

The Court Management Profession: Leadership Is Like Driving a Race Car!

Janet G. Cornell

Some of you may know that this author has an interest in driving race cars — Indy, NASCAR, “formula” cars (entry-level, open-wheel, single seat), and, on occasion, go-karts. Yep! — experiencing the thrill of speed, mastering (keeping control of) the car, and conquering the track. The premise of this article is that leading a court is very much like driving a race car. Let me tell you why. You can then decide for yourself.¹

Let’s begin with some race-car-driving basics:

- 1. Look ahead.** Keep your eyes on the horizon and focus ahead, not directly in front. This will contribute toward a better drive.
- 2. Move smoothly around the track.** Remember to make your drive smooth. Avoid jerky or sudden changes. A smooth drive helps you drive through the pack.
- 3. Know the basics.** As a driver you must learn the elements of

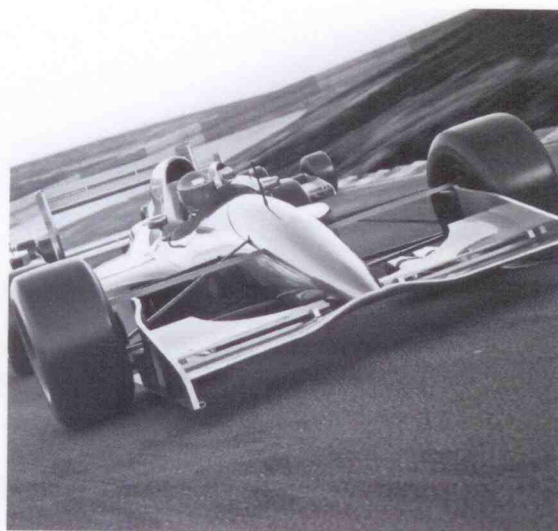
a good drive, and continue to practice. Applying the basics will make your driving experience more fulfilling.

- 4. Lean in.** Sitting closer to the wheel positions you to be in control of the car.

- 5. Look for opportunities to advance.** Take the right risks to keep moving forward toward first place. Keep practicing.

- 6. Finally, keep an eye on your resources.** This means your personal energy, the fuel, and your tires. They are the juice that will support your drive.

Now, consider these same basics related to court management and leadership.



1. Look ahead.

In the court, this can mean having a vision. Look to the future. Figure out what is needed to prepare the organization for what is to come. Looking ahead will assist you, the leader, in being prepared—for example, budget needs, new initiatives, COOP (“continuity of operations preparedness”) planning, implementation of technology, and establishment of partnerships and relationships. Kiefer and Knox have conducted a survey on what court leaders need to expect for 2025 and continually urge us to be prepared.²

¹ Opinions are the author’s. They are adapted from personal experience in driving school and from driving tips at <https://www.yahoo.com/autos/bp/5-driving-tips-former-racecar-driver-130608055.html>.

² See National Association for Court Management, 2014 Annual Conference “Future of the Courts 2025—Looking Out on the Horizon,” <https://nacmnet.org/educational-opportunities/nacm-annual-conference-2014-videos.html>; and P. Knox, J. Cornell, and P. Kiefer, “Did You See That Coming?” *Court Manager* 28, no. 4 (2013-14).

2. Move smoothly.

Be prepared. Study. Emulate leadership skills and traits. Be committed and give it your all. Continue to study and learn. Strive for consistency and constancy of purpose. Commit to making your court fulfill the purposes of courts.³

3. Know the basics.

Know your job. Know our profession. The NACM Core (<http://nacmcore.org>) provides us with expansive and practical information on the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for court professionals. Expand skills, and experience, through educational and networking opportunities. Practice leadership in different, non-court environments. Alex Aikman asserted that there indeed is a need for leaders in court administration.⁴ We need to find out what leaders do, how they are effective, and then practice it.

4. Look for opportunities.

A court leader should always be ready to recognize opportunities—opportunities for new programs, prospects for operational improvements via reengineering, and occasions to improve things for judicial officers and staff. Judge Kevin Burke has written on the “need to practice leadership without fear,” stating, “Courts desperately need risk takers.”⁵ He says we should be “spirited” and “take calculated risks.” This includes being open to change, to using technology, and to working for accountability and trust.

5. Lean in.

Be alert. “Lean in” toward others: seek their input, engage and seek feedback, and obtain and share information from and with partners and collaborators. Use it for improved personal and organizational performance. As Sheryl Sandberg noted in *Lean In*, we should seek to empower and to challenge ourselves. One way is to increase our relationships and interactions with others.⁶

6. Keep an eye on your resources.

Seek efficiencies and economies of scale. Find ways to reengineer processes. Increasingly, courts are paying attention to things that can be done to streamline and recast work tasks.⁷ What are the possibilities for reengineering? They include implementing technology to conduct tasks; realigning operational tasks; scrutinizing processes and functions; centralizing or regionalizing functions; and revamping structures and authorities. NACM published a guide for reengineering; it contains real and practical court examples.⁸

I conclude that these principles apply to court leadership. What do you think? These techniques could be used as interesting guideposts to those just entering the court leadership profession. Would it not be interesting if those in court leadership, whether seasoned professionals, those newly promoted to court leadership positions, or newly

hired court employees, became aware of and understood basics such as these and could take concrete steps to create and solidify their future?

To fellow court leaders, happy and fulfilling driving! (That is, happy and fulfilling court leadership!)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Janet G. Cornell is a court consultant and retired court administrator; jcornellaz@cox.net.

³ E. Friesen, *Purposes of Courts*, video, Bureau of Justice Assistance and School of Public Affairs, American University, Washington, D.C., at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=saHb06PNadQ>.

⁴ A. Aikman, “The Need for Leaders in Court Administration,” *Court Manager* 22, no. 1 (2007).

⁵ K. S. Burke, “Leadership Without Fear,” in C. Flango, A. McDowell, N. Sydow, C. Campbell, and N. Kauder (eds.), *Future Trends in State Courts 2012* (Williamsburg, VA: National Center for State Courts, 2012).

⁶ S. Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).

⁷ See National Center for State Courts, “NCSC Offers Steps for Court Reengineering Success,” at <http://www.ncsc.org/Services-and-Experts/Court-reengineering/Processes.aspx>; and “Court Reengineering: Compilation of Ideas from the States,” at http://www.sji.gov/wp/wp-content/uploads/Court_Reengineering_Compilation_of_Ideas_from_the_States.pdf

⁸ *Steps to Reengineering: Fundamental Rethinking for High Performing Courts* (Williamsburg, VA: National Association for Court Management, 2012-13).