



EFFECTIVE JUDICIAL REFORM STRATEGIES FOR TURBULENT TIMES

Judicial Systems in Transition: Reforms, Innovations
and Justice Conference

Table of Contents

Biography	1
Introduction	2
Reducing Civil Delay in California Superior Courts	2
Mediating Divorce Cases in Multilingual California	5
Justice in a Time of Global Movement	6
Building Individual and Institutional Integrity to Reduce Corruption – The Integrity Project	6
Reorganizing Trial Courts to Reduce Corruption in Peru	9
Building the Palestinian Justice System Under the Oslo Accords	10
Case Study: I. The California Judicial Council	12
Case Study: II. The Ninth Circuit Federal Courts	13
Final Reflections	14

Biography

William Davis has been the Administrative Director of two state court systems, California and Kentucky; the Circuit Executive for the federal courts in the Ninth Circuit covering 14 Western States and Pacific Territories. During his tenure California undertook the largest successful civil trial delay reduction project in the U.S. In 1992 he co founded a consulting firm, DPK Consulting, to work internationally on justice reforms around the globe. DPK has been recognized as a foremost rule of law firm through it's projects in over 50 countries. He served as an advisor and mediator for the International Finance Corporation of the World Bank. Bill served as a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'i's of the United States for 23 years. Bill holds a JD from the University of Kentucky and a BA from Transylvania University. Bill resides in Carson City, Nevada with his wife, Connee Davis. Their daughters, Marya and Hillary, and their families live nearby and they have three grandchildren, Nicholas, Ella and William.

See WilliamDavis.org for more details.

Introduction

In 2025, justice systems around the world face new and unforeseen challenges in the administration of justice. The rise of artificial intelligence, increasing politicization of judicial institutions, shifting public perceptions of all government bodies, and competing reform agendas are among the most formidable forces confronting those responsible for upholding justice. These developments represent uncharted waters for everyone committed to improving the delivery of justice.

This paper reflects on experiences from my four decades in judicial administration. I have served as the Administrative Director of two U.S. state court systems—California and Kentucky—and as Circuit Executive for the Ninth Circuit, the largest federal court circuit in the United States, encompassing 14 states and managing one-quarter of the total federal courts' workload. For 25 years, I also led DPK Consulting, a firm dedicated to justice system reform in more than 50 countries.

The challenges facing justice systems today are more complex and daunting than ever before. For much of my career, administrative work centered on building sound, transparent procedures. Today, political extremism has become the norm when justice issues enter public discourse. Politicians of all ideologies increasingly use the justice system as a scapegoat for allegations of cronyism and bias. Judges are often perceived as pawns in a politicized arena, believed to favor one side or another.

In the past, we could address public concerns by explaining the legal system's procedures, reinforcing trust in fairness and impartiality. Today, however, justice systems are alternately viewed as bulwarks against societal excesses or as instruments of power used to enforce the will of the strong.

This paper presents a series of real-world scenarios in which I have participated in reform efforts. Topics include delay reduction, family mediation, transparency, trial court organization, judicial planning, and reform of the Palestinian judicial system. My aim is to offer the reader a diverse set of examples demonstrating a range of approaches to justice system reform.

The content of this paper is drawn from my autobiography, *In Service to Justice: Striving to Bring Forth Our Nobility* (Dorrance Publishing, 2024).

Reducing Civil Delay in California Superior Courts

Delays in civil case processing are among the most frequently cited failures of a legal system. When courts fail to manage the timely resolution of disputes, public confidence in the justice system erodes. This failure opens the door to corruption and denies individuals access to justice for issues involving personal status, injury, loss of life, and property.

Much of the research on civil delay has rightly focused on the judge as the central figure in case management. In the U.S., debates have long centered around two calendaring systems: **individual** and **master** calendars.

The **individual calendar** system—used in federal courts—assigns each case to a single judge upon filing. That judge is responsible for the case until its resolution. This model provides clear ownership and accountability. In contrast, the **master calendar** system—commonly used in high-volume courts—assigns cases to judges as they become available. As a case progresses, different judges may handle different aspects of it. The focus of this model is efficient use of all judicial resources.

In my experience, the most valuable—and limited—resource in any justice system is a judge’s time. Recognizing that, reforms must prioritize its efficient and effective use.

