



Hope- Centered Leadership

APPLYING THE SCIENCE OF HOPE
FOR TRAINING AND DEVELOPING LEADERS

© Christopher Freeze, Ph.D.

Starting With **Why**

"People Don't Buy What You Do, They Buy Why You Do It."

- Simon Sinek

Why start with why? As Simon Sinek has noted, people don't become invested in an organization until they come to trust that organization. When an organization's leadership demonstrates that their actions are congruent with their stated values and beliefs, that is when leaders begin to build trust within and beyond the organization.

I believe building hope is vital to a person's well-being. It is not the wishful maybe-something-positive-will-happen-one-day type of hope, but the hope that allows each person to have a confident expectation in themselves, in their leadership, and in their organization.

When leaders help individuals and employees see a brighter future, are interested in how personal goals can be fused with organizational goals, provide developmental and learning experiences, encourage creativity in solving problems, instill confidence, and recognize achievements, then people are more likely to positively respond to the leaders' need to advance the organization's goals. This reciprocal arrangement produces an upward trajectory of engagement, improvement, performance, and satisfaction.

While other leadership models place varying degrees of emphasis on personal and organizational goals by identifying routes toward the goals and employing various motivational techniques, I believe that only Hope-Centered Leadership (HCL) equally emphasizes each of those components in a way that increases the mutual well-being of all parties, regardless of how success is measured. HCL is about activating hope within others.

Hope is not the goal. The well-being of everyone and the organization is the goal. HCL provides the framework necessary to achieve this goal.

This is **why Hope-Centered Leadership is important.**

A Story About Hope

"Once you choose hope, anything's possible."

- Christopher Reeve

Once upon a time, there was a box.

Not an ordinary box. This one had been filled carefully and over a long time, by forces much larger than any one person; by poverty and trauma, by addiction and loss, by histories that didn't start with the people carrying them.

By the particular loneliness of a parent stretched past their limit. By the fear a child learns to wear so long they forget it isn't their original skin. By broken systems, broken promises, or broken connections between people who once loved each other and somewhere along the way stopped knowing how.

All of it, sealed inside the box.

And someone, let's call her a mother, because it is often a mother, though it doesn't have to be, was handed this box and told to keep the lid on. She was not told what was inside. She was not asked if she wanted it. It was simply handed to her, the way these things are handed down through generations, through neighborhoods, and through circumstances that were already in motion before she was born.

"Here," the world said. "Carry this." And she did. For a long time she did. Now, there was one other thing in the box. Something the people who filled it had argued about before sealing the lid.

Hope.

Not everyone agreed it should be in there. Some thought hope was dangerous, that it made people believe things could be different when experience suggested otherwise.

A Story About Hope

"Beware how you take away hope from another human being."
- Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

Some thought it was naive, a distraction, the kind of thing that made a hard situation harder by promising something it couldn't deliver. A few thought it was almost cruel to give someone hope in a box full of all those challenges. But they put it in anyway, and they buried it. Tucked it under everything else, at the very bottom, where it wouldn't cause any trouble. And the lid stayed on.

Until one day, as it always does, eventually, the lid came off. Maybe it was a call to a hotline. Maybe it was a knock on the door. Maybe it was a night that went too far, or a teacher who noticed, or a moment when the weight of the box finally exceeded what one person could hold alone.

Whatever it was the lid came off. And everything spilled out. The fear, the grief, the shame, the chaos, all of it released into the open, into the harsh light of a system that had forms for all of it, procedures for all of it, and a docket number for all of it.

And then that mother, or that father, or that child found themselves sitting in a courtroom. Across from a judge. Everything that was in the box now on the record. Everything, that is, except for one thing.

Because when the lid came off and everything else escaped, hope stayed.

Right there at the bottom. Just where they'd buried it. Still there. Quiet. Waiting to see what would happen next.

And so I want to ask you, the person sitting on the other side of that table, in that courtroom, on that day when a family arrives with an empty box and a long record and hope still somehow at the bottom of it all —

To whom does hope belong?

The Framework of Hope

"Hopeful thinking necessitates both pathways and agency thought."

