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# President's Message



**Pearl Garza,**  
Paralegal Division President

**Dear Members,**

My term as your President is progressing rapidly. TAPS 2025 was a great success, and we continue to receive positive feedback. We are now actively preparing for TAPS 2026. The TAPS Planning Committee met in January to kick off planning and ensure we bring you engaging speakers and networking opportunities. I personally look forward to seeing your creative costumes again this year! If you have specific speaker or topic suggestions, please forward them to me for consideration by the committee. More details will be shared soon.

Reflecting on the rapid passage of time, it mirrors the constant motion within our paralegal profession. As you know, our work is constant, and our profession is continually evolving. To remain relevant, we must embrace this growth. Stay informed about developments within your districts and share your expertise with fellow paralegals. Similarly, our chairs and directors are diligently working to coordinate CLEs, facilitate mentor-mentee relationships, and gather information

on emerging changes to support your professional journey. I urge you to leverage these resources. Let 2026 be the year you embrace change, enhance your skills, and proactively manage your career.

A reminder that our annual membership renewal period is approaching. The membership year spans from June 1<sup>st</sup> to May 31<sup>st</sup>. As such, active and associate members are required to complete six CLE hours, including one hour of Ethics, by May 31, 2026. Please take the time to read the Paralegal Pulse and visit our PD website for upcoming CLE opportunities. Remember to save all your CLE certificates, as they are required for audit purposes.

In closing, I want to extend my sincere thanks to all our volunteers and vendors. Their ongoing support is vital to the Paralegal Division's success. My thanks to you, our members, for your continued participation and enthusiasm. We simply could not accomplish what we do without you!



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## Editor's Note

### We are pleased to share the Winter issue of the *TPJ*.

In this edition, several articles explore the themes of leadership and civility in the paralegal profession. One of my favorite authors, Simon Sinek, said,

*“The goal is not to be perfect by the end, the goal is to be better today.”*

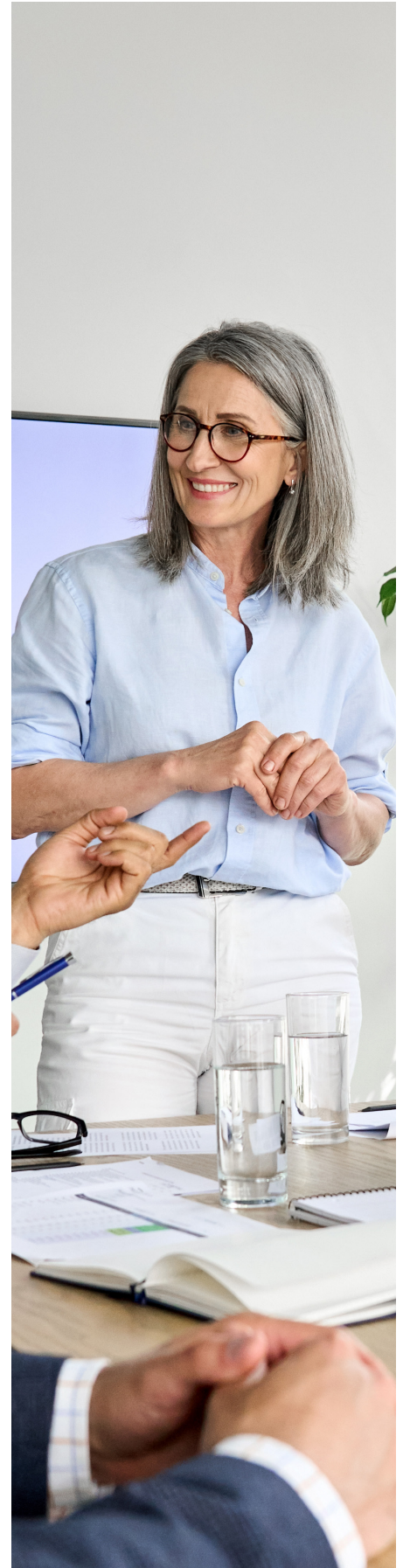
That idea truly resonates with me. Striving to be a better version of ourselves each day personally and professionally is a meaningful goal. I try to focus on the lessons in every situation and consider how I can grow as a paralegal.

Leadership can look different depending on the situation, the people involved, and the circumstances. Sometimes leadership begins with an apology, sometimes it means setting the example, and other times it simply means listening. I encourage each of us to take time to reflect on how we can become better leaders in our profession.

We hope you enjoy this issue and welcome your ideas for future articles or topics. Please send your topic suggestions and articles to [tpj@txpd.org](mailto:tpj@txpd.org).



**Kerri Alexander**  
TPJ Editor



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# Becoming the Rockstar Paralegal Your Team Needs This Year

## Joe Stephens

Consulting Attorney and Legal AI Expert, Steno

The legal field is rapidly evolving, driven by technological advancements and shifting client expectations. This evolution demands diverse skill sets within legal teams, and as a result, paralegals and support staff now play crucial roles that extend far beyond traditional clerical duties. Attorneys today require paralegals who can efficiently manage administrative tasks and strategically contribute to case management, legal research, and client communication. Let's explore the key attributes lawyers value most in their paralegal and support teams and see how these professionals can become even more indispensable assets to their legal teams.

The exceptional paralegal of 2026 embodies a unique blend of skills, forging a distinct professional identity. They transcend the traditional role of support

staff, evolving into legal operations specialists—strategic partners who understand established law practices and their future careers. Their indispensability stems not from clinging to outdated methods but from a constant drive to evolve, discovering innovative ways to contribute value within a constantly shifting legal landscape.

Technical Fluency and Innovation are crucial. The modern paralegal views technology not merely as a collection of tools but a crucial component of legal practice. They recognize that artificial intelligence and legal technology are not designed to replace them, but rather to amplify their capabilities. When a new platform or tool emerges, they are the first to explore it, becoming the resident experts for attorneys and colleagues alike. Their engagement goes beyond simply learning the basics; they delve into the intricacies, uncovering creative applications of technology to achieve superior outcomes.

