

## SPECIAL FEATURE: LEADERSHIP



# Practical Tips for Leading in Difficult Times

*By Veronica Cook, Deputy Director,<sup>1</sup> Queens Legal Services*

For many of us who are on the front lines of the fight for racial, social, and economic justice in our communities, 2025 is proving to be a test of resilience.



Nearly every day we learn of a new proposed policy or federal government action that poses harm to our clients and communities, ranging from orders to close Social Security offices to threatened cuts to public benefits, to a virtual declaration of war against

so-called “illegal DEI.” Many of our organizations are facing threats to our funding and our freedom of speech, both of which are integral to our work. On top of all that, our staffs represent a diversity of opinions and concerns — some of which may not align with our own personal views or decisions we have to make as leaders, or that may give rise to conflicts among and between staff members. For senior leadership in a legal aid organization, navigating these issues is complicated.

As part of the leadership team at Queens Legal Services, which is, in turn, part of Legal Services NYC (LSNYC) — the largest civil legal aid provider in the nation — I have had the opportunity to help our organization navigate some of these challenges. We have learned a lot in the first half of the year, and there are many issues we have handled well — and many we will be better prepared to handle in the future. With that in mind, here are some tips for leading in difficult times that I have found helpful.

## Provide Reassurance and Spread Hope.

In times of uncertainty or fear, people look to their leaders for guidance and reassurance. When you are one of those leaders, this can be tough — you might not be feeling sure of anything right now! Like everyone else, you may feel scared, overwhelmed, or even despondent at times. Faced with too many new issues

to count, the temptation to ignore as many as possible and proceed with business as usual is real. However, as comforting as it might seem to take an “ostrich” approach for a little while, a good leader cannot indulge in that luxury for too long. Instead, you have to pull your head out of the sand and let those who look to you for direction know that you intend to continue to fight for the safety and security of both your staff and your client communities.

This does not mean that you are never allowed to take a break from the onslaught of negative news. It is very important that you find a way to manage the flow of information coming your way, and you should also encourage your staff to do the same. Do not make it your personal responsibility to be aware of every single proposed change or action by the federal government the day it happens. If you are overwhelmed or burned out, you will not be in a position to lead and support others.

Although the current barrage of attacks on civil rights and marginalized populations has created a heightened sense of urgency around these issues, the unfortunate truth is that the fight for justice has always faced great resistance, constantly encountering new kinds of attacks, and is not ending any time soon. To lead through times of crisis, you must be intentional about taking time to rest and regroup so that you will have the energy to continue that fight.

Demonstrating your intent to continue to pursue your mission and fight injustice also does not mean you need to have easy solutions for every problem right

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away, nor does it mean you shouldn't acknowledge people's genuine fears, or the harm caused by recent events or the latest changes to public policies affecting our client communities. It just means that you need to let people know that you are aware of the myriad issues we are facing, and even when the potential responses to those issues are unappealing, you are considering all available options and seeking the best path forward. Knowing that you are actively looking for solutions encourages staff to do the same.

Additionally, as the famous quote by Fred Rogers goes, in times of catastrophe, "Always look for the helpers. ... If you look for the helpers, you'll know that there's hope." Hope, the belief that we can overcome the obstacles in front of us, is a key component to sustaining any fight against injustice. One thing leaders can do to inspire hope is to share examples of those who are actively challenging the injustices we read about every day and fighting for our clients' rights — lawsuits challenging discriminatory policies or seeking to protect funding that supports vulnerable communities, court orders requiring that immigrants be given due process before being deported, or op-eds and news articles denouncing acts of discrimination. Look for ways to remind your staff — and yourself — that each time there is an effort by one side to push society away from justice, there are people who are on the other side pushing back.

### **Be Honest about Incoming Threats.**

While it is important to communicate to your staff that you believe in your commitment to your program's mission and to continue fighting to secure it, it is equally important that you are transparent about the threats facing your client population — and your organization itself — may be facing. Consider creating a controlled space for staff to submit questions and concerns so management can meaningfully and

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directly respond. In that way, you can acknowledge and address fears related to funding and guide the narrative about any adjustments the organization may need to make to its practices, whether the ways it communicates about the work or organizational (structural) changes.

At LSNYC, for example, we have started holding regularly-scheduled virtual meetings, open to any staff member who is interested, where subject-matter experts talk about how recent changes in the law or actions by the federal government might affect our clients, provide updates on any recent lawsuits or other challenges to these changes, and discuss how we will continue to do our work in the face of these events. These meetings keep staff apprised of new issues and are an opportunity to offer consistent information and messaging. They also help build community by bringing everyone together to discuss the issues that affect us all.

Another component of being honest about current circumstances is that, when forced to make difficult decisions, leaders should communicate those decisions — and the reasons behind them — as quickly, clearly, and succinctly as possible. Don't sugarcoat issues or hide the ball when presented with a challenge, but don't be defeatist, either. One of the most important takeaways from any MIE leadership training is that "clear is kind." That mantra certainly applies here. A lack of transparency around decisions made in difficult times leaves room for people to create their own narratives or ascribe incorrect motives to organizational actions. Being upfront about the decisions we make promotes respect and helps people accept those choices, even when they may disagree with them.