- C. Rick Snyder

Everything we do in life hinges on the goals we've set for ourselves. Sometimes they are simple, like getting to court on time. At other times they are profound, like rebuilding a family. How we think about accomplishing those goals and overcoming the problems or barriers standing in the way is called a heuristic, or framework. If outcomes were certain, we wouldn't need hope or a framework! But for many of the families who struggle to set goals, identify a path forward, push through obstacles, or sustain the motivation to keep going, learning the framework of hope isn't abstract. It's essential.

Hope is defined as a cognitive orientation built on an interdependent sense of (a) agency (goal-directed determination) and (b) pathways (planning of ways to meet goals).

(Snyder et al, 1991, p. 571)

The three tenets of Hope:

1. _____ which are the cognitive endpoint of purposeful behavior.
2. _____ which are the mental roadmaps to goal attainment.
3. _____ which is the mental energy to pursue your pathways.

The loss of hope is seldom immediate. Yet the climate a leader creates plays an important role in whether hope is lost or nurtured. When leaders seek to create a safe, creative, and nurturing environment, the conditions are right for building a culture of hope. As a judicial officer, you shape that climate every time you take the bench. Families in your courtroom are often at their lowest point, and they are acutely attuned to whether the space feels like one of possibility or one of judgment and fear. People seek out and are sustained by a culture of hope. Rarely do they thrive in a culture of fear.

The Experience of Hope

"A high-hope person should have enduring positive emotions, with a sense of affective zest about the pursuit of goals."

- C. Rick Snyder.

In a world filled with too many things vying for time and attention, humans still seek clarity. Yet we are often confused about the correct goals and pathways forward. Motivation wanes and productivity drops. As judicial leaders, you have an opportunity to build hope in others by helping them find clarity, peace, and direction. As you become better at using the framework in your own lives, you are better able to share it with others. When the families in your courtroom are struggling, they need hope, not hollowness. Building hope is a process and takes time and practice. But when people trust the leader, hope begins to bloom.

How hope is lost:

1. Hope
2. Goal is significantly blocked resulting in _____.
3. Inability to adjust the goal when it is blocked results in _____.
4. The loss of motivation results in _____.

How hope is nurtured:

1. Goal _____ is the process of clarifying goals, which increases agency.
2. Identifying _____ is the process of adjusting goals to overcome barriers.
3. Creating _____ is the process of reinforcing the pathway and agency relationship.
4. Hope.

Hope and Justice

“Each time a man stands up for an ideal or acts to improve the lot of others or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope.”

–Robert F. Kennedy

Hope-Centered Leadership intersects naturally with the three dimensions of justice you encounter on the bench. Procedural justice asks whether the people before you feel heard and treated with dignity regardless of outcome. Distributive justice asks whether your orders communicate that a future is still possible. Restorative justice asks whether accountability is framed as a pathway forward rather than simply a punishment. Each dimension maps directly onto the framework of hope: procedural justice nurtures agency, distributive justice opens or closes pathways, and restorative justice rebuilds both the will and the way. Every interaction across these three dimensions either builds or erodes hope in families.

Procedural Justice:

1. Being heard, respected, and treated with _____ in the process, regardless of outcome.
2. I have _____ here; my voice counts.
3. A painful _____ can preserve agency if the process treated the family as _____ beings, not a case number.

Distributive Justice:

1. Outcomes that are _____, equitable, and achievable relative to what someone faces.
2. Routes forward exist; the sense that a _____ is reachable.
3. A disposition order a youth cannot realistically _____ is a _____ message: there is no route forward for you here.

Restorative Justice:

1. Accountability framed as _____ and reparative rather than punitive.
2. I have a role in the repair restores both the _____ and the _____.
3. Reactivets both _____ (a role in the repair), and _____ (accountability as a route forward.)

Panel Discussions

Recognizing Hope (or Its Absence) on the Bench:

Think about a young person or family you've worked with who seemed to have lost hope or who surprised you with their resilience. What did that look like from where you sat, and what, if anything, did you or the court do that seemed to matter?

The Weight of the Role

Judicial work in the family system can be both meaningful and exhausting. How do you personally sustain your own sense of hope and purpose when the cases are hard and the outcomes are uncertain?