For example, a top-tier paralegal might devise ingenious combinations of multiple tools: leveraging AI for initial document review and then employing specialized software for metadata analysis, all while maintaining meticulous organization within the firm's document management system. They comprehensively understand how these tools interact and can articulate their benefits to both tech-savvy and more traditionally inclined attorneys. This deep understanding of technology allows them to bridge the gap between human expertise and technological advancement, ensuring that both are used effectively.

Strategic Preparation and Project Management are also essential. Excellence in 2026 is synonymous with being the most prepared in any meeting or project. It involves anticipating needs before they arise and having solutions readily available. When an attorney mentions an upcoming deposition, the exceptional paralegal might have already established a digital evidence dashboard, prepared preliminary chronologies, and identified potential gaps in documentation. This proactive approach saves valuable time and resources, allowing the legal team to operate efficiently.

These paralegals excel at project management too, treating each case or transaction as a complex undertaking requiring meticulous orchestration. They develop and maintain detailed project timelines, identify dependencies, and proactively manage risks. They understand that in an AI-enhanced legal world, they ensure the seamless coordination of technological tools and human expertise. This blend of organizational prowess and technological understanding is crucial for navigating the complexities of modern legal practice.

Data Literacy and Analysis are increasingly important. Rock star, contemporary paralegals must be comfortable with data analysis and visualization. They understand how to interpret analytics reports generated by various legal tools, recognize patterns within large datasets, and present findings clearly to attorneys and clients. They can quickly assess the validity of AI-generated analysis and identify potential errors or biases. This critical thinking applied to data ensures that decisions are based on accurate and reliable information.

Effective Communication and Translation are key too. Top paralegals are vital bridges between different realms—between attorneys and technology, legal concepts and practical implementation, and various departments or teams. They can explain complex technical concepts to non-technical colleagues and translate legal requirements into practical workflows. This ability to communicate effectively across different levels of understanding is essential for smooth collaboration and efficient operations. They are also skilled in documentation and knowledge management. They create clear, comprehensive guides for the processes they develop, ensuring their innovations can be replicated and scaled across the organization. They maintain living documents that evolve alongside changing technology and procedures, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and knowledge sharing.

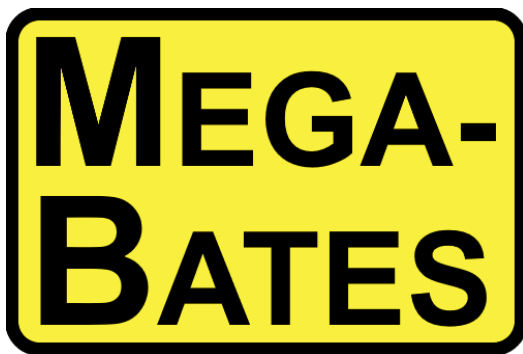
Relationship Management and Emotional Intelligence are more valuable than ever.

Strong interpersonal skills become even more useful in an increasingly digital world. Elite paralegals excel at building and maintaining relationships across the firm, with clients, and with vendors. They understand the human elements of legal practice that technology cannot replicate—the importance of trust, discretion, and personal connection. These human skills truly set a rockstar paralegal apart from a simply technically proficient one. They are particularly adept at managing and understanding each attorney's working style and preferences and adapting their support accordingly. They can anticipate when human intervention is necessary versus when automated solutions are appropriate, ensuring a harmonious and productive working relationship.

Quality Control and Critical Thinking remain essential. Top paralegals know how to verify AI-generated work products, identify potential errors, and ensure accuracy across all platforms. They maintain a

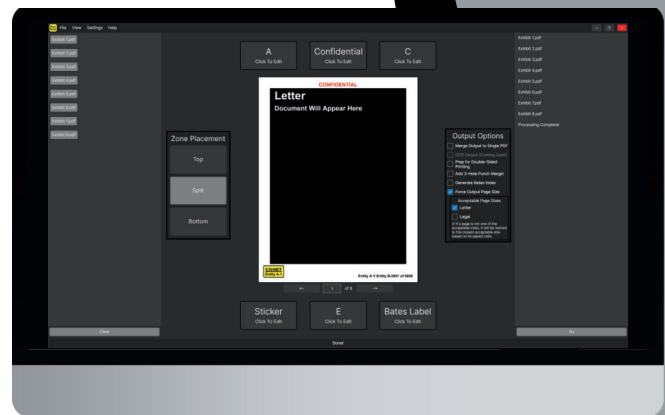
healthy scepticism about automated results while appreciating these tools' efficiency. This balance of trust and scrutiny ensures the reliability of the work produced. They are also experts at process improvement, constantly seeking ways to enhance workflows and reduce errors. They document best practices, create checklists, and develop quality control procedures that combine human oversight with technological efficiency, creating a robust and reliable system.

Continuous Learning and Adaptation are vital for long-term success. The best paralegals of 2026 are committed to continuous learning. They stay current with legal developments and technological advances, industry trends, and emerging best practices. They participate in professional networks, share knowledge with peers, and often take leadership roles in implementing new technologies or procedures. This dedication to growth and development ensures they remain at the forefront of their field. They understand



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that their value lies not in performing automatable tasks, but in their ability to oversee, coordinate, and improve complex legal processes. They are comfortable with change and see it as an opportunity for growth rather than a threat to their position. This adaptability and forward-thinking mindset is what makes them indispensable in the ever-evolving world of law.

The modern paralegal is a dynamic and multifaceted professional. By embracing technology, cultivating strong interpersonal skills, and committing to continuous learning, paralegals can transform themselves into indispensable members of their legal teams. Their strategic contributions, coupled with their adaptability and forward-thinking approach, make them true rockstars in the legal field, driving efficiency, innovation, and ultimately, success.

