

Client-Centered Lawyering: Bridging the Gap Between Legal Services and Client Needs

Summary

Consider the bio you have displayed on your firm’s website. Whose perspective is centered? Is it merely a digital version of your resume, or does it clearly communicate to potential clients how you could help them meet their legal needs?

Or consider your client-intake process. Is it merely a tool to help facilitate a conflicts check, or does it begin the process of forging a relationship with a client and earning their trust?

These exercises get at the heart of client-centered lawyering. In a fireside chat and town hall moderated by Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism Executive Director Erika Harold, Tiffany Graves, Pro Bono Counsel, Bradley Arant Boult Cummings LLP, will explain how lawyers who put humans at the center of legal relationships – and view the delivery of legal services through this lens – can increase client transparency and trust, help clients make more informed decisions, and build stronger relationships.

By refraining from immediately jumping into problem-solving mode and instead using soft skills – like active listening, effective communication, and collaboration – lawyers can move from a mindset of “How can I decide what to do for this client?” to “How can I empower this client to share what they need from me?”

Learning Objectives:

Participants will be able to:

- a. Define client-centered lawyering and how it differs from other approaches to delivering legal services
- b. Identify the “soft skills” that enable lawyers to employ a client-centered approach.
- c. Describe how centering the client’s perspective enables lawyers to more impactfully deliver legal services and empowers clients to make more informed decisions.

Outline

- I. Description of client-centered lawyering and how this approach is distinct from other approaches to lawyering
 - o Approaches the attorney-client relationship from the client’s perspective (as opposed to just the attorney’s perspective) and seeks to optimize the client’s experience (from marketing and intake to client counseling and billing) and to maximize the client’s ability to help shape the approach to and resolution of their legal issue
 - o Focuses on empowering and equipping the client to make informed decisions and collaborate in their representation
 - o Approaches the attorney-client relationship from the perspective of “how can I first equip the client to tell me what they need from me?” as opposed to skipping that collaborative process and jumping to conclusions and telling the client what the attorney believes the client needs
- II. Specific skills/traits (“soft skills”) necessary for employing a client-centered or “human-centered” approach
 - a. Active listening
 - b. Empathy
 - c. Collaboration
 - d. Adaptability
- III. Specific ways of engaging in active listening when representing a client
 - a. Nodding to acknowledge what the client is saying
 - b. Repeating aspects of what the client just said when asking follow-up questions
 - c. Using verbal nudges to encourage the client to provide additional details (e.g., “can you tell me more?”)
 - d. Following up in writing to demonstrate comprehension of what the client shared and memorialize next steps

IV. Specific ways of seeking feedback from clients

- a. Involve clients in developing post-representation survey questions
- b. Utilize focus groups of clients to provide substantive feedback and regularly review processes and procedures internally to incorporate their suggestions

V. Navigating potential ethical issues

- a. Must strike a balance between efficiently handling a matter (see [Rule 1.5](#) (fees)) while still allowing clients to be and feel heard.
- b. Must still adhere to the Rules of Professional Conduct if a client wants to pursue a course of action that the lawyer believes to be unwise, unethical, or otherwise not in the client's best interests. (See e.g., [Rule 1.2](#). (Scope of Representation and Allocation of Authority Between Client and Lawyer), [Rule 2.1](#) (Advisor))

VI. Benefits of Client-Centered Lawyering

- a. Helps build the public's confidence in lawyers as problem-solvers, counselors, and advisors
- b. Helps strengthen relationships with existing clients, which boosts client retention and referrals
- c. Helps potential clients better see how lawyers can help them solve problems and resolve legal issues, which increases the intake of new clients

Supplementary Resource:

- Clio, [Matters Season 2: The Industry Impact of Client-Centered Lawyering](#), (podcast featuring Tiffany Graves)