



Embracing the Principles of Crown Shyness in the Legal Profession

BY J. RYANN PEYTON

In many ways, the legal profession functions much like an ecosystem—an interconnected and dynamic network of individuals, institutions, and processes that operate symbiotically. Just as plants, animals, and microorganisms depend on one another for survival in nature, the various players in the legal profession rely on each other to function effectively. This interdependence highlights the collaborative nature of the legal field, where the success of one element often hinges on the contributions of others.

In the natural world, trees exhibit a fascinating behavior known as “crown shyness,” where their canopies grow in close proximity but deliberately avoid touching each other. The resulting gaps, often referred to as “crown shyness gaps,” create intricate, puzzle-like patterns in the sky.¹ While the exact reasons for this phenomenon are still being studied, theories suggest it may help trees optimize sunlight exposure, reduce the spread of disease, and prevent damage from wind collisions. It is a silent yet powerful example of how living organisms

can thrive in shared spaces by maintaining respectful boundaries.

This concept of crown shyness offers valuable insights for the legal profession, where competition, power dynamics, and collaboration often define the working environment. Much like trees in the ecosystem of a forest, legal professionals must navigate shared spaces while balancing the need for both individual success and collective well-being.

When we explore what lawyers and the broader legal community can learn from crown shyness, we uncover lessons about setting healthy boundaries, fostering mutual respect, and cultivating professional relationships that enhance both personal fulfillment and organizational success. Ultimately, crown shyness offers strategies for creating a more inclusive and sustainable legal culture.

Cooperation Without Colliding

At its core, crown shyness serves as a form of conflict avoidance in the plant world, allowing trees to cohabitate without overstepping their physical boundaries. By maintaining a respectful distance from their neighbors, trees reduce competition for resources like sunlight, water, and nutrients in the soil. This spatial separation helps each tree maximize its own growth potential without directly impinging on the growth of nearby trees.²

Crown shyness offers a compelling metaphor for the ways that legal professionals can thrive by working collaboratively without undercutting one another. This cooperative model emphasizes mutual respect and support rather than adversarial competition. In a profession often marked by intense competition for clients, recognition, and career advancement, we can enhance our collective success by cultivating a culture of knowledge sharing, mentorship, and collaboration within legal organizations.

Just as trees maintain distance to protect their own well-being and ensure mutual survival, legal professionals can benefit from setting and respecting clear boundaries. These boundaries allow for healthy collaboration without encroachment, prevent interpersonal conflicts, and ensure that resources like time, recognition, and opportunities are shared fairly.

The inherent boundary-setting of crown shyness offers valuable insights for conflict avoidance and resolution. In this context, legal professionals can learn to manage conflict by adopting a mindset of constructive resolution rather than adversarial confrontation. Just as trees maintain a respectful distance to thrive collectively, lawyers can engage in conflicts that prioritize mutual respect and solutions over personal victories.³ This approach is especially crucial in managing power struggles within legal hierarchies, where clear professional boundaries and respectful communication help prevent the erosion of trust and collaboration. By maintaining these boundaries, legal professionals can ensure that power dynamics are navigated with fairness, reducing the risk of tension while promoting a culture of open dialogue and problem-solving.

At the same time, crown shyness also teaches a powerful lesson about community dynamics and the importance of creating boundaries to prevent harm. In nature, trees keep a respectful distance to protect themselves from potential threats such as disease, pests, or damage from physical abrasion during strong winds. By maintaining this separation, trees not only protect their individual health but also preserve the well-being of the surrounding forest.

This behavior is an apt metaphor for how our legal communities can respond to bad actors who may harm the collective. Crown shyness illustrates the value of setting boundaries and limiting the influence of individuals whose behavior could negatively impact the entire group. Just as trees prevent the spread of pathogens or damage by maintaining space, legal communities can protect their integrity by isolating toxic behavior and ensuring that it doesn't permeate the larger group.

Allowing bad actors unchecked access can spread harmful practices—whether unethical behavior, dishonesty, or the mistreatment of others—just as unchecked branches can spread disease in a forest. By promoting accountability and encouraging ethical and civility standards, legal communities can preserve a culture of trust, fairness, and cooperation. Setting limits and enforcing consequences helps ensure that one individual's actions do not destabilize the

entire community, fostering a healthier, more resilient environment for all.

Likewise, crown shyness highlights the importance of minimizing interpersonal friction, even in a competitive and high-pressure environment like the legal profession. Legal teams can foster a culture of cooperation by recognizing the value of individual contributions while maintaining a respectful distance when needed, allowing space for personal growth and professional expertise to flourish without

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unnecessary conflict. This balance between close collaboration and respectful autonomy is essential for reducing stress and creating more harmonious legal workplaces.

Sustainable Growth Through Collective Care

The legal profession must foster an environment that ensures space for underrepresented groups to grow and thrive without exclusion. Just as trees in a forest benefit from the diversity of

species and resource-sharing with and among those species, legal organizations must ensure that opportunities are equitably distributed and not dominated by a few powerful individuals or groups. This prevents the monopolization of resources, such as high-profile cases, mentorship, or leadership roles, by those who are already well-established, leaving room for newer voices and diverse perspectives to enter the conversation.

Incorporating crown shyness principles in professional culture can also promote organizational success. By ensuring that all members of the legal community—especially those from underrepresented backgrounds—have access to growth opportunities, the profession will be more inclusive. A diverse environment encourages the sharing of innovative ideas, enhancing creativity and access to justice by drawing from a variety of experiences and perspectives. Studies consistently show that diversity strengthens problem-solving and innovation in organizations, making it not only a moral imperative but also a competitive advantage.⁴

Crown shyness also has implications for sustainable growth, as it not only promotes individual tree health but also contributes to the well-being of the forest as a whole. This balance between individual growth and collective sustainability is essential in professional environments, particularly in the legal sector, where high levels of stress and competition can lead to burnout. Legal professionals, much like trees, need sufficient “space”—both mental and physical—to focus on their well-being and achieve long-term success.

Legal organizations must foster supportive networks where professionals can pursue both career growth and personal fulfillment. Much like crown shyness allows for an ecosystem of trees to thrive without overshadowing one another, the legal profession can benefit from creating a professional culture that promotes sustainable career growth. This includes encouraging flexible work policies, mental health support, and mentorship programs that prioritize the long-term well-being of legal professionals.

Finally, just as trees in a forest demonstrate the power of cooperative growth over monop-

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olistic competition, the legal profession must embrace a culture of shared success. To prevent burnout and encourage personal and professional development, the legal profession must create networks that provide support at every career stage. These networks can mirror the relationships within a healthy forest, where each tree benefits from the presence and strength of the others. Collaborative and supportive environments are crucial for retaining talent and preventing early burnout.⁵

Conclusion

By embracing the principles of crown shyness—setting healthy boundaries, fostering mutual respect, and prioritizing collaboration—legal organizations can create spaces where all individuals, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, have the opportunity to grow and thrive. This not only leads to personal and professional fulfillment but also enhances the profession’s capacity for innovation and access to justice. Moreover, promoting a culture of shared success, in which resources and opportunities are distributed equitably, helps prevent burnout and ensures the long-term health of both individuals and the profession as a whole. By adopting these strategies, the legal community can transform into an ecosystem that values both individual contributions and collective advancement, fostering a more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable future for everyone. **CL**



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NOTES

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