



BUILDING A SENSE OF MISSION, TEAMWORK, AND CAMARADERIE WHILE WORKING REMOTELY

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Among the challenges of remote or hybrid work is engendering a sense of mission, shared purpose, teamwork, and camaraderie among staff. This effort is



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particularly important in a legal aid setting, where the motivations for and

rewards of work are not remuneration but a sense of a shared mission and accomplishment. Our work is hard, and the pay is generally less than staff might earn elsewhere, but retention and ultimately the quality of services to clients depend on these intangible rewards and motivations.

While our article title suggests that the goal can be accomplished remotely, we believe that an in-person component is very important. Phone, email, and video contact are simply much more effective when those involved have had some in-person contact. That said, you can be successful in building a cohesive organization even if you are able to have only minimal or even no in-person component as long as you are intentionally focused on this goal.

Identify Your Core Values

Whether your staff is working in-person, remotely, or hybrid, instilling a sense of shared purpose requires being deliberate and explicit about the core values you want to impart. Perhaps you are thinking, that's easy. Our core values are our mission: "affording equal access to justice" or "using the law to help people meet their basic needs." We urge you to be more specific. For example, these are key organizational values at Prairie State:

- Teamwork.
- Two heads are better than one.
- Client-centered services that include listening to the client and their objective, providing trauma-informed services that are alert to the fact that multiple issues may be impacting the client. Also, remembering the attorney does not have all the answers, focusing on the attorney's role as counselor who avoids rote application of intake priorities to the exclusion of examining what the case actually means for the client.
- The program's goal is to provide the best advice/services possible to the client in every case. This means staying current on the law; going to the statute, regulations, court rules or other relevant source in each instance; rigorous fact gathering; and discussing with others without rote copying from their work.
- It's ok to admit a mistake. In fact, it is imperative to bring a mistake to someone's attention quickly so we can address it and protect the client.
- Don't judge clients, colleagues, or others.
- Be mindful of implicit biases of all players in the legal system, including ourselves. Be aware of systems that may work against our clients.
- Prairie State is an equitable workplace where everyone's input and opinion counts. Everyone can bring their genuine self to work.
- Prairie State has ten offices, but is one law firm with a common mission.
- As a legal aid lawyer or staff member, each employee is part of a national community of advocates working towards similar goals.

Community Legal Aid SoCal (CLA SoCal) has identified five key organizational values:

- Accountability
- Collaboration
- Compassion
- Equity
- Trust

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Importantly, CLA SoCal defines each of these values. For example, the definition of collaboration includes, “We work interdependently and across teams with an understanding that collaboration is fundamental to our success.” You can see the full definitions of the five values on CLA SoCal’s website, <https://www.communitylegalsocal.org/about-us/values/>.

The specific values you want to impart may not be identical to those here. However, identifying those values and reinforcing them with current staff is a key step in accomplishing that goal.

Show, Don’t Tell

A Role for Formal Training

Onboarding and formal training are just a small piece of learning and professional development. Most learning takes place on the job. For mission and shared values, onboarding and orientation can introduce some of these ideas, but they must be demonstrated in practice by supervisors and leaders. We start with the role of orientation and training — “telling” — and then discuss opportunities for “showing” these values in action.

Prairie State has a robust orientation and training program. This program includes written materials such as “to do” and other checklists for new staff; “best practice” guides and tip sheets for effective communication with clients, counseling clients, high quality case notes and more; several dozen recorded training sessions addressing topics from LSC regulations to client confidentiality, poverty law basics, and unconscious bias; and a number of annual events, such as Effective Client Interviewing and Counseling.

A welcome letter is one centerpiece of Prairie State’s written orientation materials. This letter describes Prairie State’s service area, offices, structure, and critical resources such as litigation directors and subject matter

working groups. The welcome letter discusses client-centered principles and the tenets of teamwork.

Prairie State holds an annual MCLE event on interviewing and counseling for new attorneys, paralegals, and summer interns. This program uses demonstration, discussion, and skills practice to teach and reinforce core values, including active listening, focusing on client goals, effective fact-gathering, and the attorney’s role as counselor. Prairie State has held this program in person; fully virtual using Zoom; and in a hybrid format with the demonstrations by Zoom followed by an in-person day for the skills practice. The hybrid approach allows focused attention on the demonstrations, while ensuring that the in-person day is not too long for those driving from the farthest offices. A long lunch is part of the in-person day to give staff time for informal conversation and relationship building.

