

Management is downright hard!

As Rob Kepple, TDCAA’s Executive Director, wrote in one of his past columns in this journal, prosecutors are often promoted because they have had success in the courtroom, not because they’re great leaders.



By Laura Nodolf
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I remember accepting my promotion to trial team chief with enthusiasm and thinking more of the honor associated with my courtroom success than what the job entailed. I quickly discovered that I had absolutely no clue how to “manage” prosecutors. For years, all I had to do was manage my cases and schedule. Now, my time was split among three different caseloads and schedules. My time became my team’s time. Soon, my team’s time took up so much of my own that I felt like I was falling behind. I became a supervisor who managed the dockets and daily work of a team. In need of desperate help, I attended general management and civil practice courses. While I gained helpful knowledge, I never felt the training addressed the issues and pressures present in a prosecutor’s office.

The reality is I was not alone. Prosecutors all over the state were expressing the need for training directed toward management in prosecutors’ offices. When the announcement was made that the Prosecutor Management Institute (PMI) would launch in March 2016, I was ready to go! At the time, I had been promoted to First Assistant and was campaigning to serve as the next District Attorney in Midland County. After my 2016 swearing in, I came back to the office and found a note from my predecessor, Teresa Clingman. It simply read, “Laura, you earned it! Now—lead.”

By that point, I had firsthand experience addressing conflict, personnel issues, and communication styles, but I knew I could do better. I knew my team could do better. For myself and my management team, it is not enough to be good at management—we also need to be leaders. Most people do not wake up one morning to find that they are a good manager or leader. Rather, they work on their skills to hone them one baby step at a time. For my team, the first step was to attend PMI’s Fundamentals of Management course, which was graciously hosted by the Williamson County Attorney’s Office in March.

When you first mention management training

to people, they think of holding hands around a campfire, roasting marshmallows, trust falls, and touchy-feely topics. PMI is not like that. Instead, it is like getting a tool belt with *a lot* of tools. This journal does not have enough pages to cover all the topics in PMI. That said, here are the top three tools I took away from it:

1. My communication style.

In the Midland County District Attorney’s Office, certain individuals manage the day-to-day work but also help collaborate and execute whatever newly conjured crazy idea I have. Additionally, the trial team chiefs manage daily work but also act as leaders because they are constantly teaching and role-modeling. Both managers and leaders require good communication skills. If you cannot communicate



Everyone from the Midland County DA’s Office who attended the PMI training (left to right): Whitney Griffith, Laura Nodolf, Andrew Van der Hoeven, Jennifer Lively, Jana Anderson, and Tim Flathers.

I am not introspective so I had not given much thought to how I communicate or how people hear me. The PMI training forced me to look at my communication style so I can communicate in a way that is the most productive for myself and the office.

your message to your management team and the office, you are failing.

When was the last time you stopped and thought about how you communicate? I am not introspective so I had not given much thought to how I communicate or how people hear me. The PMI training forced me to look at my communication style so I can communicate in a way that is the most productive for myself and the office. Additionally, PMI allowed me the opportunity to find out how the members of my team communicate. I realized that I may ask someone to complete a task that I think is simple, but that person needs more details to complete it. Some individuals routinely need verbal affirmation that what they are doing is right; for others, knowing that their continued loyalty to the organization and their ideas are valued are what encourage them to stay. While it may sound simple, managers and leaders need to actively work on their communication to make it effective.

For my team and I, PMI was just the start. Fortunately, the Texas District and County Attorneys Foundation has recognized the need to work with offices on intermediate and advanced workshops, and my hope is that with the tools from PMI and future training, I can live up to the directive, “Now—lead.” ❄

2. People want to be heard and want their managers to listen.

Has someone ever come into your office while you are in the middle of a project and started talking to you? Do you keep typing, or do you stop to listen? I am very guilty of claiming that I am listening but I continue typing at the same time.

Actively listening to a person takes time, time we may not feel we have. However, that person came to you for a reason, and leaders need to listen with our whole attention. After listening, we need to let the speaker know that she has been heard. Would you ever want someone to leave the office because she felt like you did not value what she had to say? The tool of listening may make the difference between retaining a valuable employee and watching her walk out the door.

3. It’s OK to admit you don’t know everything.

In one exercise, we were handed a stack of 15 cards containing a variety of topics and skills relevant to prosecutors’ offices, and we were asked to honestly assess our own proficiency in those areas as either “beginner,” “intermediate,” or “advanced” level. As the elected—and with years of prosecution experience behind me—my initial thought was that I should have a tall stack of “advanced” cards. I studied them with brutal honesty and decided only three belonged in my advanced stack. Three! Actually, I am OK with three. It is OK to admit that you do not know everything or there are areas where you need improvement.