



SCHOOLS OF EXCELLENCE

# How Jessica Kelley Transitioned From Overwhelmed Director To Forward-Thinking Owner



*“I feel a renewed passion and confidence in my mission and what I’m doing. It’s made an incredible impact on how I can look forward to the future of our center.”*

**JESSICA KELLEY**

Owner, Red Barn Child Care Center & Preschool



## About Jessica & Her Center:

Jessica Kelley owns the Red Barn Child Care Center & Preschool in Clarksville, Tennessee, with her husband, Jeremy. Together, with their team, they deliver a high-quality early childhood education program.

### CHALLENGES

*“The day to day was running me—I wasn’t running anything.”*

After serving as the motivated, hands-on director of Red Barn Child Care Center & Preschool for seven years, Jessica Kelley purchased the early childhood education center. She and her husband, Jeremy, became the center’s owners.

But Jessica’s transition from director to owner was anything but smooth.

Even though she had a capable director on her team, Jessica struggled to step away from the director’s job and held onto many of her old responsibilities. She was still caught up in the center’s day-to-day operations. This stunted her growth as an owner, and made her director and other team members feel stifled.

Stuck in her old director role, Jessica was also still practicing the same behaviors that never served her: overworking and people-pleasing.

She hadn’t ever established any boundaries around her work hours, answering texts and emails at all hours of the day. This kind of overworking kept her highly connected to her center, but cost her precious time with her own son at home. As she puts it, “I spent a lot more time with other people’s children than I did with my own child.”

**Jessica learned the hard way that leadership and service without boundaries becomes chaos and anarchy. It also leads to overcommitting and underperforming.**

By April 2021, Jessica decided that she’d struggled long enough.

She joined the Schools of Excellence Owner’s Only HQ program to connect with other like-minded school leaders, empower her director to take over, and learn how to fully step into her owner role.

*“I was always at school mentally, even if I wasn’t there physically. I was ever-present for my school and not ever present at home.”*

## Challenges

- Struggled to transition from director to owner role
- Disempowered the director from stepping into their role
- Offered unlimited service to her school, without any boundaries
- Caught up in the day-to-day operations of her center

## Solution

- Integrated Owner’s Only HQ mindset shifts & leadership skills
- Coached the director & staff & delegated more to them
- Created a better balance between school & family priorities
- Unlearned the “disease to please” & learned how to say No

## Results

- Stepped into owner role, allowing director to take over the daily operations
- Continued to support director & staff only when requested
- Established better work hours to enjoy special family moments at home
- Focused time & energy on the future expansion of the center

## SOLUTION

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*“Having difficult conversations is important, but it’s not easy.”*

Inside Owner’s Only HQ, Jessica learned the essential skills she needed to successfully transition from director to owner: role modeling, boundary setting, and initiating difficult conversations.

Once Jessica accepted she wasn’t the only capable team member in her center, she understood her next step was transitioning her old day-to-day tasks to her director and the support staff. Jessica also learned that transitioning work over to the team isn’t a one-and-done responsibility or as simple as delegating. **Training staff to take over is an ongoing process of coaching and role-modeling decision making.**

At the same time, she learned how to initiate difficult, honest conversations. This is one of the key hallmarks of a school of excellence. Open communication has the power to help owners like Jessica set expectations and hold teams accountable for the center’s operations.

Perhaps the biggest challenge she faced was shifting her entire mindset to overcome feelings of guilt and grief associated with being less involved in the center’s day-to-day operations. With this, she also had to confront her own people-pleasing tendencies and finally learn how and when to say No.

The other owners inside Schools of Excellence helped Jessica understand the importance of setting boundaries around work hours. She leaned on her peers for support to create a better balance between school and family priorities.

Ultimately, these transitions and the mindset work helped make Jessica a more effective, focused, and fulfilled leader.

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*“I changed ‘I can’t not be there’ to ‘They can do this without me.’ And actually, most of the time they’re better off without me. Now they know I’m here if they need me, but I don’t want anyone to think I don’t believe in them...because I do.”*

## RESULTS

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*“My staff is able to shine because I’m no longer getting in their way.”*

Schools of Excellence’s Owner’s Only HQ gave Jessica the support she was looking for to fully step into her role as owner. Instead of clinging to her old director role, Jessica worked to effectively transition those responsibilities to her new director.

Her team now exercises greater accountability for the day-to-day operations. Rather than bringing everything to Jessica, her team completes tasks and tells her about them later. Even more importantly, she now communicates openly with her director when there is an issue, because she understands that the number one metric for great school cultures is difficult conversations.

Jessica also learned when and why she needs to say No. When it came time to sign the re-leasing papers on her school, Jessica said No to being listed as a director. Instead, she was listed solely as an owner. The signing of this paperwork had a positive ripple effect, improving her work-life balance.

As the center’s owner, Jessica set communication boundaries with her team by defining her work hours. She’s now more comfortable letting non-urgent items wait. As a result, she is fully present for special moments with her own family—like enjoying slow mornings together at home.

Additionally, Jessica picks and chooses when she’s present at school activities. She has a greater appreciation for the ordinary moments she witnesses at her school, such as listening to the kids practice for their next concert.

Now when Jessica chooses to prioritize an activity with her own family, she’s confident her capable team can handle things at school. Instead of feeling guilty or sad about missing out on the center’s activities, she feels proud of her staff and their talents.

This is possible because Jessica created a strong, healthy school culture that allows things to run smoothly, whether she’s there or not.

Today, rather than frantically working in the center as a director, Jessica works on the center as its visionary owner. She and her husband are looking forward to expanding the size of their center in the future.

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*“Now I’m able to focus on the bigger picture and the next steps...what is next for me and what is next for our company. We’re able to look forward, instead of just looking at the now.”*



SCHOOLS OF EXCELLENCE

**Set boundaries,  
trust in your team, and  
focus on the future**

**APPLY TO OWNER'S ONLY HQ.**