

# The Island of Misfit Lawyers: Creating Professional Communities Where Everyone Can Thrive

Colorado Attorney Mentoring Program







Professional Pain Points  
&  
The Value of Belonging

# How does becoming a lawyer change you?



- Cautionary tales & fear-based narratives in law school change our brain chemistry
- Three years of “fight or flight” creates a huge negativity bias in the brain – this continues into legal workplaces and practice
- Executive functioning becomes diminished, and we begin to lose the ability to put the breaks on anxiety

KILLING THEM SOFTLY: NEUROSCIENCE REVEALS HOW BRAIN CELLS DIE FROM LAW SCHOOL STRESS AND HOW NEURAL SELF-HACKING CAN OPTIMIZE COGNITIVE PERFORMANCE

Debra S. Austin, J.D., Ph.D. Loyola Law Review (2013)



**Professional identity** is defined as one's **professional** self-concept based on attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences

Professional identity goes beyond the rules of professional conduct and encompasses the **ideals** each of us holds regarding our professional roles, and how we apply those ideals to the complex situations we encounter in our professional lives.

**TRUST ME,  
I'M A  
LAWYER**

- A narrow professional identity of “lawyer” usually embodies the societal vision or core requirements for performance as a lawyer.
- But these societal pressures and performance requirements are **NOT** what define us as professionals.
- Yet it is these attributes that often shape our professional identities and in turn, limit our perception of our professional strengths and abilities.

# Role Distancing

## Embrace

Social roles in which we embrace the expectations or behaviors stemming from norms associated with a particular role or status.

## Separate

When an individual intentionally promotes a lack of attachment and commitment to a role or does not fully engage in a role's performance.



