



Leading with Purpose: Steering Legal Aid through Uncertain Times

The American Bar Association provides us with [standards for the provision of civil legal aid](#). Their guidance includes proposed standards for governance, effective leadership, and management, effective services, internal systems procedures and client relations, and quality assurance. These standards help with the technical requirements of being a high performing leader of a legal aid organization, But, knowledge and information alone won't get you through leading a legal aid during uncertain times. Rather it also requires:

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

In addition to hard skills, you will need to hone your ability to guide people who are struggling with some pretty strong emotions such as fear and anger. In other words, you will need to rely on your [emotional quotient \(or EQ\)](#). That's where self-care, awareness, and empathy come into play.

Self-care: 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, but no one benefits from you being burned out. Quite the opposite in fact.

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 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. The people you are leading need to be aware of you. Aware of your principles. Aware of your plan. Aware of your strengths. They need to know they can rely on their leader; they can rely on you.

Empathy: Empathy extends past awareness to the needs of others. Strong leaders create a culture of empathy throughout their organizations - and this culture builds in a way that we are empathetic of our staff members' needs, but that culture also builds empathy for supervisors and leadership.

Grit: The road ahead is unclear. You will encounter 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.



Confidence: You need to be confident about your ability to lead and confident in your ability to bounce back from upheaval, or even mistakes. People will be looking to you for guidance and hope. You also need to project confidence that you and your organization will continue working towards the organization's mission. Maybe it won't look like how it currently looks. During times of uncertainty, like the ones we are currently experiencing, your organization may need to temporarily step back from the quantity of services you provide. In those moments, those you lead need to feel confidence in their leadership - that their leadership knows what they're doing.

Learning: Determine where your strengths and weaknesses lie. Are you unsure of your financial skills? What about your change management skills? Do you struggle with having difficult conversations or are you conflict avoidant? These are skills that can be learned and now is the time to get the training that can fill those gaps. Finding the time can be difficult. Find the time. Delegate more. Identify your top three priorities and focus on those. Ask yourself "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 time for training, be it three to four hours over a span of 10 months, or seven to eight hours over one week. In fact, your organization immediately will benefit from the training. You'll be helping your organization.

None of these six qualities are things you either have or don't — they're muscles you build, one uncertain day at a time. The ABA's standards will tell you what a well-run legal aid organization looks like on paper. Your self-care, awareness, empathy, grit, confidence, and willingness to keep learning are what get you and your team there in practice, especially when the path isn't clear. Uncertain times don't require perfect leaders. They require leaders willing to show up, adapt, and keep going. You can do this.