Panel Discussions

Procedural Justice as a Hope-Building Practice

Research shows that feeling heard and treated fairly can matter as much as the outcome itself. Have you seen a moment in your courtroom where the process, not the ruling, seemed to shift something for a family? What was happening in that moment?

Court Culture and the Leader's Role

Judges set a tone for the courtroom, for the team, sometimes for an entire county's system. What does a hope-centered court culture look like to you in practice, and where do you think leadership matters most in creating or sustaining it?

Participants: What Did You Hear?

1. What did you hear from the panel that surprised you? What confirmed something you already knew?

2. Where in your own work do you feel most constrained from practicing hope-centered justice?

3. Is it possible that regardless of role (i.e., judge, attorney, CPS worker, parent, youth) everyone in the courtroom can leave with more hope? What would have to be true for that to be the case?

Identifying Leadership

"The first and last task of a leader is to keep hope alive."

- John Gardner, *On Leadership*

Should we focus on a leader's traits or their behaviors? Emphasizing traits is appealing because we can easily define "good" leadership and "success" or "failure." However, people are more interested in how leaders behave. Are a leader's actions in sync with positive values and do they promote the well-being of the employee? Hope-centered leaders demonstrate positive behavior that considers individual, collective, and organizational goals.

We all want leaders who walk the walk and talk the talk. We want leaders we can trust, who are trustworthy, and who support and defend the people in their care. You don't have to know the intricacies of various leadership theories to recognize what good leadership looks like. And while we know it when we see it, it is critical for leaders to have a framework for achieving and articulating desired results and goals in order to increase well-being and performance.

As a judicial officer, your leadership extends beyond the bench. It touches the families, attorneys, advocates, and court staff who move through your courtroom every day. Hope-Centered Leadership is the framework that addresses this need.

Make a list of 3 leadership behaviors you consider to be positive things a leader should do.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.



Hope-Centered Leadership

Hope-Centered Leadership is defined as behaviors that activate and nurture hope through setting task-oriented goals, navigating change-oriented pathways, and cultivating relations-oriented agency.

- Christopher Freeze

Hope Theory and Taxonomy

1. Task-Oriented Behaviors:

- Planning: Sets _____ people value and identifies the _____ needed to make those goals achievable.
- Clarifying: Communicates _____, _____, and procedures clearly enough they know what success looks like and how to pursue it.
- Monitoring: Tracks _____ and uses _____ to encourage, adjust, and keep hope directed toward the goal.
- Problem-Solving: Identifies _____ quickly and provides direction that helps people learn to address _____.

2. Change-Oriented Behaviors:

- Envisioning Change: Shares a _____ connected to what people believe and want, building confidence that a better future is _____.
- Advocating Change: Recognizes _____ and _____ that threaten current goals and actively makes the case for why change is necessary to keep pathways viable.
- Encouraging Innovation: Creates a _____ where people feel safe to think _____ without fear of negative consequences.
- Facilitating Learning: Treats _____ as part of the process, using mistakes to build new skills and _____ new knowledge.

3. Relations-Oriented Behaviors:

- Supporting: Builds the mutual _____ and relational safety that allows people to share what they need and _____ their motivation.
- Developing: Invests in growth by aligning learning _____ with both personal aspirations and organizational _____.
- Recognizing: Acknowledges contributions meaningfully, reinforcing the connection between _____ and _____.
- Empowering: Invites people into _____-making, building the _____ and creative confidence that agency requires.

Hope-Centered Leadership Scale

Directions: Read each item carefully. Using the scale shown below, please select the number that best describes your immediate supervisor.

1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Regularly, 5 = Always

- | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. My supervisor helps me to believe that our organization has a bright future. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. My supervisor helps me to see that my personal goals align with the organization's goals. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. My supervisor provides useful opportunities to learn skills that help me achieve goals. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. My supervisor encourages me to be creative in solving problems in route to achieving goals. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. My supervisor creates a safe and supportive environment to successfully work through challenges to goal attainment. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. My supervisor encourages me to generate multiple routes to achieve goals. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. My supervisor instills confidence in my ability to overcome challenges and achieve goals. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. My supervisor recognizes my progress in successfully reaching goals. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. My supervisor allows me to craft my job responsibilities to be more meaningful and satisfying. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

To calculate a score, add up the circled numbers and divide by nine. This will give you an average. The average can be compared to the scale to help determine if the leader always, rarely, sometimes, regularly, or always behaves in a way that inspires and activates hope within others.