High Role I



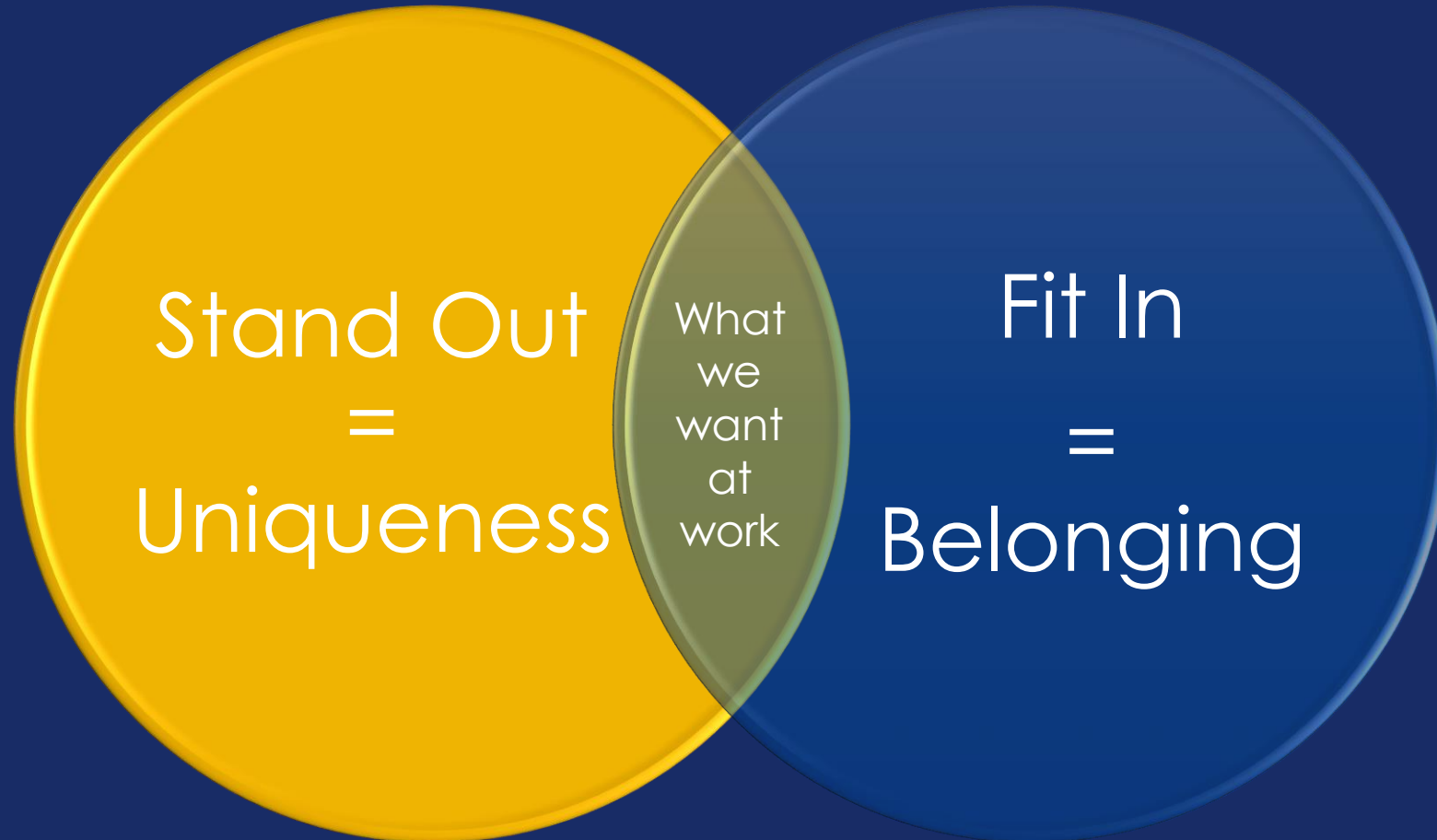
**WHY AM I SUCH A  
MISFIT?**



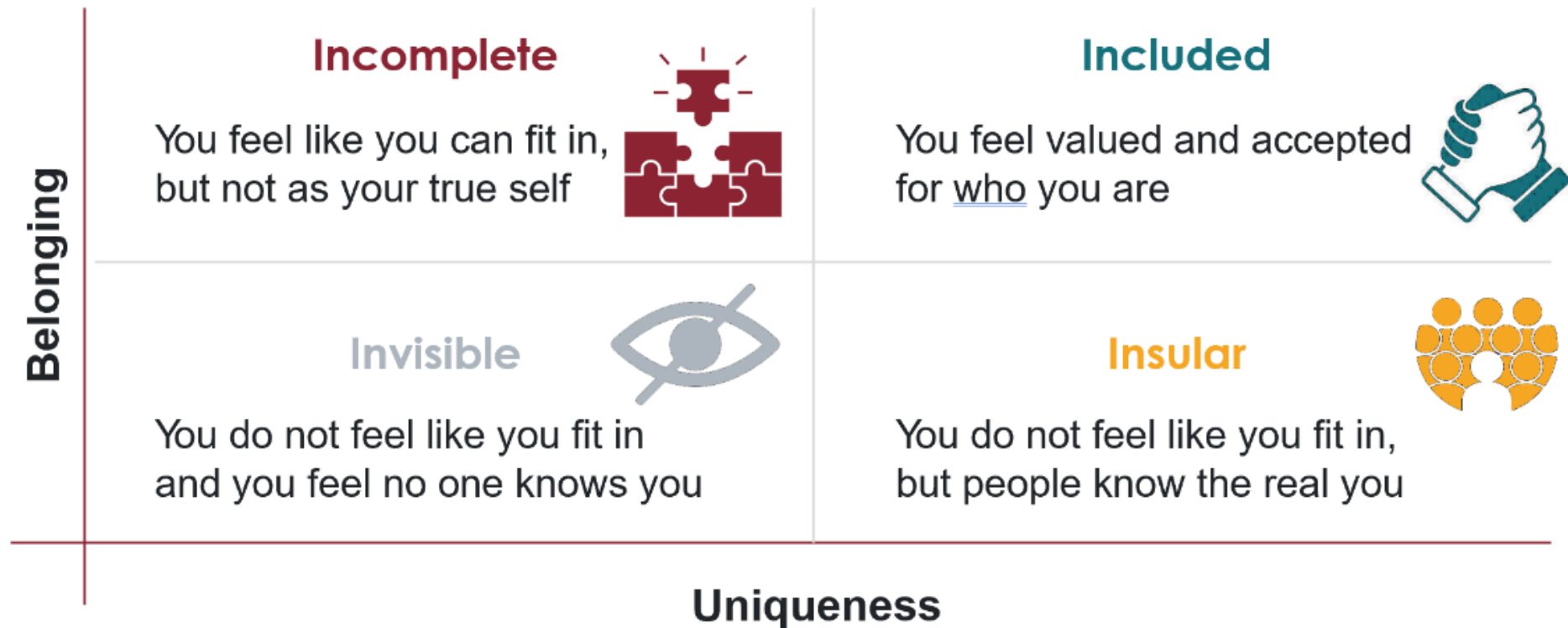
Distance



# Two Most Basic & Essential Human Needs



# What Happens When we Lack Uniqueness or Belonging?



# How Leadership Style Impacts Belonging





# Meritocracy Managers

- Meritocracy Managers hold the ideal of merit above all else and therefore try to hire, promote, and reward based on performance alone.
- By focusing on merit to try and capture the best talent, their teams end up homogenous with competency gaps, or areas where they are lacking skills.





# Culture Crusader

- A Culture Crusader is a leader who prioritizes creating a team of like-minded people who “fit” the culture of an organization.
- Ends up forgoing the benefits of incorporating different thoughts, perspectives, and backgrounds.
- Culture Crusaders excel at engendering the feeling of belonging, but they are missing uniqueness.



# Team Player

A Team Player is a subset of Culture Crusaders (mostly people from underrepresented communities) who work so hard to assimilate with the group that they lose touch with the value their own and others' diverse perspectives add to the team dynamic.



