

# LEAP



## How NALA 'Grows' Leaders

As part of NALA's LEAP program, the 2009-2010 class was assigned to write an article on "Leadership" for publication. The participants were divided into three groups, each of which contributed to this article. Group Leaders Sandra Hatch, *CP*, Carolyn Davis, *ACP*, and Melisa Frick, *ACP*, were responsible for combining input from the groups into this article.

The legal profession has been around for hundreds of years, but the addition of paralegals/legal assistants occurred more recently because of changes in technology and in the practice of law. The original idea for developing the profession was that lawyers needed lay assistants, just as doctors had nurses, to be more efficient and reduce legal fees.

In the 1970s, several key developments gave the paralegal profession momentum:

1. Paralegal training programs began to appear
2. Clients began to strenuously object to the minimum fee schedules published by county bar associations
3. The ABA completed an approval process for paralegal schools and began holding seminars
4. The National Association of Legal Assistants (NALA) was founded in 1973

### NALA and Local Associations

The National Association of Legal Assistants started by offering seminars for legal assistants. The association also created a task force to design a professional

certification program for legal assistants.

The task force conducted surveys of existing certification programs in other professions, and of extant paralegal training courses.

The results were used to create the Certified Legal Assistant (CLA) certification program to advance the careers of all paralegals.

NALA then launched annual conventions, adopted the *Standing Rules*, and completed the CLA examination. The first exam was given in nine regional testing centers to 90 legal assistants. The first 48 CLAs were introduced in 1977, and now there are now more than 15,000. The history and credibility of NALA within the profession allowed the association to be involved in influential court cases regarding the use and billable time of paralegals.

After NALA was founded, many local professional associations were formed to assist paralegals across the country. A professional association is a non-profit organization whose members are the "owners" and stakeholders in the association. Local associations are the leaders of our profession, and many are affiliated with NALA.

### Structure of NALA

NALA is a volunteer organization governed by a board of directors supported by a small professional administrative staff. Under the "Carver System" of governance, the board focuses on policy, and the staff focuses on day-to-day administration. The board, which is made up of elected, appointed, or hired individuals to serve NALA, relies on the governing documents of the association, including its *Bylaws*, *Board Policies*, and *Code of Conduct*.

The board is also responsible for identifying new volunteer leaders for NALA, focusing on the big picture, and planning. Providing efficient and effective use of human and financial resources is a key objective that is met by working with committees and providing one voice in support of the interests and goals of NALA members.

The staff, on the other hand, is responsible for managing and administering NALA projects and programs, and keeping the board informed on administrative matters.

In addition to the board of directors and administrative staff, the "working" boards and committees that oversee various

functions and member benefits of NALA play a key role in the association's governance. For example, NALA's Certifying Board and the Advanced Paralegal Certification Board work with the Board of Directors to assume responsibility for administering the certification programs and exams.

Committees also work with NALA to perform various functions and fulfill member benefits. These committees include the Professional Development Committee (PDC) and the Continuing Education Council (CEC). The PDC is responsible for overseeing the NALA *Code of Ethics and Professional Responsibility*, *Model Standards and Guidelines for Utilization of Legal Assistants*, the *National Utilization and Compensation Survey*, *Career Chronicle*, and the LEAP (Leadership Enhancement and Preparation) program.

The CEC is responsible for the Annual Convention, *Facts and Findings*, NALA Campus LIVE!, the Short Course, and publications. Through the committees, NALA is able to deliver educational opportunities through print media, the Internet, and in person, which makes it easy for all paralegals to continue to upgrade their professional skills and expertise.

A balance between the Board of Directors, the committees, staff, and volunteers is essential to the continued growth and success of NALA. Another crucial factor in assuring that NALA flourishes, is the training of future paralegal leaders through the LEAP program.

## The LEAP Program

Leadership is the first word in the LEAP acronym, effectively emphasizing the importance of this key management skill. Effective leaders have charisma, commitment, good listening skills, and passion as well as compassion. Willingness to serve, and a clear vision of goals and how to approach them are also major leadership skills.

- Charisma enhances the ability to seek the very best in others by enticing listeners to remember how good they felt from the encounter.
- Commitment keeps a group moving forward. If a leader is truly committed, then others will be inspired to follow that example and truly listen to what the leader has to say.
- Listening is a great deal more than just hearing. A good listener focuses on the speaker, does not interrupt, anticipate conclusions, or judge the speaker.
- Passion in a leader inspires followers to believe the impossible can be possible. Leaders with great passion and few skills often out-perform those with great skills and little passion.
- Compassion may be the most important attribute for a leader to cultivate a mutually beneficial relationship with others in an organization. Good leaders must

understand the meaning of "servant hood" and be willing to practice it daily.

- Vision is a trait that anyone can develop by looking inward to identify latent talents. Reflecting on personal development and identifying the strengths that helped accomplish tasks in the past will often reveal talents that have been overlooked.

## LEAP Participation

Participation in the LEAP program has helped participants identify the leadership traits they possess as well as those they need to attain to become leaders. It is sometimes painful to acknowledge personal weakness, but participation in LEAP has set an admirable tradition of preparing better paralegals, better leaders and, most importantly, better people.

## The Complete 2010 LEAP Class

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