In the mid-1970s, the National Center for State Courts conducted a nationwide study on civil delay in large urban courts. One of its key findings was the importance of **judicial control from the moment of case filing**. Such control fostered accountability and improved the pace of litigation.

Despite these findings, by the mid-1980s, civil delays in California’s Superior Courts had reached crisis levels—often exceeding five years. The **Judicial Council of California**, the governing body responsible for overseeing court operations, had not taken meaningful action to address the problem.

California’s judicial system is vast: 58 counties, 40 million residents, 2,100 judges, 25,000 court employees, and over 190,000 lawyers. Municipal courts handled approximately 14,000 cases per judge annually; Superior Court judges handled over 2,000.

In response to the growing crisis, the **California Attorney General introduced legislation** mandating that the Judicial Council implement a delay reduction program in the state’s nine slowest courts—primarily located in major metropolitan areas.

A Change in Leadership

A pivotal shift occurred in 1986 with the appointments of **Chief Justice Malcolm Lucas** and **William Davis** as Administrative Director of the Courts. Chief Justice Lucas brought extensive trial court experience, having served as both a Los Angeles Superior Court and Federal District Court judge before joining the California Supreme Court. Davis brought national leadership experience, having served as Circuit Executive for the Ninth Circuit and Administrative Director in Kentucky.

Chief Justice Lucas’s credibility with trial judges proved invaluable in gaining their cooperation and support. His leadership—grounded in experience—was essential during a time when reform required judicial buy-in across a decentralized system.

Leadership in judicial systems is uniquely challenging. Judges operate as equals, and there is often resistance to centralized direction. Compounding this is the frequent turnover in leadership positions. To strengthen judicial leadership, we developed a **specialized training program for Chief Judges** at the California Center for Judicial Education.

We identified a group of judges from the nine target courts using what I call the **“one-third rule”**—a concept I developed while working with indigenous communities in Latin America. When faced with change, communities often divide into three groups: one-third embrace it, one-third are uncertain, and one-third resist. We recruited the change-ready third—judges who had shown interest in innovation—for intensive training.

This training included a deep dive into the causes and consequences of delay, reviews of case studies, and instruction in **change management practices**. These judges became local champions for reform within their courts—a critical element for building internal consensus and momentum.

Expanding the Reform

Although no new funds were allocated for the reform effort, we saw this as an opportunity rather than a limitation. Chief Justice Lucas and I proposed that the **Judicial Council invite all courts in California—**

regardless of delay status—to voluntarily join the program. The Council agreed, and **30 additional courts opted in**, representing about 80% of the state’s Superior Court caseload.

This broader participation reframed the legislative mandate into a **statewide standard of excellence**. By inviting courts to voluntarily join the reform effort, we cultivated a sense of pride and ownership. This strategy demonstrated a core principle of successful change management: **transforming obligation into aspiration**.

Engaging the Legal Profession

At the time, California’s 150,000 lawyers formed the most influential lobbying group in the Legislature. Lawyers had effectively assumed control over case scheduling, and many were handling more cases than they could reasonably manage. Judges often deferred to their preferences, contributing to delays.

Engaging the **State Bar** was therefore essential. Rather than framing the reform as a threat, we showed that faster case management could allow lawyers to **increase billable volume and earnings**. By appealing to their self-interest, we minimized resistance and gained valuable allies.

Results and Lessons Learned

The California delay reduction initiative became the **largest civil court reform effort in U.S. history**. Within **four years**, the average time to resolve civil cases in Superior Courts dropped from **five years to 22 months**.

The success of this reform underscores several vital lessons:

- **Judicial leadership matters**—and must be grounded in credibility and experience.
- **Change champions** within the judiciary are essential for building internal support.
- **Voluntary participation** strengthens reform legitimacy.
- **Appealing to self-interest** can neutralize opposition from powerful stakeholders.
- **Visionary framing**—presenting reform as an opportunity for excellence—motivates engagement more effectively than mandates alone.

Systemic reform in justice systems is never achieved through a single strategy. It requires a **multifaceted, collaborative effort** that speaks to both the values and ambitions of those involved. When aligned, these forces can move even the most entrenched institutions toward lasting and meaningful change.

Building Consensus and Creating Urgency

Sound research into the causes of delay—and the identification of successful interventions—is foundational to any serious reform effort. Equally important is the deliberate development of leadership within the judiciary. Judges must not only implement change; they must champion it. Including dissenting voices in the early stages of reform planning can preempt resistance and build legitimacy.