**Author biography:**

Joe Stephens, Consulting Attorney and Legal AI Expert at Steno, helps legal teams work more efficiently. He leverages his experience managing a large rural public defender office and working in the Texas Legislature to enhance Steno's innovative deposition services and legal tech tools.

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# Letter to a Young Paralegal Professional by Kay Elliott<sup>1</sup> and Prof. Angela Downes<sup>2</sup>

Dear Young (and young at heart) Paralegal Professionals,

As the great German lyric poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote in his seminal work *Letter to a Young Poet*<sup>3</sup>, we sit down to write this letter to you as you begin your paralegal career. If you are already on your career journey, we ask you to reflect and think about the topics we discuss. We focus on civility and civil discourse and its importance in your practice as a paralegal. Civil Discourse is defined as a conversation or discussions where there is a mutual airing of often opposing views without rancor, but with the intention of promoting greater understanding while moving toward solutions. The legal landscape has shifted dramatically as it relates to civility. Winning at all cost, meanness, back biting are the normal course of action and the expectation of acceptable behavior in order for attorneys and paralegals to zealously advocate for their clients. How did we get here and how do we shift our actions in the

legal practice to create a space where we can disagree more constructively? There is an urgent need for peaceful civil discourse as a primary prevention of fear, distrust, disinformation and violence.

## Radical Civility

This is a divisive time in our county's history. Like many Americans, we watched in horror as a deranged shooter attempted to assassinate the former president of the United States at a recent campaign rally in Butler, Pennsylvania<sup>4</sup>. We were thankful that the former president was spared, but saddened to learn of one life lost and the many others injured and traumatized. We were left with the questions of how did we get to this point? Our differences have not only divided our nation, but also created an atmosphere where communication and conversation are not a tactic, but violence is the means to handle disputes and disagreements. Would this violent act result in a turning point for the nation?

Would this start the conversation again? As the picture of the gunman and his struggles were revealed, any hope for a change in the tenor and tone of how we communicate with each other did not and it was back to business as usual.

## How did we get here?

In *The Death of Discourse*<sup>5</sup>, authors Ronald Collins and David M. Skover opine that as our society has become more reliant on television and social media for news and information, the lack of civility is the core tenet of the critique of discourse in American "Entertainment is the supra-ideology of all discourse<sup>6</sup>." The type of content reported and viewed has changed to an entertainment focus, with high content of reality television and a spotlight on stories that shock, titillate and where celebrity reigns supreme. We have developed a shorter attention span and expectation about what it means to interact with each other. According to

<sup>1</sup> Prof. Elliott received her J.D. from the University of Oklahoma, her LL.M. from SMU, and her Masters in International Business from UTD. She was trained as a mediator in 1982 and has mediated over 2500 cases to settlement. In 1989, her husband, Frank Elliott, founded the law school which is now Texas A&M University School of Law in Fort Worth. Courses in ADR were offered at the school from the earliest days of its existence. Kay has taught Mediation, Family Mediation, Negotiation, Arbitration, International Business Transactions, and Client Counseling at the law school for over 30 years and coaches the ADR teams which have won 11 national championships. The Texas A&M College of Law ADR program is currently ranked first in Texas and fourth in the nation.

<sup>2</sup> Prof. Angela Downes is a Professor at UNT Dallas College of Law where she serves as Assistant Director of Experiential Education. Prof. Downes teaches clinical courses, the 40-hour mediation course and domestic violence and the law. Her scholarship focuses on civility, vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, mediation, arbitration and issues of interpersonal violence including domestic violence, human trafficking and child abuse. Prof. Downes is a JAMS, formerly Judicial Arbitration and Mediation Services, neutral on the Dallas panel.

<sup>3</sup> We have modeled this article after Rilke's work, *Letters to a Young Poet*. Born in 1875, the great German lyric poet Rainer Maria Rilke published his first collection of poems in 1898 and went on to become renowned for his delicate depiction of the workings of the human heart. Drawn by some sympathetic note in his poems, young people often wrote to Rilke with their problems and hopes. From 1903 to 1908 Rilke wrote a series of remarkable responses to a young, would-be poet on poetry and on surviving as a sensitive observer in a harsh world. Those letters, still a fresh source of inspiration and insight, provide a chronicle of Rilke's life that shows what he was experiencing in his own relationship to life and work when he wrote them.

<sup>4</sup> On July 13, 2024, a gunman armed with an AR style rifle attempted to assassinate former President Donald Trump during a campaign rally in Butler, Pennsylvania. While the former President did sustain an injury to his ear, sadly, Corey Comperatore, a former fire chief, was killed and two other attendees, David Dutch and James Copenhaver were seriously injured. A Secret Service sniper killed the gunman. <https://www.pa.gov/en/agencies/psp/newsroom/pennsylvania-state-police-identify-victims-shot-during-attempted.html>; <https://www.fbi.gov/news/press-releases/butler-investigation-updates>; <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-rally-shooter-death-attendee-butler-county-da/>

<sup>5</sup> *The Death of Discourse*, Ronald KL Collins and David M. Skover, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Collins, p. xxvii

Collins and Skover, [e]lectronic visual entertainment-in all its new and varied forms, enjoys a dominant and almost unchallenged status in our society. As such, mass entertainment media greatly influences the cultural direction of modern First Amendment freedoms<sup>7</sup>. Recent statistics state that 95% of all generations post and have social media accounts<sup>8</sup>. We are more connected than ever with large "communities" of followers, posting and liking each other's content. Although we are more connected than ever, we are showing a curated version of our lives. Hiding behind social media allows some to say mean and unkind things with no repercussions<sup>9</sup>. While this is more the norm, we must change.

What follows is an exploration of how to integrate civility into your practice.

