

## Legal Leadership *Court consultant carves interesting career path*

**By Tom Kirvan**  
**Legal News**

He is quick to say that he is not a lawyer, even if he possesses enough legal knowledge to make an attorney's head spin.

He has been a *confidant* to scores of federal and state judges and justices across the U.S., consulting with some of the finest legal minds in the country over the course of a 35-year career in court and judicial administration.

But a lawyer he is not, which may partly explain the continued demand for his services from courts and legal institutes across the nation.

Dale Lefever holds a Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration and Labor and Industrial Relations, a doctorate he earned from Michigan State University in 1972. The degree served as a springboard for upper level administrative work in medical education for MSU and the University of Michigan, where he retired as assistant chair for Planning and Program Development, Department of Family Medicine, in June 2006.

But a retiree he is not, as evidenced by a recent whirlwind travel schedule that saw the judicial consultant crisscross the country several times over a two-week period to conduct leadership and management development programs for high-ranking court personnel. It is a role that he has relished since he was first approached about offering his consulting services in 1973.

"I was part of a panel discussion at Wayne State in 1973 that focused on education for the professions," Lefever explained. "I represented the medical side and had the opportunity to meet Harvey Solomon, who was with the Institute for Court Management that Chief Justice (Warren) Burger created in 1971. Harvey and I hit it off and that relationship really led to my involvement in leadership work with the courts."

Since that chance meeting some 35 years ago, Lefever has conducted more than "1,300 leadership and management development programs for judges, court administrators, prosecuting and defense attorneys, clerks, probation officers, and other participants in the justice system," he indicated.

“In addition to the National Center for State Courts, sponsors for these programs have included the Michigan Judicial Institute, the National Association of Court Managers, the National District Attorneys Association, the Federal Judicial Center, the National Judicial College, the United States Department of Justice, the American Bar Association, the National Center for Juvenile Justice, and federal and state courts at the trial and appellate levels in both the United States and Canada,” Lefever related.

His areas of expertise are in “leadership development, strategic planning, court governance, team development, and the management of organizational change,” he noted. It is work where he can help some of the most powerful members of the nation’s judiciary look beyond the limits of their legal knowledge.

“For most of the individuals I work with, all of their training and experience has been in the law,” Lefever said. “As such, when judges or justices are thrust into positions of leadership, many of them have a need for training in areas beyond their fields of expertise. Suddenly, they have oversight responsibility for areas such as finance, personnel, budgeting, and record keeping. Helping them manage this new set of responsibilities is where I try to lend a hand.”

Lefever’s first clients were court administrators, an audience he found particularly receptive to the leadership techniques and principles he was promoting. Those wearing the robe initially viewed Lefever in an altogether different light.

“It’s safe to say that most judges are not comfortable confiding with people outside the legal profession, those who don’t know the culture of the courts,” Lefever said. “It took time to develop a relationship of trust with them, at which point we can begin the work in earnest. I know that when I give a presentation to a group of judges I have at most 10 minutes to win them over or I have lost them for good.”

It took Lefever “a good three to five years” to become fully familiar with the legal jargon of his court clientele, a feat that continues to pay lasting dividends for the emeritus faculty member at the U of M.

“They appreciate the fact that I have taken the time to learn their language and that I have tried to learn as much about them as possible,” Lefever said. “It’s important that I have a basis of understanding about them and their particular court situation before I begin work.”

Lefever’s “team development” approach recently was in evidence during a training program with Supreme Court justices of a southern state, a five-member judicial panel appointed by the governor. His task was to help build “collegiality” among the justices, three of whom were newly appointed to the court.

“The challenge was to help fuse three new members with two who have experience on the Supreme Court bench,” Lefever said. “The goal was to create a sense of collegiality

among five highly intelligent individuals who have been in positions with a great degree of judicial independence in the past. I was asking them to approach their court role in a different way, giving up some of their independence for the overall good of the court system. Collegiality is not just about establishing civility. It is all about a governance model that can be used as the foundation for building a more effective court operation.”

In December, Lefever conducted a leadership seminar for more than 30 chief judges in Michigan. It is an annual program that he presents to help prepare recently appointed chief judges for the leadership and administrative challenges to come.

“A chief judge is not a ‘judge on steroids,’” Lefever quipped. “Depending on how the assignment is viewed, it can present a great opportunity to leave an important legacy of leadership. Some look at it as their ‘turn in the barrel,’ while others see it as a chance to promote some institutional changes that will better serve the public. I try to get an early sense of how big an investment they are willing to make in order to promote court improvements.”

The 64-year-old Lefever grew up in Lancaster, Pa., one of two children. His parents, the late Richard and Mildred Lefever, were Mennonites and both were raised in a large family.

“My father was the oldest of 14 children and he had an eighth grade education,” Lefever said. “He was a farmer and drove a delivery truck. My mother was one of nine children, so she and my dad both were well-prepared to raise my sister (Marianne) and me.”

Lefever attended Wheaton College, a Christian liberal arts school located just west of Chicago. He earned his master’s and doctorate from Michigan State and it was there that he met his wife, Marty, a former teacher who has served as a regional director for Community Bible Study. The couple has three children—Krista, Doug, and Lori—and eight grandchildren with a ninth on the way.

The Lefevers keep tabs on their family from their home in Ann Arbor, enjoying time together at their summer retreat on Burt Lake near Petoskey. The beauty of northern Michigan also serves as a place for Lefever to fine tune his golf game, a sport he picked up more than a decade ago. He drinks from a cup sporting the letters G.O.L.F., short for “God Offers Love and Forgiveness,” words to the wise for anyone who takes the sport too seriously.

Lefever considers his work with the judiciary as “a real honor and privilege.” He welcomes the opportunity to offer guidance on leadership matters, often “serving as a sounding board” for judges and justices who somehow feel isolated by their positions of judicial authority.

“Over and over I hear from judges that one of the toughest aspects of their job is the isolation they feel,” Lefever said. “It’s a common theme throughout the judiciary, which, to me, is the least understood branch of government.”

Court personnel can count on Lefever as a “lifelong resource.” He regularly sends books and articles on leadership and effective management in an effort to “provide follow up and support” to those who have attended his programs.

“I am happy to stay in touch with those who have attended my seminars and presentations,” Lefever said. “It is proof to me that I have offered them something of value when they call or send an e-mail.”

His consulting business has been built on his reputation. He has no promotional materials, no glitzy brochure or fancy Web site to promote his professional wares. In fact, it was only recently that he sported his first business card.

“I don’t write proposals,” Lefever said. “I have a reputation and relationship based business, simple as that. Such an approach is more consistent with my faith-based values. In all honesty, I make it hard for them to hire me. I want to ensure that they are serious about the job ahead and that we have an excellent chance at success if the program is followed. When someone hires me, they can feel assured that they will get everything and more out of me.”



*Photo by Tom Kirvan*

**A consultant to the courts, Dr. Dale Lefever has shared his leadership wisdom with state and federal judges across the nation. He began his consulting career more than three decades ago while working in medical education and administration at the University of Michigan Medical School.**

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