Prairie State reinforces principles of client-centered services through a video and discussion with new staff. Praxis International has produced a four-minute video titled “The Story of Rachel,” which shows the competing pressures and challenges facing a domestic violence victim who has decided to seek an order of protection and divorce from her abusive husband. In the session, trainers and new staff watch the video together. Then trainers lead a discussion about the challenges the client faces and what these challenges mean for effective representation. When this program is presented virtually, breakout rooms allow for small group discussions facilitated by experienced attorneys. Staff in all roles take part to reinforce the core value of working together across offices and job functions.

CLA SoCal similarly has been deliberate about keeping the shared values front and center from the start of a staff member’s tenure with the program. Being explicit about the values, defining them, and including them prominently on the program’s website are part of this effort. The orientation packet discusses the values, as does the orientation PowerPoint. CLA SoCal’s human resources staff conduct check-ins with new staff at 30, 60, and 90 days, and more often, if necessary, to learn whether new employees are feeling like they are part of the organization. Employees know from the start that how they exemplify the values will be part of their annual evaluation. Leaders and supervisors reinforce the values by including an opportunity at every meeting for shout-outs to coworkers for successful work in line with the values. New employees see this early on, and they not only learn the importance of the values, but they see examples of how the values are put into practice.

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Opportunities for Demonstrating Values

In some respects, demonstrating and reinforcing shared values is no different working remotely or in person. How supervisors and leaders talk about clients and discuss cases with their staff are critical ways that they reinforce — or undermine — shared values. Something as simple as including in every case discussion the question “What does the client want?” reinforces the principle that the client, and the client’s goals, center any representation. Similarly, discouraging negative or judgmental comments about clients sends important messages, including respect for clients. The supervisor teaches that this does not mean that we avoid acknowledging the weaknesses in the client’s case, but we avoid subjective comments that do not relate to the legal merits of the case or the best advocacy approach. Discussion at case acceptance or review meetings reinforces the idea of collaboration and teamwork. Virtually every interaction between a supervisor and supervisee is an opportunity to reinforce important program values.

Establishing and reinforcing shared mission and values — and indeed effective supervision overall — will not “just happen.” They require deliberate planning. Planning is even more important in a remote or hybrid workplace than in the traditional in-office setting. An impromptu conversation that may occur when a supervisee sees your open office door is less likely when either or both of you are working from home. The opportunity to debrief or process what happened in court, or the chance to simply vent after a frustrating interaction, may be even more important when staff work remotely. Ensuring that these conversations take place means intentional effort. Supervisors at CLA SoCal and at Prairie State have identified similar solutions to this challenge. CLA SoCal’s Family Law Unit (FLU) supervising attorney meets in person with each new employee, generally for lunch and again at the end of their first week. This helps establish a crucial personal connection between the supervisor and the new employee. The supervisor then schedules weekly meetings, in person or virtually, with the new employee. These meetings are a chance to discuss the employee’s cases or other work, learn of any challenges the new employee is facing, and reinforce the five key SoCal values. The FLU supervisor continues but reduces the frequency of these meetings once the new employee is well-established.

Weekly check-ins with each supervisee have become part of Prairie State’s routine since the start of the COVID pandemic. Indeed, some supervisors have

wondered why it took the pandemic to institute this very effective method of supervision.

Although very valuable, weekly check-ins do not replace the important informal interactions or “water-cooler” conversations that help build legal skills, a client-centered approach, teamwork, and collaboration. They do not fill the need to process a difficult conversation with opposing counsel or a caller, or an adverse ruling from a judge. Those things generally are best addressed relatively quickly, while they are fresh in the attorney or receptionist’s mind and before they spend too much time stewing.

One simple solution is for the supervisor to calendar a note to call and check in with the new attorney after court. Another solution is a group chat. Prairie State’s telephone intake/counseling staff has established a Google chat group to create water-cooler opportunities and enhance collaboration. One telephone intake attorney explained that after a difficult client interaction, she will message the group to ask if anyone is free to talk. They hold a quick debrief, and she feels ready for her next call. The same Google chat group enables attorneys to get quick answers to questions and share knowledge with one another.