## Ethics: Code of Professional Ethics, Professional Responsibility and the Paralegal

Like all professions, paralegals are bound by a code of ethics and professional responsibility<sup>10</sup>, that serves as a guide on how to conduct yourself, interact with clients and others in the profession. The preamble of the code of ethics reminds paralegals that in order for the profession to be successful there must be high standards of conduct and integrity. Moreover, although paralegals are not governed by the attorney code of ethics, because there is close coalition between the two professions, paralegals are urged to be familiar with the lawyers' code of ethics. Further, integrity and civility for paralegals are guided by canons. The Canons are intended as a general guide. While civility is not specifically named in the Canons, Canon 8 and Canon 10 call upon paralegals to maintain high ethical standards and to foster professional responsibility and cooperation in the administration of justice.

<sup>7</sup> Collins p. 5

<sup>8</sup> Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The US Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community, 2023 Surgeon General report <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> See generally Treating People Well: The Extraordinary Power of Civility at Work and In Life, By Lea Berman and Jeremy Bernard, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> <https://txpd.org/ethics-pages/professional-ethics-and-the-paralegal/>, Paralegal Division, State Bar of Texas Adopted March 27, 1982, Amended June 23, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ, Daniel Goleman, 2006, p. 303

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*Canon 8. A paralegal shall maintain a high standard of ethical conduct and shall contribute to the integrity of the paralegal profession.*

*Canon 10. A paralegal shall do all other things incidental, necessary or expedient to enhance professional responsibility and the participation of paralegals in the administration of justice and public service in cooperation with the legal profession.*

In order to ensure civility in the profession, paralegals must adhere to the tenants set out in the Canons as guiding principles, but it is not just a code of ethics and professional responsibility that focus on civility; there is also scientific evidence that promotes the benefits of integrating civility into practice.

## The Science of Civility

Although historically lawyers have used logic and deductive reasoning as the primary persuasion tools, neuroscientists have recently confirmed that we do not make decisions based primarily on logic because we cannot and do not make decisions in the absence of emotion. Emotions affect not only perception but also cognition – how we think about our perceptions. We know from research that in most situations emotions do more to drive decisions than was formerly believed. Rationality is bounded by emotion. As social psychologist, Jonathan Haidt reports, when we make decisions our emotional dog wags our rational tail<sup>11</sup>. The five main components of Emotional Intelligence are the following,

Self-Awareness, Managing Feelings, Empathy, Listening Actively, and Insight. Processing emotion is a non-conscious event that humans do intuitively<sup>12</sup>. The brain and the heart communicate to the body, both chemically and by producing mood-enhancing hormones<sup>13</sup>. Hopefully a paralegal can use E.Q. to connect with a client in a way that triggers the five components of EQ.

Humans have lived in social groups for hundreds of thousands of years. During that time, we have developed a social brain comprised of widely dispersed specialized neural circuitry that has evolved to support many social tasks. Our need to engage in social reasoning such as cooperation and coordination drove the development of our large brain size and intelligence<sup>14</sup>. Social intelligence is currently being researched using neuroscience to map the areas of the brain that regulate interpersonal dynamics. The human need to work with others has promoted empathy, smooth interaction with others, social cognition, language development and civility. There is every reason to view social intelligence not just as cognitive intelligence used in social environments but as including emotions and the immediate, unconscious responses of the amygdala - 2 almond shaped parts of the brain<sup>15</sup>.

Human brains have two integrated systems of thinking: system 1 and system 2. System 1 is fast, unconscious and intuitive. System 2 is slower and more deliberate and specialized for deductive reasoning. The amygdala is a storehouse of emotional memory. Once triggered this psychological sentinel can rapidly take control of our brains. Most of us think we spend the majority of our time in the rational frontal cortex, system 2. We in fact spend our hours mostly in system 1<sup>16</sup>!

Once the client connects with a paralegal and the two have experienced mutual empathy the client can be told a story that

shifts attention to a conflict of another and the client can be helped to see the current conflict from a new perspective. A well told story engages many parts of the brain. Stories engage the motor and sensory parts of the brain, causing the secretion of oxytocin, the bonding hormone, cortisol, the fight or flight hormone, and dopamine, the "Happily ever after" hormone. Through carefully selected stories about other clients who found positive conflict solutions, a client may be able to suggest value-creating options. The life lesson embedded in the story can be a powerfully persuasive tool for focusing on *possibilities* rather than threats. Mirror neurons triggered in the story connect with the storyteller's mirror neurons. This persuasion tool is called narrative transportation. This is an emotional and instinctual connection human have with each other and explains why stories have been told for as long as humans have gathered to interact. Powerful persuasion depends on the carefully chosen story that transports a client from a stressful, anxious focus on their current problems to seeing the case from a new and more hopeful perspective. The story must resonate emotionally with the client. The client can be encouraged to have empathy for the protagonist in the story and identify with that character. Research shows that the default inclination for most primates is for empathy, cooperation and friendliness. Stories can create an environment where this is most likely to occur. Research also shows that meaningful connection requires a combination of compassion and cognitive empathy. A skillful, persuasive paralegal can transform negative conflict into positive solutions.<sup>17</sup>

Civility demands that communicators keep the dignity and respect for others with whom we disagree constantly in mind. Staying calm, establishing an empathetic connection with others, not allowing our problem-solving brain to be hijacked by the

language or opinions of others promotes productive dialogue. In order to live well with others, we must develop the ability to use our emotional and social intelligence to full advantage in resolving conflict<sup>18</sup>.

