

Vision and Community: Keys to Thriving in Legal Services

By Rosemary French and Marie Contreras

Welcome to legal services! Welcome to one of the most fulfilling, frustrating, and challenging jobs on the planet. Welcome to a tradition of fighting for the rights of poor people and their communities. Welcome to a legacy of building strong communities by helping

- preserve and produce more affordable, habitable, accessible housing and protect individual rights to such housing;
- widen access to health care, child care, food, and income support programs;
- lessen if not eliminate violence, neglect, and abuse in families;
- rescue people from and prevent homelessness;
- protect consumers—particularly vulnerable elders, immigrants, and persons with limited English language skills—from rip-offs;
- create jobs, prevent unemployment, and remove barriers to productive employment;
- facilitate integrating immigrants, people of color, and people with disabilities into the labor force and society at large; and

- enable students to get a quality education

Yet our work has few extrinsic rewards. Except for some clinical programs, we are absent from the halls of academe. We are not held up as the “best and the brightest” even though we know we must be. The pay is not great. With few exceptions, we are not in the public eye; we are not depicted on television or in film. Many people think that “poverty lawyer” is an oxymoron: Lawyers for poor people? You must be kidding!

Nevertheless you are not alone. You are part of a dedicated, talented community of people across the country, indeed the world, committed to justice for low-income people and eager to help you.

It does not get much better than this.

Turnover is high but legal services is more than bright fresh faces who spend a few years learning their craft and then move on.¹ Of those who stay, some merely repeat their first-year practice over and over, never developing beyond it, and some burn out. Then there are our leaders, and those who may become our leaders—not necessarily those in formal positions of power in legal services but those who profoundly influence their client

¹We have not found any published statistics on turnover. From our experience doing entry-level training for over twenty years, our guess is that turnover in legal services programs serving low-income people is at least 25 percent per year.

Rosemary French is president and Marie Contreras is deputy director, Benchmark Institute, 431 Alvarado St., San Francisco, CA 94114; 415.695.9296; rosemary@benchmarkinstitute.org; marie@benchmarkinstitute.org.

communities, who literally invent areas of poverty law practice, and who day in and day out do whatever it takes to serve their communities.

What makes the difference? The leaders have a personal vision that guides them and their own community that supports them. Many years' experience in legal services says that these two factors—creating a vision and building a community—determine whether you thrive in legal services even while you deal with the dull, the bureaucratic, and the effects of bone-crushing poverty.

Personal Vision

*Your work is to discover your work and then
with all your heart to give yourself to it.*
—Buddha²

Developing your personal vision—what you want to create of yourself and the world around you—is essential to individual satisfaction and happiness. It is an absolute prerequisite for leadership. A unique personal vision exists in each of us yet, for most, remains unarticulated. To make your vision one of greatness you must articulate it and then implement it. Both take work and courage.

Our vision guides us in all facets of our life. It is our constitution, expressing our core values, our hopes and dreams. It is the criterion by which we measure everything.

In our professional life, vision guides us in choosing the type of work we do and how we choose to do it. It governs our relationships with our clients, the client community, coworkers, opponents, decision makers, government institutions, and the legal system itself. It guides us in how we use the law to serve our clients and the low-income community and how we see our role in achieving justice.

Developing a vision means asking: Are you doing what you want to do, how,

when, and where you want to do it? What do you consider quality service? What areas of the law intrigue you? What strategies—litigation, administrative advocacy, education, economic development—excite you?

Developing a Vision Statement

*We never know how high we are
Till we are called to rise.
And then, if we are true to plan
Our statures touch the skies.*
—Emily Dickinson³

Developing a vision statement requires introspection, analysis, and commitment. Not a casual affair, it may take some time before you have written something that you are satisfied truly expresses your values and directions. It is something you will want to review at least on an annual basis.

There are many ways to develop a vision statement. One exercise asks you to imagine your own memorial service and what you would like family, friends, colleagues, and community members to say about your achievements, contributions, and character.⁴ Another directs you to imagine achieving a result that you deeply desire and then asking: What does it look like? What does it feel like? What words would you use to describe it?⁵ Another approach is summarized in “Steps to Create Your Vision” (see the sidebar).⁶

Community

A community of your own is the other key to sustaining yourself in legal services work. Community makes you smarter—linking together is the essence of intelligence; and the interconnectivity of community means more intelligence. Community provides you with context—a deeper understanding of your work and a strong connection to people who share your values, mission, and passion about

² LAURENCE G. BOLDT, *ZEN AND THE ART OF MAKING A LIVING* 166 (1993).

³ EMILY DICKINSON, *THE COMPLETE POEMS* (1924), available at www.bartleby.com/113/.

⁴ STEPHEN R. COVEY, *THE SEVEN HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PEOPLE* 96–97 (1990).

⁵ PETER SENGE ET AL., *THE FIFTH DISCIPLINE FIELDBOOK* 201–11 (1994). See also LAURENCE G. BOLDT, *ZEN AND THE ART OF MAKING A LIVING* 137–60 (1993).

⁶ The complete exercise can be found at www.benchmarkinstitute.org/Our_Training/coa/personal_vision&quality_service.pdf.

serving low-income people. Community gives you the resources and spirit to stay engaged even in the worst of times.

Reflect on your experiences when you were part of a community. Recall those moments when you felt a sense of belonging to a larger network of interests, a time when communication flowed easily, when getting and giving open, honest, and caring advice and support was bountiful. What allowed that sense of community to emerge? What inner qualities of mind and heart were most alive within you? What strategies did you use to meet challenges?

Most likely, quality relationships were at the heart of your community. Whom you include in your community becomes paramount.