A key element of our success in reducing civil delays was the creation of a **sense of urgency**. The judicial system had suffered a visible decline in public esteem due to its failure to deliver timely justice. Restoring confidence required appeals to a higher cause—one that all participants could feel ownership of. Reducing delay became not just a technical task, but a **moral mission**.

This required consistent engagement from the Chief Justice, who traveled frequently to meet with judges in local courts. We held **quarterly meetings** where courts could share strategies and successes. These gatherings fostered a sense of common purpose and allowed for peer learning and encouragement.

We also maintained **regular communications** to reinforce the program's objectives and principles. Courts were encouraged to develop their **own locally tailored solutions**. Every success—no matter how small—was recognized and celebrated, creating momentum and empowerment across the system.

At judicial seminars, I observed a growing sense of enthusiasm. As courts began to meet the program's goals, the cultural tone of the judiciary began to shift. Judges and staff saw that meaningful change was possible. That realization had a lasting impact.

Successfully mobilizing thousands of judges and court employees around such a comprehensive reform effort was a major accomplishment. This initiative **changed the paradigm** of judicial administration in California. A few years later, the state judicial system undertook the unprecedented step of securing full state funding for the courts—a complex and politically sensitive process. I believe the success of the delay reduction program helped build the **goodwill and institutional credibility** needed to make that possible.

Mediating Divorce Cases in Multilingual California

In response to public advocacy, California implemented **statewide mandatory mediation** for family and divorce cases. Judges had long expressed frustration over the emotional complexity of these disputes. Over time, **family mediation**—developed largely outside of the formal court system—had demonstrated its value in resolving such cases effectively and with less adversarial friction.

Yet California's **diverse population** posed unique challenges. At least **59 languages are spoken** in the state's public schools. Many immigrants arrive with negative experiences from their home countries' legal systems, making them wary of new procedures—especially those not overseen by judges or lawyers.

This was especially true for California's **Hispanic and Latino populations**, which represent roughly 40% of the state's residents. Nearly 30% of this group speaks **Spanish as their primary language**. When family mediation was first introduced, courts reported skepticism and distrust among Spanish-speaking litigants, particularly regarding the legitimacy of **non-judicial officers** serving as mediators.

Ironically, many Latin American countries place significant legal authority in the hands of **public notaries**, who often perform functions similar to those of court mediators. Yet this parallel did not translate into trust, due in part to poor communication and lack of cultural context.

The **Administrative Office of the Courts** began receiving complaints from trial courts about difficulties in mediating cases involving Spanish-speaking families. After conducting field research, our staff proposed a new strategy: develop **culturally appropriate orientation materials** to explain the mediation process.

Initially, we contracted with a local NGO to produce an **audiovisual guide**. However, their approach was overly academic and formal. The tone did not resonate with the intended audience. We chose to look elsewhere and ultimately found a group that approached the issue from a **cultural and anthropological perspective**.

The result was transformative. The team developed a video that **reframed the divorce process through the eyes of a child** whose parents were divorcing. The child narrated the experience, reflecting not only the emotional toll of the conflict but also the **cultural nuances** of a Latino family navigating the U.S. legal system.

This narrative approach shifted the focus of parents from legal rights to **the well-being of their child**. It helped them recognize how their actions and words affected their child—and encouraged them to engage with the mediation process more thoughtfully. The emotional impact of the video created a **space for empathy, reflection, and often reconciliation** or at least, cooperative resolution.

Justice in a Time of Global Movement

The **mass migration** of people to North America and Europe is presenting **unprecedented challenges** to legal systems. These migrants bring with them diverse languages, cultural expectations, and legal traditions. Many arrive with a deep skepticism toward legal authorities.

In my view, **the everyday administration of justice** shapes public perception of government more than any other function. Courts are where individuals most often experience the state firsthand. Therefore, courts have a special responsibility to **communicate effectively across cultural boundaries**.

This responsibility has never been greater. Justice systems must now operate as **intercultural institutions**. The challenge is not only to maintain the integrity of core legal principles, but to **adapt communication strategies** to ensure equal access and understanding.

In my experience, reform must be guided by the principle of **cultural sensitivity without compromising justice**. The courts cannot be indifferent to the lived experiences of those they serve. A justice system that listens and adapts—while holding fast to its fundamental values—is essential for the **peaceful integration of diverse populations**.

