



Skills to Lead Legal Aid Programs Through Uncertain Times

By Martina I. Cucullu Lim, Program Director,¹ OneJustice

Knowledge and information alone won't get you through leading a legal aid organization during uncertain times. In addition to hard skills, to lead



through the difficult times ahead, you will need to hone your ability to guide people who are struggling with some pretty strong emotions such as fear and anger.

The critical importance of emotional intelligence or emotional quotient (or EQ) has been well-established when confronting leadership challenges. As such, you will need to identify, assess and secure the skills required to do so. Specifically, you will need the following skills:

- Self-care
- Awareness
- Empathy
- Grit
- Confidence

As part of our work at OneJustice, we have trained hundreds of leaders and leadership teams, and we have delved deeply into the importance of these skills.

Why self-care? Because you are about to undertake a difficult and unrelenting role and need to be emotionally and physically healthy to survive, let alone thrive. So, make sure you're regularly setting aside time to take care of your needs. It's really tough to do (I know), but no one benefits from you being burned out. Quite the opposite in fact.

Why awareness? You need to be self-aware as well as aware of the people you're seeking to lead. What are their needs? Where are they emotionally? What is working for them? What isn't working for them? For this you will need to rely on your instincts, your knowledge, and feedback from your team members.

This includes staff that you directly supervise as well as those who don't directly report to you. This self-awareness requires that you be aware of your emotions, and also the impact you are having on your staff, how your actions, moods, and emotions affect them. The people you are leading are acutely aware of you. Are they aware of your principles. Aware of your plan. Aware of your strengths. They need to know they can rely on their leader; that they can rely on you.

Why empathy? Empathy extends beyond simply awareness of the needs of others. Strong leaders foster a culture of empathy throughout their organizations. This culture not only supports staff by acknowledging their experiences but also encourages empathy toward supervisors and leadership. When you're attuned to how people are feeling—and why—you become a more effective and empowered leader. Being aware of how people are feeling, and why, will empower you as a leader.

Why grit? As an emotionally intelligent leader, you are mission focused and motivated. But the road ahead is unclear. You likely will encounter many obstacles along the way. Thorns that nick you as you move forward. Rocks that will make you fall. Mud that slows you down. With each nick, fall, and slog, you need to have the grit to keep moving forward, showing your team they can rely on you.

Finally, why confidence? Confidence in what exactly? You need to be confident about your ability to lead and confident in your ability to bounce back

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from upheaval, or even mistakes. People will be looking to you for guidance and hope. You also need to project the confidence that you and your organization will continue to advance your mission. Maybe there will need to be changes and it won't look the same. Maybe you will have diminished resources despite never having enough? Even if your organization must temporarily step back from the quantity of services you provide, the reality is you will still be providing vital services to your community.

All easier said than done...What if you are not sure about these skills or are not confident in yourself? This is the time to determine where your strengths and weaknesses lie. Beyond the hard skills you need, how are your EQ skills? Your change management skills? Do you struggle with self-awareness or empathy? How are you at having difficult conversations (or are you conflict avoidant)?

If you identify skill gaps, it is imperative that you address them so you can best serve your organization and staff. Once you identify which skills you need to work on, you can take direct action to fill your knowledge gaps. Look for training programs; ask your peer colleagues for leads!

At OneJustice we have developed two Executive Programs to train leaders in nonprofit management. Our Executive Fellowship program is foundational for executives and leadership looking to move into an executive leadership role. Our Strategic Leadership: Navigating the Now program provides advanced strategic training for times of unpredictability or instability. We have found that training for just a few hours a month can provide the skills and equip leaders to rise to the occasion.

As prepare yourself for the coming change and uncertainty, you may ask: "How am I going to find the time to get the training I need? I'm already juggling more than any one person should be juggling." True. Finding the time can be difficult. But ask yourself this, are you doing anything that someone else could be doing? Chances are, the answer is "yes." In that case, you need to delegate that task. Another question you could ask yourself is "do I know the organization will fall apart if I set aside a few hours per month to train or am I just scared the organization will fall apart?" Chances are, your organization will not fall apart if you dedicate 3 or 4 hours per month to becoming a stronger leader. In fact, your organization immediately will benefit from the training. You'll be helping your organization.

So...now what? Take a breath. Feel the ground beneath your feet. Say out loud "I can do this!"

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