## The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Practitioner

The landscape of defined paralegal duties is rapidly changing. In August 2024, the Texas Supreme Court sought comments on a proposal that would allow qualified nonlawyers to provide some legal services to low income-Texas<sup>19</sup>. This change would allow new and amended rules that permit licensed legal paraprofessionals and licensed court-access assistants to provide certain limited legal services to low-income individuals. Areas of need include family law, consumer law, estate and probate law. It would be mandatory that the court assistants providing the services are sponsored by approved legal assistance groups. Services could be provided without a supervising attorney. Texas is one of the fastest growing states with an average of 1,000 new residents moving to Texas each week<sup>20</sup>. This population explosion has created the need for more legal services. In order to qualify a legal paraprofessional would be required to complete an ethics exam, show good moral character and fitness and take a more specific specialized subject matter test or meet other criteria that would exempt them from additional testing. This potential rule change calls for a greater need for civility.

## CONCLUSION: Embracing civility, surviving and thriving in the age of conflict

As we come to the end of our letter, we remind you burgeoning paralegal professionals to focus on the code of ethics and professional responsibility detailed in the Canons. We hope that these tenets will

12 Emotional Intelligence in Action: Training and Coaching Activities for Leaders, Managers and Teams, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Marcia. Hughes, L. B. Patterson, and J.B. Terrell, 2005, p. 12

13 Emotional Intelligence, Goleman, p. 13

14 Social Intelligence: New Science of Human Relationships, Daniel Goleman, 2007, p. 329

15 Thinking, Fast and Slow, Daniel Kahneman, 2013 p. 150

16 Kahneman, p.15

17 The Storyteller's Secret: From TED Speakers to Business Legends, Why Some Ideas Catch on and Others Don't, Carmine. Gallo, 2016,p. 216-217

18 The Soul of Civility: Timeless Principles to Heal Society and Ourselves, Alexandra Hudson, How to Restore Trust, Civility, and Civil Society-and Save Democracy A. Hudson, 2023 p. 336

19 <https://www.abajournal.com/web/article/rule-change-to-allow-paralegals-to-offer-limited-legal-services-is-proposed-by-top-texas-court>

20 <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/03/texas-population-passes-the-30-million-mark-in-2022.html> For example, four southern states – Texas, Florida, North Carolina and Georgia – accounted for 93% of the nation's population growth in 2022, but only 67% in 2023. Texas experienced the largest numeric change in the nation, adding 473,43 people, followed by Florida which added 365,205 residents.

be your guiding light and a constant reminder to make the profession better. Incorporate empathy as part of your professional armor. Share empathy with other paralegals, lawyers, clients, clerks and staff. The research is clear, empathy makes us happier and more connected to those around us<sup>21</sup>. The research also tells us that people who avoid empathy often hurt themselves in the process. By contrast, decades of evidence demonstrate that individuals who empathize with others help themselves: attracting friends more easily, experiencing greater happiness, and suffering less depression than less empathetic peers<sup>22</sup>. Ultimately, we remind you to look to the future, but remember civility to restore trust and create a better professional environment.

Alexandra Hudson, the author of the *Soul of Civility* provides guidance for embracing civility<sup>23</sup>:

- Bonds are nourished by civility, and in turn build a civil society;
- Invite neighbors into our homes or offer to help them when they are in need;
- Consider creating a third space that can be a place of building relationships and community, and be a refuge from the divided world;
- Accept hospitality when it's offered;
- When interacting with strangers in the marketplace of life—such as public transit, traveling, etc.—remember to look people in the eye whenever you can. Acknowledge and affirm their personhood, human dignity, value and worth;
- Don't assume the worst about others;
- When you meet someone new, try to nurture the connection.

Paralegals have an opportunity by mastering civility skills to maximize every interaction with a client. Modeling civility can transform a clients' conflict vocabulary and landscape from win/lose or black/white to *possibility* seeking. When a future relationship with the opposing party is one of the client's interests, as in family and employment conflicts, modeling civility and encouraging the client to use this mode in all future interactions with other parties can transform a case into a search for value creating solutions for everyone. Some lawyers are not trained in interest based bargaining and civil discourse, but paralegals can be, adding value to the lawyer and to clients.

Client interactions with paralegals offer opportunities to help clients achieve better outcomes and to improve their civility skills in every human encounter. Paralegals have an opportunity to help clients see the value of civil discourse in all situations, not just in the current case. Lastly, we remind you to remember your *why*<sup>24</sup>, do good work and never forget the importance of your contribution to the profession.



21 The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World, *Choosing Empathy*, Jamil Zaki, 2019, p. 38

22 Zaki. P. 40

23 The Soul of Civility: Timeless Principles to Heal Society and Ourselves, Alexandra Hudson, *How to Restore Trust, Civility, and Civil Society—and Save Democracy* p. 181- 183

24 What Finding Your Why Really Means, *Forbes*, Stephanie Bruns, May 25, 2021, 9:58 am EDT; <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stephanieburns/2021/05/24/what-finding-your-why-really-means/>;

# West Texas Way of Leadership

By Jay Rudinger of West, Webb, Allbritton & Gentry

West Texas is a legal practitioner's paradise. Most everyone tries to get along and help one another. The unspoken rule of engagement is that we only fight about what matters in the case and an attorney's word is their bond. Peace is more important than pride. Backstabbing is virtually non-existent and if you're fortunate enough to end up in any one of our courtrooms, you will not find yourself "hometowned." You will be hard pressed to find an attorney that tries to win a case on gamesmanship. Out here, the facts are the facts, the law is the law, and the Court's job is to decide the weight of those. The source to this unique culture is difficult to trace, but a prominent West Texas trial judge once speculated that, "West Texas's legal culture arose out of practitioners that relied on cotton farmers, sharecroppers and common folk who knew that a cooperative and supportive community meant survival in the dust bowl."<sup>1</sup> Distilled down into a simple sentence, grace was essential to survival in West Texas. Out here in Lubbock, we call this the "West Texas Way."