Building Individual and Institutional Integrity to Reduce Corruption – The Integrity Project

The **President of the Supreme Court** of the Dominican Republic reached out to me for help. At the time, our team at **DPK Consulting** had been working in the country for several years, supporting the implementation of a **new criminal procedure code**—a reform that represented a major shift in the nation's justice system.

The President, a dynamic and visionary leader, had been at the forefront of this profound transformation. Yet he confided that he felt **disappointed and isolated**. Despite the significance of the reform, only a small number of people within the judiciary appeared equally committed. He was unsure how to address the pervasive lack of engagement and asked for guidance.

I suggested that he appoint a **committee of court officers** with whom I could work to craft a meaningful response to this concern. Once the committee was formed, we invited its members to **San Francisco** to observe a broad range of justice institutions in action.

Over the course of a week, we toured **various courts and public institutions**, reflecting each evening on what had been observed and how it might inform efforts back home. The **most profound and consistent**

observation from the Dominican delegation was not about physical infrastructure or technology. It was about **people**.

They were struck by how individual employees—across roles and institutions—carried out their duties with a strong **sense of personal responsibility**, often in the absence of direct supervision. Time and again, they saw staff diligently and efficiently doing their work—not because someone was watching, but because it appeared to matter deeply to them.

Naturally, this raised fundamental questions:

Where does this personal sense of duty come from? How is this culture cultivated?

We posed these questions to supervisors, court staff, and judges throughout our visits. Their answers were revealing: they spoke of a **shared commitment to public service**, a culture of **professional pride**, and systems that **rewarded integrity** and discouraged misconduct.

For the Dominican committee members, these reflections illuminated a critical gap in their own justice system. While they could identify individuals in their country who exhibited similar dedication, such behavior was **not the norm**. What they had witnessed in the U.S. pointed to something deeper and more foundational: a **culture of integrity**.

In their final assessment, the committee concluded that **the absence of personal and institutional integrity** was the most significant barrier to reform and the key factor undermining the justice system in the Dominican Republic. The challenge was not only to reform processes or procedures—but to **rebuild the moral fabric** of public service.

The Integrity Project: Cultivating Ethical Identity in the Justice System

Our project team began developing a response to a profound and troubling question: How can we foster ethical behavior and a deeper sense of personal responsibility within a justice system struggling with corruption and disengagement?

We anchored our work in a simple yet powerful quote from the Bahá'í writings:

“I created thee noble, why dost thou abase thyself?”

This principle—**the essential nobility of each individual**—became the foundation of our strategy. It framed the work not as a punitive correction but as a call to return to one's higher self, to reclaim integrity as a core identity.

At the same time, we recognized that **purely intellectual appeals**—through data, reports, or argument—rarely spark genuine transformation in justice systems. Over the years, I have seen how debates and statistics often trigger defensive reactions or intellectualized denial rather than change. The system's capacity to rationalize its behavior is formidable.

To bypass these defenses, we turned to **art**—specifically, to **music**, the most resonant medium in the Caribbean. We engaged a local NGO to survey the public's perception of the justice system. But instead of producing a written report, we asked them to **translate their findings into an artistic form** that could provoke an emotional response.

The result was a **rap performance**, infused with the raw, often crude language of everyday Dominicans. The lyrics gave voice to the people's anger, pain, and disillusionment with the justice system.

We invited the highest levels of the judiciary and justice sector to experience this performance—including the **President of the Supreme Court**, the **Attorney General**, the **Public Defender**, and the **Court of Appeals**.

It was a powerful moment.

I watched as **tears welled up** in the eyes of the Chief Justice. The message was brutal, unfiltered, and deeply painful—a searing **rebuke of corruption, indifference, and alienation** within the system. But it was also a turning point.

The emotional power of the music **created the space for transformation**. With the public’s voice ringing in their ears, the project team launched a national strategy—a traveling program that would reach **every city and town** with a justice office.

Each session began with the same rap-based presentation. It served as a **mirror**, forcing participants to confront how the public perceived them. Then we asked:

“Is this how you want to be remembered?”

That simple question opened a space for **reflection, honesty, and accountability**. From there, we led participants through a process of imagining a better legacy:

- *What do you want your service to stand for?*
- *What small steps will you take—starting now—to live that identity?*
- *What will you do differently, and how will you be accountable to your peers?*

Each person concluded the workshop by signing a **“Covenant”**—a personal and collective pledge to uphold integrity in daily actions. This was not a top-down mandate. It was a **grassroots moral commitment**.

