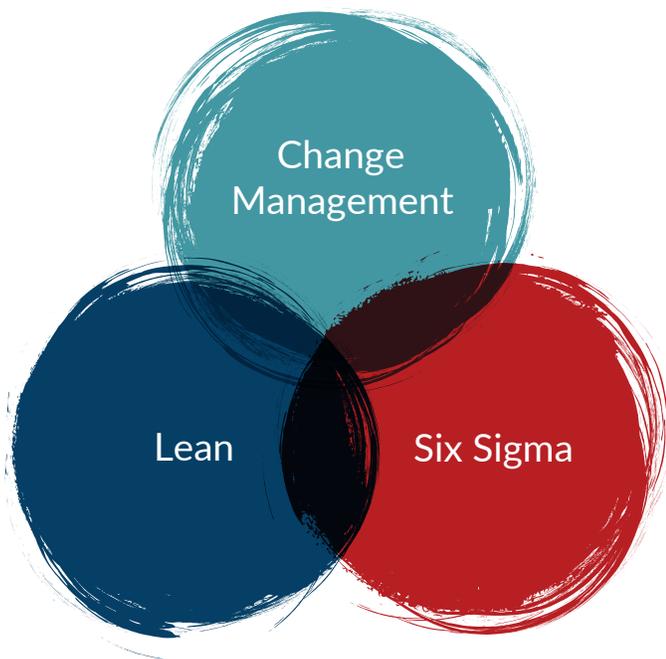
One of the Alliance’s Commitments of High-Impact Nonprofit Organizations is “Investing in Capacity,” and Great Circle, a longtime Alliance member, sought a new means for making an investment in its ability to not just implement, but sustain, needed and impactful change throughout the organization. This led to a partnership with The Joint Commission Center for Transforming Healthcare, which worked with Great Circle to implement an organization-wide initiative called Robust Process Improvement (RPI).



## Investing in Capacity

According to Jenna St. Cyr, chief quality officer for Great Circle, the four-year process, which began in earnest in 2017, is a combination of change management techniques along with the proven principles of Lean Six Sigma, which aims to build efficiency by providing a cultural template for producing meaningful change and eliminating organizational waste.

St. Cyr said having both of those components in place had been critical to Great Circle's success in building a culture of sustainable change. "We've always been good at implementing solutions and doing it quickly as well. But, because we often deal with crisis, we can find ourselves easily diverted. And that's often led to being reactionary about the work in front of us instead of focusing on maintaining or sustaining long-term solutions."



Their Lean Six Sigma approach, which involved training staff to become Green Belts and Black Belts equipped with the skills and insights to foster a culture of change throughout an organization, has been widely used in manufacturing industries, but implementation in the human services sector is less common. But for St. Cyr, equipping staff at all levels of the organization to become agents of change makes perfect sense for Great Circle. It also perfectly aligns with Innovating with Enterprise, another one of the Commitments of High-Impact Nonprofit Organizations.

*"This approach engages the voices of our entire staff—it's much more of a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach," St. Cyr added. "Our front-line staff have the best understanding of what our problems are, what their pain points are, and, most importantly, what effective solutions will look like. RPI has been a great way to engage staff at all levels of the organization to hear their voices and help them be engaged in driving the solutions throughout the organization."*

As Great Circle has continued to implement the RPI program across the organization, the return on its investment has manifested itself in myriad ways. First and foremost, the cultural shift has been palpable.

*"We've had staff members approach our RPI leadership team just to say thank you for being given a seat at the table," said St. Cyr. "Many have never participated in these types of meetings before or been asked to share their opinions with leadership in this manner. They appreciate the opportunity to be heard."*



RPI is driving quantitative results for Great Circle as well. One of the initial points of emphasis for the program was to create an internal scorecard to measure key performance indicators on a monthly basis, with management invited to take ownership of their results. It's an opportunity to openly discuss barriers to success, and problem solve in a collaborative manner to drive improvement utilizing the RPI tools with which they have been equipped. As leaders have become more comfortable engaging with the data, those key performance indicators have vastly improved.

Another way in which Great Circle is using RPI to great effect is with respect to diversity, equity, and inclusion, an area of focus the organization identified as an opportunity for needed improvement but had struggled to implement in a meaningful way. Great Circle tasked its initial class of Green Belt trainees with advancing that effort, encouraging the work to grow organically at all staff levels, rather than being pushed in a top-down approach. The result was the establishment of a Diversity Council, which is now leading the organization's work to cement cultural sensitivity, equity, and inclusion into its DNA. The creation of the council also sent a powerful message to staff about Great Circle's commitment in this area, which in turn was reflected through positive staff satisfaction survey results.

RPI has been a resounding success for Great Circle with hundreds of staff members across the organization completing training programs or participating in RPI projects. But it's the cultural shift that stands out most to St. Cyr. She's seen numerous efforts over the years at driving institutional change, and all too often the organization would slowly slide back onto that well-worn and comfortable path.



*“What’s made RPI so impactful is that Great Circle is now building its own infrastructure within the organization,” she said. “We’re not just training our staff in the principles of change management; we’re training our staff to train others so that when this partnership is over, we’ll be able to sustain this infrastructure through our own RPI training department.”*

Any organization looking to adopt a formal approach to change management is likely to be doing so with the best intentions, St. Cyr added. “For us, RPI provided a concrete structure to drive cultural change with tools that are digestible to staff at all levels of the organization. It doesn’t have to be complex. RPI is actually very simple. We are having simple conversations and inviting people to the table who weren’t there before. There is a structure and a process to it, and as we’ve followed that process with fidelity, we’ve seen results.”



# Commitments in Action Celebration



## About the Commitments

The **Alliance for Strong Families and Communities' Commitments of High-Impact Nonprofit Organizations** is a framework designed to deliver foundational direction to community-based organizations in achieving impact. By building capacity in the Commitments, organizations can achieve lasting, meaningful change with children, families, and communities.

The Commitments in Action Celebration elevates the stories of the organizations whose ingenuity, innovation, and vision, as part of the **Strategy Counts initiative**, helped the Alliance to establish the Commitments framework.

## Next Steps

Learn more about the Commitments on the Alliance's website. Then, implement the **Commitments Assessment Tool** to gain insight into your organization and benchmark your current state. This will help you to prioritize areas for improvement and customize your Alliance membership experience.

The tool is unique because it evaluates not just operational practices, but the culture and values that distinguish and drive human-serving organizations. Visit [alliance1.org/commitments](https://alliance1.org/commitments) to get started.