** Use the scale only with permission of author.

Total Score:

Hope As A Protective Factor Against Burnout

"Burnout is not about giving too much of yourself, it's about trying to give what you do not possess."

- Unknown

Without mitigation and intervention, the psychological stress of ongoing workplace demands leads to burnout, decreased performance, and turnover. For judicial officers, the weight of high-volume dockets, trauma exposure, and resource constraints creates compounding stressors that no single policy can address. While organizational support and effective leadership matter, hope serves as a powerful and malleable resource that can buffer those demands. Leadership attention to the core elements of hope, namely goals, pathways, and agency, has the potential to reduce burnout and increase both well-being and performance on and off the bench.

Burnout has been defined as a syndrome of chronic exhaustion that manifests itself in a cynical, negative attitude regarding work, and reduced professional efficacy.

- Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001

The three steps to burnout:

1. Imbalance which results in psychological strain.
2. Depersonalization which results in poor treatment of co-workers and clients.
3. Self-critical thinking which results in withdrawal from others and the job.

Understanding Job Demands and Resources

"A leader's job is to balance job demands and resources so that employees maintain a higher level of well-being."

- W. B. Schaufeli, 2015

If we accept that the goal of Hope-Centered Leadership is increased well-being for both the individual and the organization, we need to think carefully about how that well-being is built. The Job Demands-Resources Model places emphasis on reducing burnout and its cascading effects on motivation, performance, and satisfaction. For judicial officers and court staff alike, that means understanding what people need to thrive, what motivates them, and what stands in the way of their success.

Self-determination theory (SDT) states people have three innate psychological needs in order to be healthy and thrive in the workplace:

- Autonomy (i.e. feeling in control),
- Competence (i.e. feeling effective),
- Relatedness (i.e. feeling loved and cared for).

Ryan & Deci, 2017

What can hope-centered leaders do to help meet these essential needs?

- First, leaders can directly **influence** job demands and resources by providing helpful feedback, setting clear priorities, and securing additional resources where possible.
- Second, leaders can use intentional leadership **behaviors** to support work-life balance and reduce exhaustion.
- Third, leaders can **empower** people with the autonomy to shape their own work, seek new challenges, build new skills, and ask for the feedback they need to grow.

- Tummers and Bakker, 2021

Identifying Job Demands and Resources

"All types of job characteristics can be classified in one of two categories: job demands and job resources."

- Bakker and Demerouti

You've heard it countless times: "That's not how we do things around here." And they're right. Whatever you're proposing isn't how things have been done before. People say this because change is unsettling, especially when the outcome is uncertain. Yet it is precisely in that uncertainty where hope is born, because uncertainty carries the possibility that things can be better. Before hope-centered leaders can navigate that resistance, however, they must first do foundational work: identifying whether the conditions people face are demands that drain them or resources that sustain them.

Take a moment to reflect on your own experience on the bench. List three things you find most exhausting or demanding in your role as a judicial officer. What weighs you down?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Now list three things that motivate you and bring meaning to your work. What makes the difficult days worthwhile? What reminds you why you chose this path?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Now that you have identified your top demands and resources, you have a clearer picture of what needs to change. The goal is to increase the resources that energize you and reduce the demands that drain you. Being hope-centered will be critical to communicating that change, both to yourself and to those you lead.

Community of Practice

Shelter Care:

The shelter care hearing is often the first point of contact between a family and the court system after a child is removed. Families arrive in crisis. Children are frightened. The process that follows will either begin to repair trust or compound the trauma already in motion. Hope-centered shelter care does not require optimism about outcomes; it requires intentionality about process.

