

Judicial Profile: How Do You Re-engineer a Court? Judge Brickley Believes It Starts with Communication

By Stacy Sellek
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“Never underestimate the power of communication.”

This is one message Chief Judge Kathleen Brickley of the 36th Circuit Court in Van Buren County says has been driven home to her many times in the last few years.

When she was appointed to the bench in 2012, she immediately saw “areas of opportunity” where the court could make changes to improve public service. Her original plan was to wait six months before trying to implement changes, but said she quickly modified that to about three days.

“We had a stalled video system implementation project, we needed help with jury management, we lacked a law clerk—many areas needed to be addressed,” she said. “And it soon became apparent that all of these changes that I was hoping to implement weren’t going to happen without a court administrator, so that was a big focus.”

But she was also concerned about staff morale as the court embarked on this period of transition.

“Everything here had become a bit settled, and then it suddenly became a culture of change—that wasn’t easy,” she said. “It was unnerving for them at first to think, ‘Is my job going to be eliminated?’”

So how did she address that?

“By listening,” she explained. “One quality judges need to possess is the ability to listen. When judges lose that quality, we also lose our sense of humility and our ability to learn from others.”

Once the lines of communication were established and Judge Brickley reached out to the State Court Administrative Office (SCAO) for help in administering several Management Assistance Plans (MAPs) for the court, Judge Brickley says that the court staff became more enthusiastic about the positive changes that were taking place.

“I cannot say enough about the capabilities and flexibility of the staff during this process,” she shared. “I have seen leadership at all levels.”



Judge Kathleen Brickley

Eventually, the circuit court administrator position got funded, and is now held by Frank Hardester.

“I didn’t realize how much as a lawyer I would need to multitask as a judge, but there are details that I just don’t have the time to handle,” Judge Brickley explained. “Frank capably handles those details, and really, he is helping us better manage our own performance.”

Looking back on the transition in the 36th Circuit, Judge Brickley shares some of the leadership insight she has gained along the way.

“Being a judge takes courage,” she said. “Not only do you need to have the courage to do what the law requires, but you also need courage to lead the court. I tell myself this often when faced with unpopular or difficult decisions on and off the bench.”

Judge Brickley credits several judicial mentors, such as retired Kalamazoo County Circuit Judge William Schma, with inspiring her to become a leader in the court. Judge Schma, in 1992, founded the Kalamazoo County Drug Treatment Court, the first of its kind in Michigan and among the first in the nation, and later founded the National Association of Drug Court Professionals. Judge Brickley currently oversees the Van Buren County Drug Treatment Court – Women’s Court.



Judge Brickley (far left) stands next to recent drug court graduate, Shanna Grubaugh, and her family. Judge Brickley told Shanna: "I don't know if you realize it, but you had an amazing support team in the court who fought to keep you in the program, even when you were struggling against it. And we will always be here for you."

“He taught me the importance of listening. I hear him in my head from time to time,” she admitted with a laugh.

On why she wanted to become a judge, Judge Brickley explained, “It was partly because our community never had a woman judge or magistrate, and I believe that if our judiciary is to be perceived as fair, we need to truly represent the people we serve. Also, as a mother of a daughter, I wanted to inspire her. And I truly enjoy legal scholarship.”

Judge Brickley earned her law degree from the University of Notre Dame, and has been married for 23 years to her husband, an emergency physician. They live in South Haven with their 11-year-old daughter.