

By Michael K. Jeanes, Clerk of the Superior Court

The next time you break bread, leave with a sharp saw

Last month, members of the office's administrative staff held a potluck. Typical of Phoenix, a "spring potluck" happens on a day when temperatures flirt with triple digits, meaning everything happens indoors. Typical of a government agency, we kept things in-house by transforming our training room into a picnic atmosphere by rearranging tables and trading the hot sun for the soft glow of fluorescent tube lights. While eating homemade food is always welcome, the bigger goal was togetherness.

Without being able to identify an authoritative source, it seems "breaking bread" with those around you is as old a human tradition as any. And breaking bread itself can be a challenge when a room full of people includes vegans, paleos, carb avoiders, gluten-free individuals, and others along the endless spectrum of dietary needs and experimentation. Actual breaking of bread quickly becomes a metaphor for sharing ideas and experiences.

Office get-togethers often start with work small-talk because work is the team's common thread. Food and shared space make it easier to transition to actually knowing your co-workers. When Clerk staff start talking about family vacations, whose kids are graduating this year, and the best escapes from the summer's heat, the fast-paced, work-based mind gives way to a more laid-back, natural and receptive mind. In the Clerk's office, these get-togethers lead to new partnerships, friendships, and ideas, and can reinvigorate personal and work projects.

Sparks fly when, during a thousand different conversations, seemingly wild ideas make their way into office practices. While it's unlikely anyone would willingly bring up the Clerk's strategic plan during a social get-together, someone's experience at a national park or a movie theater might start the unconscious wheels turning of how the Clerk's office can incorporate new features into office practices. Things like how people reserve camping spaces in advance or how they buy tickets online can find their way into the Clerk's goals of taking payments online and scheduling appointments for passport applications. Although the Clerk has mandates and guidelines, there is a lot of space for creativity and innovation between the markers.

Government and the judicial branch can be seen as slow to change and downright opposed to the idea. But motivated people tend to ignore stereotypes and others' perceptions. It's important to pull people out of their daily grind and give them space to focus on who they are, who they work with, and the world beyond putting out fires all the time. It's in that space that people appreciate those around them and the bigger picture of individual contributions to keeping this public service machine burning clean and efficient.

Stephen Covey's seventh habit for being highly effective is sharpening the saw. Without trying to cover each habit here, the Clerk's office strives to think strategically, work toward goals, know who we are and who we work with, and to really understand why we do what we do. The seventh habit is about continuous improvement, which requires maximizing our personal and professional interactions. What better reason to sharpen your saw than to cut into some treats from time to time with your team?