Almost immediately, we saw results. Within a month, the President of the Supreme Court began receiving letters and visits from lawyers and citizens alike, sharing stories of **noticeably improved interactions** with justice officials. A **cultural shift** was underway.

Though the successor to this Chief Justice did not continue the effort, it was **revived and sustained** by the leader who followed him. The **Integrity Project** lives on, not as a policy or a campaign, but as a **movement**—a redefinition of identity in the justice sector.

While many anti-corruption strategies focus on compliance, rules, and restrictions, we pursued a different path. We believed that lasting change emerges from **within**—from a reclaimed sense of **dignity, nobility, and responsibility**. The **antidote to corruption is not punishment. It is integrity**.

Reorganizing Trial Courts to Reduce Corruption in Peru

As I was preparing to leave Buenos Aires for Ecuador, I received a call from a lawyer in Lima, Peru. He urged me to make an unscheduled stop in Lima to meet with a team of justice reformers aligned with the newly elected President, **Alberto Fujimori**. Their focus: overhauling a justice system plagued by corruption.

I rearranged my plans and flew to Lima. From the airport, we drove straight to the **Supreme Court building**, where I was ushered into a large room filled mostly with men in military uniforms. Covering one wall was an intricate chart—a sprawling collection of lines, boxes, and diagrams.

I was introduced, and a man who appeared to be the group’s leader launched into a dense, highly technical presentation explaining the proposed reforms. After nearly 90 minutes, he turned to me and asked for my opinion.

I paused, then responded honestly:

“None of this makes any sense to me.”

If the goal was to reduce corruption, I explained, they needed to start not with complex institutional diagrams, but with the **core building block of any justice system—the trial court**.

The trial court model in Latin America hadn’t changed since the colonial era. I had recently visited the museum in **Santo Domingo**, which holds the original documents establishing the first trial court in the Americas—created under the Spanish Crown. The structure had endured, largely untouched, even as comparable systems in Europe had since evolved.

Trial courts are where justice happens—where rights are determined, guilt or innocence is decided, and where citizens actually interact with the justice system. In other words, they’re where public trust is either built or broken.

A week later, I received a call from the **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** office in Lima. They asked our firm to assist in the **reorganization of Peru’s trial courts**. We accepted.

For the next several years, we worked out of an office in the Supreme Court. Our focus was the **redesign of civil trial courts** in Lima and other major cities. A recently vacated government building in downtown Lima was chosen as the new site for the civil courts.

My colleague, working closely with Peruvian counterparts, led a full redesign of the facility:

- The **first floor became a centralized filing center**, denying direct access to judges’ chambers.
- **Computer modems** were installed to give lawyers and the public real-time access to case information.
- **Court employees were trained** to assist citizens in navigating court processes.

We also redesigned judges’ offices and workflows to **maximize transparency**. But the most **critical reform** was the **elimination of ex parte communications**—the private, one-sided conversations with judges that were widely viewed as the primary avenue for corruption.

In our initial research, we interviewed hundreds of people involved with the courts. Again and again, they pointed to **ex parte meetings** as the most corrupt element of the system.

We brought this insight to the project’s leadership. To their credit, they agreed. A formal order from the Supreme Court **banned ex parte contact with judges**.

Not long after, I was summoned to the **Bar Association of Lima** for a special session. Over 600 lawyers filled the auditorium. I recognized many from our early consultations. The tension was palpable.

After a polite introduction, the Q&A began. The **first question targeted the ex parte decision**. The tone was hostile and accusatory. The backlash confirmed for me that we had struck at the heart of the problem.

No explanation I offered satisfied the crowd. But the reform stood.

Nine months later, I received a call from the UNDP Director in Lima. He said:

“I just got off the phone with Senator Fujimori (the President’s brother). He said the reform project has to stop. We’re hearing the trial courts are becoming too impartial.”

And just like that, the project was over.

Reflection

In hindsight, the backlash confirmed the **effectiveness** of our approach. By redesigning the courts physically, procedurally, and culturally, we disrupted entrenched systems of influence and access. But the political establishment wasn’t ready for a judiciary that **couldn’t be controlled**.