What does grace in West Texas law have to do with leadership? Well, the West Texas legal culture started with its legal leaders taking risks by extending grace to others, in a field where that is often lacking and even when the recipient of that grace may not have deserved it. It meant taking the risk of giving another the benefit of the doubt and making the conscious decision to give grace again even if someone took advantage of that grace in the name of gamesmanship and try to win cases on technical "gotcha" moments. It meant that grace was given with the knowledge that an extension given to a person may not be reciprocated by the person on the receiving end of that grace. Someone, somewhere, possessed the raw courage to extend grace and make room for the law and the facts to prevail. Whoever that leader was, the West Texas legal community and those graced by it owe them a great deal of gratitude. That grace defines the West Texas Way.

Effective leaders reflexively give grace. Effective leadership creates a culture of grace in the office, not just for the client but for those who work under and above them.

To help you determine when to give grace and accomplish effective leadership I've outlined a three-step process in determining when giving grace is appropriate:

## 1. Does it matter?

- a. If yes, go to step 2.
- b. If no, give them grace.

## 2. Will it determine some future important outcome?

- a. If yes, go to step 3.
- b. If no, give them grace.

## 3. Give them grace.

Grace isn't just for opposing counsel or for others in the office. You deserve grace too. We're often harsher on ourselves than we realize. A mislabeled bates number, a phone number written down wrong, taking the last snack in the cabinet<sup>2</sup>, all deserve grace. Until you've learned to give yourself grace, giving it to others will prove difficult. If you are having a hard time starting, refer to the three step process outlined above for guidance.

Now, please do not misunderstand, this is not an ode telling you that you should permit others to bully you, or suggesting that you let them use the courtroom or your grace as a tool for their own abuse. Your reflex should be grace, tolerating abuse is antithetical to the self-grace discussed earlier. Grace is an emblem of strength and a badge of confidence. That may be hard to believe given what popular media outlets attempt to portray what strength ought to look like in the legal workspace. Your grace towards others is a courtesy and a temporal obligation projecting your competence and ability to treat others like humans.

With that, I'll challenge you to give the West Texas Way a try. If it doesn't work, try again. After that second try, don't stop giving grace.



1 Honorable Judge Les Hatch, 354<sup>th</sup> District Court, Lubbock County, Texas.

2 This is not an admission of guilt, I solemnly swear I saw more snacks in there.

## MENTOR PROGRAM

### Mission Statement

To promote professionalism, foster ethical practices, and encourage personal and professional growth through mentorship and hands-on experience.

### Vision Statement

To be a leading model of excellence in paralegal mentorship by forming an engaged and inclusive legal community where knowledge is shared, professional standards are elevated, and every paralegal is empowered to reach their full potential.

### Program Benefits

- Gain insights from experienced paralegals
- Enhance legal knowledge and practical skills
- Build professional confidence and networks
- Receive guidance on career development

### Mentor/Protégés Expectations

#### Mentor:

Opportunities to share your guidance and general advice\* regarding the paralegal profession, ethics, and substantive legal topics;

Encourage and promote the Division, and opportunities to participate in the Division; and

Invite Protégés to attend Division functions, and introduce Protégés to Division leadership, as well as some of the members.

#### Protégés:

Receive direction and support generally\* on topics such as ethics, career advancement\*\*, and professionalism;

Access to valuable networking opportunities with other paralegals and the legal community through your mentor and others at state-wide and district Division events; and

Opportunities to learn more about the Division and Division activities, as well as opportunities to learn how to become more involved.

### Mentor/Protégés Requirements

**Mentors** – Voting, active members in good standing, with at least seven (7) years of experience as a paralegal, are qualified to serve as Mentors. Mentors must complete the requisite application acknowledging Mentor has read and agrees to follow the Mentor Program Guidelines.

All Directors and Officers of the Division meeting the experience requirement are required to serve as Mentors, as well as encourage and promote the Mentor Program

**Protégés** -Protégé applicants must be a current Active, Associate or Student member in good standing with the Paralegal Division with three (3) years or less of experience as a paralegal or in a specific area or law. Protégés must complete the requisite application acknowledging Protégé has read and agrees to follow the Mentor Program Guidelines.

\*Mentors are not to provide legal advice when discussing substantive legal issues, and will adhere strictly to ethical and confidentiality guidelines in not disclosing any information about pending cases or specific issues of law.

\*\*Protégés should not expect that career counseling includes actual job placement, and are requested to exercise consideration and discretion regarding the use of the Mentor's time.

### Contact Information

If you are interested in either obtaining a mentor or serving as a mentor, please read the Division Mentor Program Guidelines via the My Account link. You will also find the Mentor Request Form and Protégé Request Form there as well.

# The Golden Rule and the Practice of Criminal Law

By Alyssa E. Nava, Managing Attorney, Nava Law Texas

You've heard of the golden rule, haven't you? Whoever has the gold makes the rules." That line comes from *Aladdin*, one of my favorite childhood movies. It's said by Jafar, the villain. But unlike Jafar, I was raised to believe in a very different version of the golden rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

In philosophy, it's known as the ethic of reciprocity. In daily life, it's simply treating people the way you'd want to be treated—not in reaction to how they treat you, but as a reflection of your own principles.

In the criminal justice system, prosecutors and law enforcement officers hold extraordinary power. They are, in many ways, the ones who "have the gold." So what happens when people in those positions abandon the ethic of reciprocity and instead follow Jafar's logic?

The Supreme Court of Texas has made the standard clear. Through the Texas Lawyer's Creed, we are instructed to treat others in the legal profession with courtesy, candor, and cooperation. That mandate isn't optional. It reflects our collective duty to protect the dignity of the profession and the people we serve.

And yet, in the day-to-day practice of criminal law, I've seen firsthand and heard from many others across the state that this rule is too often ignored. Some prosecutors choose hostility over professionalism. Some law enforcement officers choose condescension over compassion.

This profession demands a thick skin. I can handle the occasional disrespect. But what concerns me more is how that attitude affects the people at the center of our work: The accused, the victims, the witnesses, and the families whose lives are disrupted by the legal process.