As we write this article, neither Prairie State nor CLA SoCal has instituted a policy standardizing weekly check-ins or other aspects of virtual supervision and collaboration. CLA SoCal is looking at this as a possibility to support its hybrid and remote work options.

Everyone Learns Differently

It is important to remember that each staff member learns differently. Some new staff require more in-person time. Other new staff thrive in the remote environment. The new staff member drives the bus. It is the supervisor’s responsibility to be attuned to what their new employee needs to succeed. If in doubt, ask.

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It sounds simple, but we often do not think of being so direct. Not only will asking what supervision works best for the new employee give you valuable information, it will reinforce your organization's values of compassion, collaboration, and belonging for the staff member.

Creating a Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive Workplace when Interaction is Virtual

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion may be one of the most difficult challenges of a remote environment. Making every employee feel a valued part of the program, without pushing them to conform to an existing culture, and valuing every voice is hard when everyone is together in one place. It is that much harder when people are working remotely.

"Reverse mentoring" is an idea from the book *Belonging*³ that may work well in a hybrid environment. New employees are paired with a member of senior management. The express goal is for the management member to learn from the new employee. This approach sends the strong message that all voices matter, and brings new perspectives experienced staff likely have not considered.

Using "nominal group technique" also allows all voices to be heard, and works well virtually. At a meeting, the leader poses a question and all participants write down answers, often several responses. Each participant then offers one item from their list. There is no discussion until everyone has spoken, helping ensure that no single voice dominates.

Nurturing Social Connections

Principles for social opportunities:

- Participation is always voluntary.
- What works in one place may not work in another place; be flexible.
- Create a safe space.
- It is easier to engage by video with people you have met in person and that is particularly true for social engagement.

CLA SoCal has done substantial work, even before the onset of the pandemic, to support staff morale by creating ways to stay connected through planned social activities. The activities were adapted and expanded during the exclusively remote work period of the pandemic; and now that staff is on a hybrid work schedule, these activities

continue to enhance the employee experience and reinforce the organizational values of Accountability, Collaboration, Compassion, Equity, and Trust.

CLA SoCal's monthly staff newsletter helps staff feel connected. Each newsletter includes a message from the executive director, a client success story shared by an advocate, a staff profile featuring a biography that mixes the personal and the professional, a pet profile written by staff about their beloved animal friend, and a feature on staff social activities. The newsletter has been popular, and staff interest in contributing to the featured columns has been high.

During CLA SoCal's 2019 restructure, it created a Communications Committee, tasked with keeping the staff apprised of developments in the restructure process. This was important for making all staff feel included. When the restructure was complete, the Communications Committee took on a new name, The Funsicles, and a new mission—to develop ideas and activities to support staff morale and camaraderie.

In short order, the Staff Book Club was formed. It continues four years later. Members pick a book, take ample time to read, and get together over lunchtime to discuss the book, initially in-person and now via Zoom. Among the titles the club has read are *Lessons in Chemistry* by Bonnie Garmus, *Man in the High Castle* by Philip K. Dick, *Kitchen Confidential* by Anthony Bourdain, *Mexican Gothic* by Silvia Moreno-Garcia, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, and *True Biz* by Sara Novic.

The Funsicles became instrumental in keeping staff connected during the pandemic. The committee designed creative ways to foster camaraderie among staff working from their remote locations. They used the program's internal social media channel to stimulate interaction. For example, during Spirit Week staff could share photos related to the theme of the day and comment on each other's posts. There was a haiku contest about working from home and shared projects, like assembling jigsaw puzzles through the social media channel.

The Funsicles started Spotify playlists, including a summertime list played at the pandemic-era virtual picnic and last summer's in-person picnic, and a holiday playlist for the end of the year party. Staff were welcome to add to the playlists and did so. The Halloween party, the annual end of the year holiday party, and the annual staff summer picnic all happened virtually during the pandemic and are now held in-person again. These activities have become part of the CLA SoCal

culture and are integral to the way staff stay socially and personally connected in the current hybrid work environment.

Conclusion

As in all things, being intentional is essential to being successful. As we pivoted to working remotely, COVID forced us to be more intentional about how we communicate our values and how we supervise our staff. This has had benefits not only for remote and hybrid work, but it also has improved our in-person orientation, training, and supervision of staff as well.

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- 3 Cohen, Geoffrey. *Belonging: The Science of Creating Connection and Bridging Divides*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2022.

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