Still, for a brief moment, Peru’s trial courts offered a glimpse of what real justice might look like: **transparent, impartial, and centered on service to the public**. That vision remains both a guidepost and a challenge to justice reformers everywhere.

Building the Palestinian Justice System Under the Oslo Accords

When the **Oslo Peace Accords** were signed in the 1990s, one of Israel’s conditions for recognizing a Palestinian state was the creation of a **functioning Palestinian justice system**. In 1999, my firm was awarded the contract to help the **Palestinian Authority (PA)** design and implement this system. Over the next decade, we worked across the West Bank and Gaza with judges, prosecutors, law schools, police, women’s organizations, public schools, Palestinian consultants, NGOs, IT professionals, and traditional leaders.

Despite the outbreak of the **Second Intifada in 2000**, we continued building a justice system from the ground up. Our first step was to develop an automated case management system called **MIZAN**, in partnership with a talented Palestinian IT firm in Ramallah. No prior data infrastructure existed. The MIZAN system was designed to track and record all court activity, offering—for the first time—a reliable picture of what was actually happening in the justice system.

We began in 1999 with a year of groundwork: listening to key stakeholders, studying the system’s baseline conditions, and trying to understand what Palestinians hoped for in a justice system of their own. There was a real sense of **optimism and cooperation with Israeli authorities** during this early stage.

That changed abruptly when two Israeli settlers were murdered outside our office in **Ramallah**—a former Quaker school. Mass protests and violence followed. Our foreign staff had to be evacuated, and the project was frozen.

Three months later, with the region still in lockdown, I requested permission to travel to **Gaza** and meet the **President of the Palestinian Supreme Court**. After intense negotiations with Israeli authorities, we became the **first Western visitors allowed back into Gaza** during that period.

That visit remains one of the most profound experiences of my professional life.

In our meeting, after some pleasantries and coffee—an essential courtesy in the region—the Chief Justice leaned across his desk and said, through our translator:

“We are going to do all of our reform with you and no one else, because we trust you.”

That word—**trust**—landed like a thunderclap. Trust is the cornerstone of any meaningful reform in the justice system, and it is something that must be earned. To this day, I am not entirely sure what earned us that trust. I believe it was due in large part to the strength and integrity of our **Palestinian professional team**, whose leadership and cultural fluency were essential.

The President **dismissed the World Bank and European Union reform teams**, placing his confidence in our team. With that trust came immense responsibility—and pressure to deliver results.

Working under the constant threat of violence and navigating complex political terrain was an everyday challenge. A simple trip from **Jerusalem to Ramallah**—just 10 miles—could take **three to four hours** due to military checkpoints. Being stopped by heavily armed teenagers holding Uzis was part of daily life.

Our method was clear: **build from the ground up**. We started by determining the volume and status of court cases in each city. Fortunately, the number of courts in the Palestinian territories was small, making this task achievable in a few months. Armed with reliable data from MIZAN, we helped set the stage for informed reform efforts.

Over time, our work expanded far beyond court administration:

- We helped restructure law school **curricula** to reflect the evolving legal framework.
- We established a **judicial and court staff training center**.
- We created a specialized **prosecutorial training program**.
- We supported the creation of an **independent judicial administrative structure**, separating it from the Ministry of Justice.
- We launched the **first dispute resolution center** in Palestinian territories.

However, we soon realized that these institutional changes were largely invisible to the public. People didn’t understand how or whether the justice system was changing. That led to one of the most impactful innovations of the project: we **produced a feature film**.

The movie illustrated the evolution of the justice system and became a powerful tool for public engagement. It was shown in schools across the West Bank and Gaza, aired on national television multiple times, and sparked widespread public discussion. The film reached people emotionally in a way that reports and technical briefings never could.

Despite all of these achievements, the long-term vision of the Oslo Accords—to establish a Palestinian state with a functioning justice system—was never realized. Shifting political realities and hardline decisions by both sides **derailed the momentum**.

Still, the legacy of the work endures. The **MIZAN system** provided a sustainable foundation for information-based decision-making. The reforms in legal education, professional training, and public engagement were **landmarks in institution-building under extreme pressure**.

What we built proved that even amid political conflict and social instability, it is possible to lay the groundwork for a **justice system rooted in trust, transparency, and public service**.

Reflection

Justice systems do not thrive on laws alone—they require legitimacy, community ownership, and the steady hand of **strategic trust-building**. In Palestine, we saw that building **infrastructure, capacity, and public confidence** all at once was not only necessary—it was possible.