My brother, also a criminal defense attorney, once shared this quote with me from *Hellblazer: Dead in America*:

"A good person should show generosity and respect to one whose fate has been placed in their hands."



A good prosecutor—and for that matter, a good public servant—should do the same.

Several years ago, I came across a law enforcement pamphlet designed to educate the public on how to handle police encounters. In bold print, it read:

“Practice the golden rule: Treat the officer like you would want to be treated. Treat the officer with respect... Officers in return will treat you with respect.”

To me, that’s a misunderstanding of the golden rule. Respect is not transactional. It is foundational. Officers should treat every person, whether suspect, victim, or bystander, with dignity from the outset. In many cases, those individuals are experiencing one of the most stressful moments of their lives. A respectful approach can deescalate tension and lead to safer, more constructive outcomes for everyone involved.

And this isn’t just about fairness. It’s also about effectiveness. As a former prosecutor and now a criminal defense attorney, I can tell you that juries pay close attention to how officers and prosecutors behave. Those who act with professionalism and kindness carry more credibility and are less vulnerable to being discredited on the stand.

For paralegals, this principle matters just as much. You are often the first point of contact for clients. You draft the communications. You help manage the discovery process. You interact with opposing counsel’s support staff. In many ways, you set the tone. When you choose professionalism, even in the face of incivility, you not only elevate the practice, you help protect the integrity of your office and the process itself.

So, what can we do?

Let me end with a quote from one of my favorite shows, *Angel*:

“Nothing in the world is the way it ought to be. It’s harsh, and cruel. But that’s why there’s us, champions. Doesn’t matter where we come from, what we’ve done or suffered, or even if we make a difference. We live as though the world is as it should be, to show it what it can be.”

That, to me, is the most powerful interpretation of the golden rule. It’s a call to action.

Let us act with respect, even when it’s not returned.

Let us treat others with dignity, even when it’s difficult.

Let us live and work as though the system is what it should be so we can help shape it into what it can be.

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LARGER  
AUDIENCE**

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## Ellen Lockwood

Ellen Lockwood, ACP, RP, is the chair of the Professional Ethics Committee of the Paralegal Division and a past president of the Division. She is a frequent speaker on paralegal ethics and intellectual property and the lead author of the Division's Paralegal Ethics Handbook published by Thomson Reuters. She may be contacted at [ethics@txpd.org](mailto:ethics@txpd.org).

# The Ethics of Knowing Your Limitations

We know all paralegals have superpowers, and that smart attorneys value their paralegals as an important part of their practices. But just as superheroes only have a few superpowers, not to mention at least one significant weakness, paralegals also have their limitations.

Paralegals should welcome the opportunity to try new things and it is healthy to have confidence that you will be able to do new tasks. However, confidence isn't equivalent to experience. Paralegals should proceed carefully before undertaking any of the following:

- **Working in a new area of law**

Learning a new area of law is often easier than learning your first area of law as you already understand how the law works, as well as legal procedure. However, knowing a little about a new area of law does not equal the knowledge of paralegals experienced in that area of law. You may think a particular area of law is easy and that you can perform work in that area as well as someone else because you are smart and frankly, how hard can it be? Unfortunately, that attitude is not only unwelcome in most firms and companies, it is also the kind of arrogance that can cause you to make mistakes because you don't know everything after all.

- **Working in an area of law that is new to your attorney**

A paralegal's experience in a particular area of law is not a substitute for consulting an attorney who practices in that area. Paralegals may provide information about issues involving an area of law with which the paralegal is

experienced which may be a convenient way for the attorney to gain a basic understanding of the legal concepts and issues raised in the matter. The paralegal may then assist the attorney in gathering pertinent information from the client and other resources to provide to the expert for review and analysis before the expert advises on how best to proceed.

- **Figuring out new things on your own**

There are many resources for paralegals to use to determine how to do many things you may not have done previously. (One of the best resources is the vast knowledge of PD members through the eGroup Forum.) However, determining which form to file or the next steps to take in a proceeding doesn't necessarily include an understanding of why what you are doing is required or recommended. Paralegals should be aware that without the understanding that comes from experience, there is a risk you will overlook some important aspect of the task. The more you learn about your area of law, the more you realize the implications of certain actions and the variables that can affect a course of action.

Your attorney usually assumes you know what you are doing, and the client has every right to assume you are competent and knowledgeable about the work you are performing. While paralegals should not be discouraged from trying new things, it is important to be aware of your limitations. Do not confuse confidence for competence.

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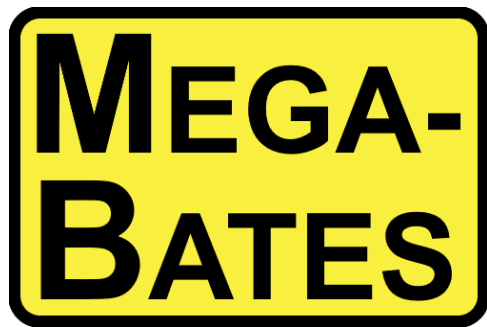
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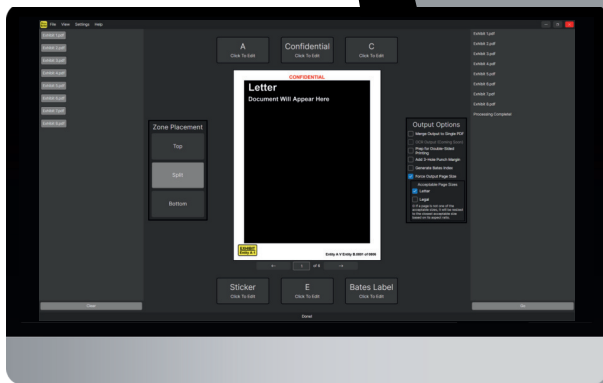


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# Board of Directors Quarterly Board Meeting Summary Fall 2025

Texas Paralegal Journal



Submitted by President-Elect, Kim A. Goldberg, TBLS-BCP, Civil Trial Law

The PD Board of Directors met on Friday, September 26 and Saturday, September 27, 2025, in San Antonio, Texas.