- 1. When you think about a shelter care hearing where you felt you were at your best, what were you doing?*
- 2. At what point in the shelter care process do families most often lose hope and is there a moment where the court can intervene in that loss?*
- 3. If you imagine addressing the child directly during a shelter care hearing: what would you want them to remember about how they were treated, years from now?*
- 4. What is one thing you could say or do at shelter care that would signal to a family: "This system sees you as a person, not a case"?*

Community of Practice

Disposition:

Disposition is where pathways thinking is most directly at stake. The services ordered, the conditions set, the framing of accountability all communicate to a youth and family whether routes forward exist or have insurmountable challenges. Disposition done well doesn't just close a chapter, it opens the next one. The way accountability is framed tells a youth whether a future is still within reach.

1. How do you currently invite youth and families to participate in disposition planning? What genuinely gets in the way of that participation?

2. When a disposition outcome feels fair and predictable to a family, what made it that way? What produced that experience?

3. What does a hope-sustaining disposition order look like versus one that forecloses pathways? What's the difference in language, structure, or tone?

4. If you were designing a disposition process from scratch with hope science in mind, what would you change first?

Community of Practice

Permanency:

Permanency hearings involve the longest time horizons and the highest stakes. For youth, permanency is existential. It is a question about whether they belong somewhere. Hope-centered permanency work holds that question with honesty and refuses to let uncertainty become hopelessness. Even when the path is uncertain, the hearing can affirm that this child still matters.

- 1. How do you communicate permanency goals in a way that keeps hope alive — even when timelines are uncertain or the path to reunification is fragile?*
- 2. What do families most need to hear from you at a permanency hearing to believe that a future — some future — is still possible for their child?*
- 3. When reunification is no longer the goal, how do you frame alternative permanency in a way that is honest without being hope-ending?*
- 4. What is the most important thing a judge can do to make a permanency hearing feel like a turning point rather than a verdict?*

Community of Practice

System Leadership:

Judges do not only lead courtrooms. They set the hope climate of entire systems through their tone with colleagues, their response to difficult outcomes, & the culture they model. A hope-centered leader is an environmental architect: someone who understands that the conditions they create determine whether hope can survive in people around them.

1. *What does a court system with a hope-centered culture look like? If you walked into one, how would you know it?*

2. *What do you do, formally or informally, to sustain the hope and well-being of the people who work with you? What have you seen others do that you'd like to borrow?*

3. *Where in your system does hopelessness spread most quickly? What conditions allow it, and what, if anything, has slowed or interrupted it?*

4. *If you could change one structural or procedural thing in your jurisdiction to make hope-centered practice easier to sustain, what would it be?*

Benchcard Development

Translate the key moments surfaced in the breakout into draft bench card content. Groups move from identifying what matters to articulating it in a form that is brief, portable, and usable at the point of practice. The goal is raw material, not a finished product.

1.

2.

3.

4.

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Christopher Freeze, Ph.D.

Dr. Christopher Freeze is a leadership consultant, scholar, and practitioner whose career spans federal law enforcement, state government, and higher education. He is a George Kaiser Family Foundation Endowed Professor of Cybersecurity at the University of Oklahoma Polytechnic Institute, where his research and teaching sit at the intersection of leadership science, human behavior, and cybersecurity.

His professional career began in 1989 as an Auditor for the State of Tennessee investigating fraud, waste, and abuse of public dollars. In 1996 he joined the FBI as a Special Agent, spending the next 23 years investigating criminal, cyber, and national security crimes before retiring in 2019 as Special Agent in Charge over the FBI's operations in Mississippi. In that role he focused on building partnerships across public and private sectors, addressing the challenges facing law enforcement, and developing leaders at every level. He was subsequently appointed by Governor Phil Bryant as Executive Director of the Mississippi Department of Human Services in 2019, where he led the agency through a major fraud and abuse case while working to move families from crisis to self-sufficiency.

That experience with crisis, resilience, and recovery drew Dr. Freeze to the Science of Hope. His Ph.D. in Organizational and Community Leadership focused on the conceptualization, development, and application of Hope-Centered Leadership, a practical framework for helping individuals establish meaningful goals, identify pathways forward, and sustain the motivation to pursue them.

Dr. Freeze's consulting work translates rigorous research into actionable leadership practice for audiences navigating high-stakes, high-demand environments.

Contact Information:

Christopher Freeze, Ph.D.
christopher.freeze@ou.edu
chris@mrchrifreeze.com

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