

Centering Relationships, Equity, and Sustainability in Supervisory Practices

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In partnership with [Reverb DEI](#), [JustLead Washington](#), and several other consulting partners, I've had the privilege of co-facilitating supervisory skills training for several statewide cohorts of legal aid and legal advocacy managers in Washington and Massachusetts over the past four years. The demand for these trainings has remained strong—we've connected with over 250 participants to date, including 175 in the past year alone. Amid persistent attacks on communities most harmed by poverty, racism, and other forms of oppression, legal aid and advocacy work is more complex than ever, and managers are being called upon to lead through constant crises, uncertainty, and overwhelming workloads. Burnout is high, and many managers receive little, if any, training.

Where supervisor training exists, it is often tactical, focusing on tasks like case assignments and task delegation. While such skills are important, our approach has been to blend foundational skills with a strong emphasis on relational, equitable, and anti-racist practices. Topics have included self-awareness and emotional intelligence, managing across difference, navigating power, creating equitable culture, and conflict management, and participants have opportunities for peer workshopping and skills practice. Our sector's work is inherently relational, and supervisors in legal aid organizations are charged with supporting and leading people within an often emotionally demanding context. Therefore, we've made it an imperative to ground supervisors in the "human" side of supervision.

The following shares themes we've observed across training cohorts, including needs and challenges along with opportunities that can help supervisors strengthen their practices and their teams.

Lack of Supervisory Training

Challenge: Many legal aid supervisors step into their roles due to seniority, without formal professional development or an opportunity to practice developing skill sets. This can lead to inconsistency across staff experiences and avoidable challenges.

Opportunity: The continued demand for our trainings and engagement during sessions demonstrate that there's a clear desire to grow these skills, should resource and opportunity allow. For organizations that do not have internal training resources, resources tailored for legal aid and nonprofit managers are increasingly available, including offerings from the [Shriver Center on Poverty Law](#), [The Management Center](#), and [CompassPoint](#). A modest investment of time early in a manager's tenure can yield significant long-term benefits for organizational and team performance, as well as morale and retention.

Staff Exhaustion and Organizational Pace

Challenge: The understandable sense of urgency in legal aid and advocacy work often drives unsustainable workloads and burnout. Staff are exhausted, overwhelmed, and routinely

navigating crises and uncertainty. Many teams operate in a state of chronic stress, juggling secondary—and increasingly, primary—trauma.

Opportunity: A trauma-guided and intentional approach can help. This requires organizations to understand how its staff, clients, and partners are directly and secondarily impacted by systemic oppression, including harm done by the legal system, as well as how trauma, burnout, and compassion fatigue show up in the workplace. It also requires shifting our organizational practices toward practices that generate trust, consistency, transparency, and resilience. Access to peer support spaces and external resources is increasingly important ([Resilient Advocacy](#) is one place to start), but ‘access’ requires protected time and a team culture that values self- and community care and boundaries. Prioritizing sustainability is not in conflict with serving clients—it’s essential to improve resilience and retention.

Transactional or Punitive Supervision Culture

Challenge: Too often, supervision is approached as a compliance activity or a tool for discipline, rather than as an opportunity for staff development and trust-building. Yet, human relationships and creating belonging are at the heart of our organizations’ missions and supervisory work, and our approach must center that reality so that we can walk the talk of our values.

Opportunity: Time for relationship building must be non-negotiable. This has been part of our approach for aligning participants with a shared understanding of equity, in a time where DEI terms have been called into question: It is hard to disagree with the notion of aiming toward a team where everyone is treated fairly and has access to what they need to succeed. By establishing a strong relational foundation, supervisors are better positioned to support and coach their team members toward effectiveness in ways that meet their staff where they are, rather than through a one-size-fits-all approach. And, when there is a foundation of relationship, supervisors have more productive conversations when performance challenges must be addressed.

However, time is required to build meaningful relationships, and time is a much too scarce resource in our organizations. Managers and leadership must treat supervision as mission-critical infrastructure, rather than as a function that is added onto a supervisor’s full plate of their own cases and clients. Recognizing that caseload requirements and funders often dictate the pace of this work (and acknowledging that this is easier said than done), we also must collectively seek opportunities to push back and reframe narratives around what successful advocacy looks like. As many social justice advocates have named, we can’t build liberatory futures with extractive practices.