## 2025-2026 Board of Directors and PD Coordinator

President	Pearl Garza
President-Elect	Kim Goldberg, TBLS-BCP
District 1	Amy Rainwater, TBLS-BCP, PHP
District 2	Director Vacancy
District 3 and Parliamentarian	Billy Hart
District 5	Susi Boss
District 7	Marnee Bolen, TBLS-BCP
District 10 and Secretary	Marie Boleslawski, ACP
District 11	Shannon "Shay" Mendez Smith
District 12	Jennifer Harris, CP
District 14 and Treasurer	Maria Sturdy
District 15	Letty Rodriguez, TBLS-BCP
District 16	Director Vacancy
Paralegal Division Coordinator	Rhonda Brashears, CP, TBLS-BCP

## Also in attendance were guests invited by the President:

Javan Johnson, ACP, TBLS-BCP  
Lisa Pittman

The Board participated in a "Get to Know You" leadership event.

Each District Director and several Committee Chairs provided the Board with an update of past and upcoming events taking place in each of their Districts and in their Committees. The Board Advisors also provided Liaison reports for each of their assigned Committee/Organizations, including the Artificial Intelligence Committee.

The Board reviewed the proposed 2025-2026 Budget and proposed Committee Charges with discussions.

The Board discussed some proposed changes to the Paralegal Division governing documents that will be provided to the Board for review and vote.

**TAPS 2025** was held in San Antonio on September 24-26, 2025, at The Westin San Antonio North. The Board received a report from the TAPS Planning Committee regarding TAPS 2025. Surveys from members were completed at TAPS 2025 and will be provided to the TAPS Planning Committee for consideration in planning TAPS 2026.

The Texas Paralegal Journal resumed publication with its Fall 2025 issue.

## Some upcoming dates to remember:

**Membership: Renewals** will begin May 1 and go through July 31, 2026.

TAPS 2026 will be in San Antonio – September 30 to October 2, 2026, at The Westin San Antonio North - 9821 Colonnade Blvd, San Antonio, TX 78230. Stay tuned for more details!

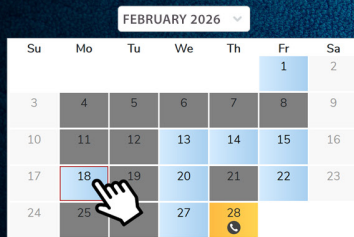
**The Paralegal Pulse** is emailed out monthly. Please open and read them when you have a moment. The Pulse highlights upcoming CLE opportunities, The President's Gavel and the monthly opportunity to "Read and Win." Just read through the current issue of Pulse and be the 19th person to correctly answer the question provided. The monthly winner will receive a \$20 e-gift card to be emailed directly to them!

We are looking forward to a year of new and exciting events. Hope you will join us for all of them.



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# MEET OUR NEW 2026-2027 PRESIDENT-ELECT, MARIA STURDY



**Maria Sturdy,**  
President-Elect

In February 2026, the Board of Directors announced its election of Maria Sturdy as the 2026-2027 President-Elect of the Paralegal Division.

Maria Sturdy is a Paralegal working under the direction of Chris and Michelle Jones at Jones & Jones in Longview since 2012. Jones & Jones specializes in Employment Law and Personal Injury. Before coming to Longview, Maria worked for Michael G. Carroll Law Firm in Tyler. Maria graduated Magna Cum Laude with her Associate Degree in Applied Science with emphasis in Paralegal Studies from Tyler Junior College.

Maria has been a member of the Paralegal Division since 2015 she has served as the District 14 Director from 2022 -2026. She has also served as the Treasurer from 2023-2026. Most recently, she has been elected as the President-Elect for 2026-2027.

Maria has been member of the Northeast Texas Association of Paralegals (NTAP) since 2013 and has served in a variety of roles over the years: President, 1<sup>st</sup> Vice-President, 2nd Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer for the association. She was honored to receive NTAP's Paralegal of the Year award in 2017 and 2023. Maria is also a member of the Texas Bar College.

Maria and her husband Bill have 5 children, 13 grandchildren and 1 great grandson. Maria enjoys cooking, gardening, painting and camping.





TAPS 2025 was held in San Antonio, Texas on September 24–26, 2025. The theme was “Your Keys to CLE Live – TAPS 2025.” We had 176 attendees. We had 60 topics over 74 speakers who addressed a wide variety of topics.

On Wednesday evening, the “Set the TAPS Tempo on Opening Night” networking social was held. A match the song/artist was played and door prizes were given. On Thursday, we enjoyed a social, “The Beat Goes On.” It was an up-tempo evening of networking brought to our attendees by Felix and Fingers in a dueling piano show-off. Everyone had a great time – there was singing and dancing, as well as a costume contest.

We hosted another TBLS Helpful Hints Live for attendees who were interested in knowing more about the TBLS exam. Molly Galvez from TBLS was on site to answer questions.

The Friday morning special session was a panel discussion by Justice Lori Massey Brissette, Justice Todd McCray, Justice Velia J. Meza, Justice Irene Rios, and Justice Adrian A. Spears, II.

On Friday the attendees enjoyed a wonderful presentation “The Encore” at the annual meeting luncheon with keynote speaker, Honorable Adrian A. Spears II who spoke on “Being the Best Paralegals in Your Role in the Judicial System.”

Our charity was “Stand with Santos.” The funds raised benefit the Texas Access to Justice Foundation, a nonprofit organization that provides grants to organizations statewide offering free legal assistance to low-income Texas. The funds raised during this time were going specifically to help those affected by the 2025 Central Texas floods.

Alice Lineberry, 2025 TAPS Chair





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