### **Know Your Limits.**

One key to being an effective leader in difficult times is recognizing that you cannot fix every problem

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with which you may be presented. Part of your job as a manager is to figure out, from among the issue you face, which ones you — both as an organization and as an individual — are equipped address, and which you are not. As a legal aid organization, you are here to serve clients facing various civil legal issues and administrative barriers to their financial and familial security. It is probably not within your organizational mission nor expertise to challenge an Executive Order purporting to eliminate birthright citizenship or to represent a parent alleging free speech violations against a school district that refuses to allow discussions about slavery. When presented with issues outside of our expertise, mission priorities, and/or resources, it is important that we not dive in simply because the issues presented are important and we feel a sense of panic in the air. Rather, we must recognize that there are many other organizations devoted entirely to policy development and defending civil and constitutional rights. When appropriate, we can refer potential clients to such organizations, or even partner with those groups to increase the impact of our advocacy. But the best way for us to help our clients is to provide direct civil legal services and community education consistent with our mission.

We should also look outside of our organizations for resources to support client needs that may not be legal in nature. Depending on where you are located, your state or local government, and the social service community, may offer resources such as educational opportunities, counseling, or other support for immigrants, members of the LGBTQ+ community, or survivors of interpersonal or gender-based violence. Referring clients to organizations and resources tailored to their specific identities and non-legal needs is an exercise in both efficiency and humility, and it leaves your organization free to focus on the issues you are more equipped to address. Building on (or creating) these partnerships at times of need also lets those organizations know that you are a trustworthy and reliable partner to whom they can refer their organizational members when legal issues arise.

In addition to the importance of recognizing organizational limitations, it is important that leaders recognize individual limitations and areas of responsibility, as well. The role of an executive director is different than that of an HR director, which is different from that of a legal practice director. If anything, times of upheaval make it even *more* important that a good leader recognize what tasks can and should be delegated to others. When funding is threatened, an executive director may be the best

person to advocate with state and local governments to address any anticipated funding gaps, while an HR director may be best equipped to devise an equitable staff reduction plan, should that become necessary. On the other hand, the executive director is likely *not* the person who should be drafting specific legal advice for our clients or updating staff on proposed changes to federal regulations around Medicaid or education law.

### **When Possible, Brainstorm Together.**

Across the nation, legal aid organizations are facing all kinds of threats right now. These include threats to our funding, our mission and our work, our right to free speech, and, of course, the rights and safety of our clients and staff. Some of these threats may have to be addressed using a top-down approach, where the executive leadership team of the organization needs to make decisions about how to protect our funding, talk to our grantors, or present our work to the public. As discussed above, in those cases, it is important for leaders to communicate those decisions quickly and clearly.

There are other decisions, however, that can be made using more of a consensus approach. How do we want to advise our non-binary and transgender clients regarding changing their gender markers on official documents right now? Is there advocacy we should be doing related to the closure of Social Security offices where many of our clients apply for benefits in person? Should we devote precious resources to protecting free speech on college campuses, even if that has not previously been one of our priorities? With so many immigrants under attack, regardless of status, should we expand our outreach and education efforts directed at green card holders who may be eligible to naturalize?

Whenever possible, create opportunities for groups of key stakeholders within the organization to talk through these issues together. Consider the resources at your disposal, your staff expertise and that of other organizations, and the immediate needs of your clients. This type of transparency and collaboration can help keep morale up and build or maintain the sense of community necessary to sustain this fight.

You may also want to brainstorm with colleagues in other jurisdictions about how they have handled or intend to handle policy changes or attitudes that are harmful to their mission. In New York City, we realize that we have been fortunate in many ways by having a local government that (generally speaking) promotes inclusivity and offers resources for members of marginalized communities. We also have one of the strongest local anti-discrimination laws in the

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nation to protect our clients' rights even when federal policy changes would indicate they deserve less than equal treatment under the law. However, many of our sister organizations in states like Texas and Louisiana have been figuring out how to best serve vulnerable populations in a hostile environment for years. Don't be afraid to reach out to leaders who may have more experience with messaging to an unfriendly audience or engaging with populations that traditionally have been reluctant to seek services and may be even more so now.

### Focus on the Mission.

Finally, above all else, stay focused on your organization's mission. We are here to meet the legal needs of our clients — low-income, vulnerable residents of our various cities and states. All decisions we make, in times of crisis or not, should be made with that guiding principle in mind. Doing so will not ensure that every decision will be well received or even understood by all — many of the decisions we make during this time will be tough ones. Indeed, sometimes being a leader means making practical decisions that are in the (long-term) best interests of your staff and clients over the decision that feels better in the moment. As long as you are making decisions consistent with your organization's values, you will be able to defend them even when you or others may find them unsatisfying.

In fact, a crisis can present an opportunity for an organization to loudly declare its values and thoughtfully, intentionally define — or redefine — itself. Those of us in leadership roles should take

this opportunity to think strategically about the way we do our work and consider ways to improve our practice to meet the needs of the current moment. In some ways, the priorities and work of a legal aid organization are straightforward, but this may mean that your organization has not engaged in big-picture strategic planning, or even unit-specific priority-setting, recently. Now is the time to do so. Whether due to necessity or an abundance of caution, your organization may choose to change the way you talk about, structure, or fund some of your work. But if you make those changes with intention, you can make clear to your staff that even though the work may change, it will continue.

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