The lessons from this project continue to inform my belief that **real change begins by understanding reality, cultivating trust, and building from the ground up**—no matter how difficult the terrain.

Consultation as the Cornerstone of Judicial Reform: Two Case Studies

I. The California Judicial Council

In **1974**, I had the privilege of serving as the **first Director of Judicial Planning** for the California court system—the first such office in the United States. The **Judicial Council of California** established a planning committee composed of judges from across the state, representing diverse courts and communities. Our mandate: to develop strategies to guide the future of judicial administration in California.

At the time, the **American Bar Association** had released its *Standards of Judicial Administration*, which addressed nearly every facet of court operations. Our committee embraced these standards and encouraged courts at all levels to adopt them voluntarily. We deliberately avoided a top-down approach; we knew that mandating compliance would politicize the effort and reduce buy-in. Instead, we emphasized **consultation and voluntary adoption**, framing the standards as tools—not directives—for self-improvement.

The value of this approach quickly became apparent. The standards helped courts **standardize procedures, enhance transparency, and improve service delivery**. Our role was not to control the process, but to **invite thoughtful planning** and provide a structure through which each court could pursue progress on its own terms.

In **1986**, when I was appointed **Administrative Director of the Courts for California**, I returned to this foundational principle. We initiated another comprehensive planning process and adopted a set of system-wide goals. Courts were encouraged to set their own objectives aligned with those goals and develop clear strategies for implementation—again with the aim of creating **accountability without imposition**.

Planning remains a challenge in many judicial systems. But with consultation at the center, it can evolve from a bureaucratic exercise into a powerful driver of **collective vision and performance improvement**.

II. The Ninth Circuit Federal Courts

The **Ninth Circuit**—comprising 14 states and several Pacific territories—handles nearly one-fourth of all federal court business. In **1981**, I was appointed **Circuit Executive** for the Ninth Circuit, serving at the pleasure of the Judicial Council and Chief Judge.

The **federal court system** in the U.S. had long been centralized. Although Congress had established Judicial Councils to support administrative decentralization, most circuits had not developed robust

administrative frameworks. Judges—appointed by Congress through rigorous political processes—largely managed court operations, but the administrative apparatus had **lagged behind this structural shift**.

Our team introduced an active, inclusive planning process involving all levels of the system. Drawing on input from advisory committees, judicial officers, and staff, we submitted **annual improvement plans** to the Judicial Council. One of our key proposals was **fiscal decentralization**—allowing circuits more direct control over budgetary decisions.

This idea met fierce resistance. The **Chief Justice of the United States at the time publicly denounced me** for advancing it. However, his successor embraced the concept and launched a pilot program to test **decentralized budget management** at the circuit level.

What made this transformation possible? In a word: **consultation**. We believed in the capacity of judges, administrators, and staff to analyze their own systems and propose meaningful improvements. Every interaction was grounded in **mutual respect**, not authority. We didn't dictate solutions—we facilitated **reflection, dialogue, and ownership**.

III. Final Reflections

These two case studies—in California and the Ninth Circuit—illustrate a core truth: **meaningful court reform emerges from participation, not prescription**. No two contexts are the same. But in every setting, I have seen the power of consultation to generate legitimacy, engagement, and results.

I have always believed that those who work in justice do so not because it is a job, but because it is a **calling**. To build systems that safeguard rights, ensure access, and foster public trust is one of society's highest responsibilities.

Too often, reformers cling too tightly to their own ideas, seeking control rather than collaboration. In my experience, **the more voices you invite into the conversation, the stronger the reform effort becomes**. Reform must reflect the values and norms of the communities it serves. It must be shaped not only by those at the top, but by all who are part of the system—from judges to court clerks to community members.

Successful reform requires:

- **Consultation at every level**
- **Ownership by key stakeholders**
- **A culture of annual planning and performance review**
- **Commitment to transparency, accountability, and continuous learning**

Justice systems should never stand still. Planning and reflection must become **institutional habits**—not episodic interventions.

The most enduring reforms are those that **build from within**. They are cultivated—not imposed. And they grow strongest where trust and participation run deepest.

References

Davis, W. E. (2024). [In Service to Justice: Striving to Bring Forth Our Nobility](#). United States: Dorrance Publishing Company.

Note: Paper was edited using ChatGPT