Your community should include people in all kinds of jobs—other lawyers, paralegals, support staff, community groups, and other people who work in your area of expertise such as social workers or fair-housing advocates. Be sure to include people outside your organization and beyond your geographical region. This is true even if you are part of a big organization. Insularity may be comfortable, but it does not provide the diversity that healthy community demands. The Internet makes extending your community to virtually anywhere possible and practical.

Pull Everything Out of Your Supervisor. A prime candidate for your community is your supervisor or manager. As part of your ethical obligation to act competently, your first duty as a new lawyer is to pull everything you can from your supervisor.⁷ Not only is it your supervisor's job to supervise you, it is the supervisor's ethical duty.⁸

Get Thee a Mentor. "Simply put, a mentor is someone who helps someone else learn something that he or she would

Steps to Create Your Vision

1. Determine your core values (three to five values that are important in your life such as excellence, service, family).
2. Describe the kind of person you want to be. How do you want to be with your family, friends, colleagues, community, and with yourself? How do you want to be with your clients and the client community?
3. Describe the work that you want to do:
 - What are your interests?
 - What would you like to learn or develop?
 - What are your strengths and weaknesses?
 - What areas of the law intrigue you?
 - What impact would you like your work to have?
 - What long-term value would your work have for your clients?
 - What long-term value would your work have for the client community?
4. What quality or attribute makes you unique?
5. Write your vision—your desired future. To make your vision more powerful, state it in the present tense as though it has already happened.

Source: Adapted from Chuck Kormanski, *Values, Visions, and Missions: Using Personal Strategic Planning*, in 1 THE 1995 ANNUAL: TRAINING 59 (J. William Pfeiffer ed., 1995), and Dennis T. Jaffe & Cynthia D. Scott, *Career Development for Empowerment in a Changing Work World*, in NEW DIRECTIONS IN CAREER PLANNING AND THE WORKPLACE 33 (Jean M. Hummerow ed., 2000).

have learned less well, more slowly, or not at all if left alone."⁹ A mentor can include your supervisor, manager, the more experienced gray head who is outside of the chain of command and helps you understand your organization, or a learning coach—a sensitive and trusted advisor. Look for someone who regards you as a partner in learning, not just as the "baby lawyer." You are likely to have sev-

⁷ MODEL RULES OF PROF'L CONDUCT R. 1.1 (2002); MODEL CODE OF PROF'L RESPONSIBILITY DR 6-101(A) (1983); CAL. RULES OF PROF'L CONDUCT 3-110(B) (2002). With some local variations, most states have adopted the American Bar Association's Model Rules of Professional Conduct or its older Code of Professional Responsibility. California has adopted neither but has its own standards.

⁸ MODEL RULES OF PROF'L CONDUCT R. 5.1(b) (2002); CAL. RULES OF PROF'L CONDUCT 3-110 (2002).

⁹ Chip R. Bell, *The Mentor as Partner*, TRAINING & DEV., Feb. 2000, at 54.

eral mentors throughout your career. Keep in mind that “the greatest gift a mentor can give his or her protégé is to position that protégé as his or her mentor.”¹⁰

Create a Peer Learning Group. “There is literally tons of research indicating that peer teaching is superior to any other form of instruction.”¹¹ Get together with other new attorneys and form a study group. You probably did it in law school; you can continue it on the job. Instead of contracts or torts you can discuss and learn anything from one another. You also can second-chair at court or administrative hearings for one another, cotrain at community legal education presentations, and give feedback on one another’s written work.

Join Work Groups, Task Forces, ListSers. The people who work in your office are usually part of your community, but they are just the beginning. If you are working in an organization with multiple offices, make an effort to get to know people in those offices. Get involved in substantive work groups within your organization. Look for those who share your passion and commitment. Once you find one or two people, they will point you toward others.

Participate in task forces and listservs. Many are run by state or national support centers, whose mission is to provide some form of support—cocounseling, information services, or training—to advocates in the field. Whatever area of the law you practice, you should find a group devoted to those issues. To find them, ask your mentor and coworkers, or visit the National Center on Poverty Law Web site (www.povertylaw.org).¹²

Get Training. Actively seek out training, especially training that is offered with-

in legal services. Interactive training and events that encourage participation and networking are especially useful. Training accelerates development of the knowledge and skills that you need to serve your clients effectively.¹³ It is also a great way to find people who share your values, motivation, and dedication. Both trainers and participants are candidates for your community. People who are willing to invest time in training, who believe in the importance of ongoing learning and development, very likely share your commitment and values.

Growing Your Community. Support and connection are not instant; they grow with attention and care giving. Community building is a process in which one thing leads to the next. Learning, excitement, and self-confidence build upon one another. Learn by doing, and see where it takes you. Professional community developers say: “Build from good, expect better, make great.”¹⁴ Share your passion and support the passion of others, however you can.

Let people know who you are—what excites you, what you want to contribute, what kind of person you are. Involve the informal leaders who make things happen, host gatherings, acknowledge people’s contributions, celebrate successes.

The metaphor for the twenty-first century is community. For those of us working with low-income people, our community can be our anchor, our strength, our wall against the storm. All we need is the vision to make it happen.

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

—Margaret Mead

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ DAVE MEIER, THE ACCELERATED LEARNING HANDBOOK 219 (2000).

¹² See Links by Substantive Area, at www.povertylaw.org/legalresearch/links/links.cfm.

¹³ For a list of various training activities, see www.benchmarkinstitute.org/training_by_topic/training_by_topic.htm.

¹⁴ COMMUNITY BUILDING: RENEWING SPIRIT & LEARNING IN BUSINESS 80 (Kazimierz Gozdz ed., 1995).