Conflict Avoidance/Intolerance

Challenge: Every organization we work with struggles with addressing internal conflict. In a time of increasing polarization and overwhelm, our teams are often battle-ready yet weary, leading to increased conflict at a time when we have the least energy and emotional capacity to address issues productively. We also increasingly see legal advocates rely on formal processes like grievance procedures rather than engage in what can feel like risky direct conversations. Complicating things further, many supervisors lack the tools—or support—to engage productively in disagreement themselves or support others in doing so, and often organizations then [exacerbate harm](#) by minimizing what staff are experiencing or not offering containers or resources to address conflict and frustrations.

Opportunity: Though there is no place for harm like microaggressions or abuse, supervisors – and all staff – must be resourced to build ‘generative conflict’ skills to better navigate disagreements, differences in perspectives, and other common interpersonal conflicts. Participants consistently name this as a top priority. Further, supervisors have an outsized role in creating team and organizational culture and can help propel their teams and organizations toward a culture that values direct communication, grace, and learning and growth from mistakes. This includes normalizing and encouraging regular, multi-directional feedback across all levels of the organization. Done well, such practices can prevent harm and improve trust.

Unacknowledged and Unaddressed Power Dynamics

Challenge: Supervisors inherently wield positional power but are rarely encouraged to notice, name, or adapt equitably to power dynamics. Attempts to ignore or minimize these dynamics often backfire, especially when managing former peers or managing across differences in social identities (like race, gender, and age) and supporting team members whose lived and professional experiences differ from our own.

Opportunity: Supervisors should be encouraged—and trained—to name, navigate, and share power. This includes democratizing decisions and delegating authority and responsibility where possible. This also includes prioritizing leadership development and growth and approaching interactions with intentionality and humility, taking the proactive responsibility to understand how others may perceive or experience each situation and to mitigate the potential for bias our decision-making and processes. Micromanaging, requiring perfection regardless of context or necessity, or only valuing one right way of doing things (our own) hinder staff development, damage morale, and lead to a culture of fear and punishment rather than generating a sense of mutual investment and accountability.

Assumed Alignment and Unspoken Expectations

Challenge: Finally, mission and values alignment is critical—but insufficient. Many teams falter because we assume that we’re ‘all in this together’ but leave our expectations, needs, and requirements implicit and unclear.

Opportunity: Supervisors must continually strive to make the implicit explicit. This includes what each team member’s role and tasks are, what success looks like for their role, and how their work contributes to furthering the work of your team and organization. Engage in dialogue about what you value, what your needs and priorities are, and how you can best work together. Transparency and clarity can further alignment, improve team cohesion, build trust, and prevent performance challenges down the road.

Conclusion

Our impact depends not only on what we do, but on how we do it. If our organizations value dignity, compassion, equity, and justice for our clients and communities we must walk that talk in how we support our people. As we look ahead to an uncertain and tumultuous future, legal aid organizations must invest in creating and modeling the cultures we want to see, including resourcing the people who lead their teams. With intentional structure, time, and training, we can build stronger, more sustainable organizations—and support managers in the relational, challenging, and deeply rewarding work of supervision.

About the Author



Jennifer Werdell walks alongside nonprofit and public sector agencies in their journeys to become more adaptive, effective, equitable, community-entered, and anti-racist. After kickstarting her legal career as an Equal Justice Fellow and legal services attorney at the New York Legal Assistance Group, Jen transitioned to nonprofit management and leadership development work and has operated in those spaces for almost 20 years. While supporting public interest and pro bono programs at Seattle

University School of Law, Jen co-founded and coordinated the [Washington Race Equity & Justice Initiative \(REJI\)](#) and helped to create the nonprofit [JustLead Washington](#) as a home for REJI and a statewide Leadership Academy for public interest attorneys and social justice advocates.

Jen served as JustLead's founding Executive Director for five years, serving as its organizational lead while facilitating ongoing leadership and anti-racism trainings, co-creating written resources like REJI's [Organizational Race Equity Toolkit](#), and consulting directly with partner organizations on strategic planning, organizational development, leadership support, and racial equity efforts. Since departing JustLead in 2022, she continues to engage in leadership- and equity-focused consulting, training, coaching, organizational/HR support, and facilitation as an [independent consultant](#). Jen received a BA from Amherst College and a JD from New York University School of Law, and she also holds a SHRM-SCP Certification from the Society for Human Resource Management.