Shaka Senghor: How to Succeed by Building Emotional Connectivity in Legal

Written by Teresa Matich

Shaka Senghor, two-time bestselling author, has had his fair share of experiences with the justice system—and with what can happen when there's a lack of emotional connectivity and humanity.

We sat down with Shaka at ClioCon to chat about his recent work, and what he believes will have the greatest impact on changing the legal profession for the better. Below are some of Shaka's tips for how lawyers can foster much-needed and long-lasting change in the legal profession.

Affirm the whole person

Shaka's latest book, *Letters to the Sons of Society,* is a very personal account of his outlook on relationships between fathers and sons. Shaka believes there is a critical need for creating space for community between fathers and sons. "There's a major gap in terms of how we communicate with young boys, in how dads get emotional support, and how they can show up in an emotionally supportive way for their children. Emotional availability is the greatest gift fathers can give their children." he said. "But this is really a book that speaks to us all."

For example, in the book, he talks about affirming his son not just for playing sports and exhibiting typical "boy" behavior, but also for his creativity, emotional availability, and leadership. In other words, it's important to see and affirm sons as whole people. But this applies to the legal profession as well, as lawyers *also* have a need to be seen as a whole person, and not simply as an attorney.

Embrace emotional connectivity

The most surprising experience that Shaka has witnessed over his years of attending ClioCon is the emotional connectivity he has with the participants.

"I think there's the stereotype of lawyers being stoic and having a 'get things done' attitude. But what I've always done is start out with my humanity, and in turn, what I get is the best of humanity."

Shaka believes we all have so much to learn from each other, and that change can only come from being open and willing to listen.

“I can’t tell you how many warm hugs and tears I’ve received. People are openly expressing things they’re working on, career challenges they’ve faced, and things they’re overcoming,” he said.

Use proximity to gain context

Another way to harness the power of emotional connectivity for the legal profession is for lawyers to spend time with individuals before they become entangled in legal issues. The more time lawyers spend in the communities their clients come from, the greater their empathy and understanding, which, in turn, enriches their advocacy. Context is vital, and these communities provide that. “When you have context for why things have turned out a certain way in people’s lives, I think you’re a better advocate,” Shaka explained.

For example, while working at Navan as Head of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), Shaka made sure the executive team was proximate to issues they cared about. When it came to the company’s philanthropic efforts, rather than simply donating money, he directed that the company spend time in the community to best understand how to invest their resources.

Lawyers can apply these teachings, too. “The instinct is, ‘let me do a legal workshop.’ That’s great, but it would also be great to say ‘hey, I’m going to play softball in this community and *then* do a legal workshop,” Shaka said. In the latter scenario, lawyers are building better connections and more trust with clients.

Get vulnerable

The number-one way Shaka believes lawyers can make an impact on the legal system? Telling stories that reflect the truth of their experiences.

“A lot of times, we don’t have those insights,” Shaka said, explaining that those going through a case are focused on their own freedom, or their own issues. They’re not thinking about the many other clients those lawyers may have. “The more narratives that are shared from the profession, the more we understand why it’s one that we should all be leaning into learning more about, but also supporting,” he added.

Vulnerability is important, but challenging to put into practice in an adversarial occupation like law, leading to a dearth of insights into the truths of their experiences. Those aiming to drive true change in the legal profession need to do more to support lawyers in sharing these stories.

Build an inclusive culture

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) is important in the courtroom, in legal practices, and beyond, and it's crucial for law firms who want to truly transform the legal industry. Two strategies Shaka used to build an inclusive culture, that law firms can also apply, were to ask hard questions of leadership and use humor. He believes it's incredibly important for leadership teams to ask themselves: Who's not at the table? Who's not in the room that can add a perspective we don't have? And, if your team lacks those perspectives, be willing to ask the hard questions about how to implement changes.

As for adding humor to the mix, Shaka explained that DEI doesn't always have to be serious. "I think what makes true connection is the ability to have a big range of experiences," he said, explaining how he would set up happy hours where the team talked about music, culture, and things they had in common. Or, they would learn new things about each other and the ways in which they were different but stronger as a team.

Stay curious

One of the stand-out moments at this year's presentation from Shaka was his call to stay curious. When doing work that has a potentially adverse outcome, as lawyers do, it's easy to constrain oneself and try to be perfect as opposed to getting to a space where you can show up in the best way possible. Shaka believes the latter is infinitely more important, and that staying curious is key.

"I try to think of presence over perfection," he said. "And if you think this way, oftentimes you will get a perfect outcome."

Staying curious is not only critical to keeping your joy and spirit alive, but also to exposing your practice to new and better ways of operating. If you think you've got a situation under control, be open to the fact that maybe someone else is doing things differently, and it could improve your firm too. "How much are you willing to invest in being curious? That's a game changer," Shaka said.

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