# White Knight

Takes a paternalistic approach to people from underrepresented communities and tries to “save” them. The resulting lack of emphasis on shared goals diminishes team cohesion because people cannot see how they fit together.



# Optimist

- An Optimist is a leader who sees value in uniqueness and belonging but is not committed to actively creating change and so maintains the status quo through inertia.
- The main issue that Optimists face is not taking action because they assume things will improve on their own.





# How Culture Impacts Belonging

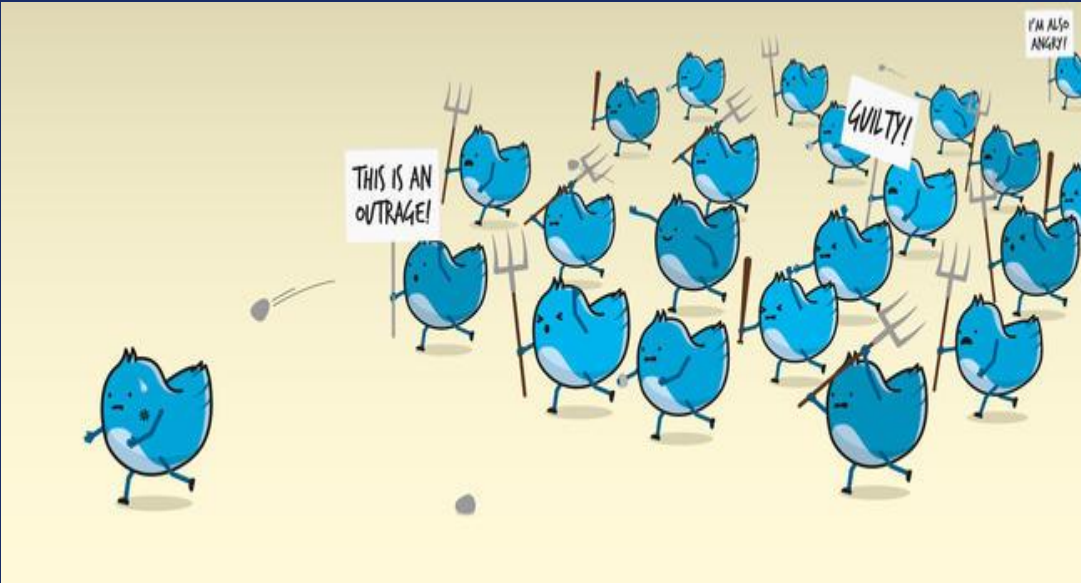


# Control Culture



- The law and traditional norms of the legal profession make us believe that we have or can be always in control. Nothing could be further from the truth.
- Misfits are understood through the lens of their differences not their contributions. This level of misunderstanding can lead to intense power struggles.

# Outrage Culture



- Outrage culture in the legal profession satisfies our need for social solidarity.
- It is the misfit who has the ability and strength to vulnerably express concerns, opposition, or the hunger for systems change.
- In the wrong space, such disruption can be met with swift condemnation and scapegoating.

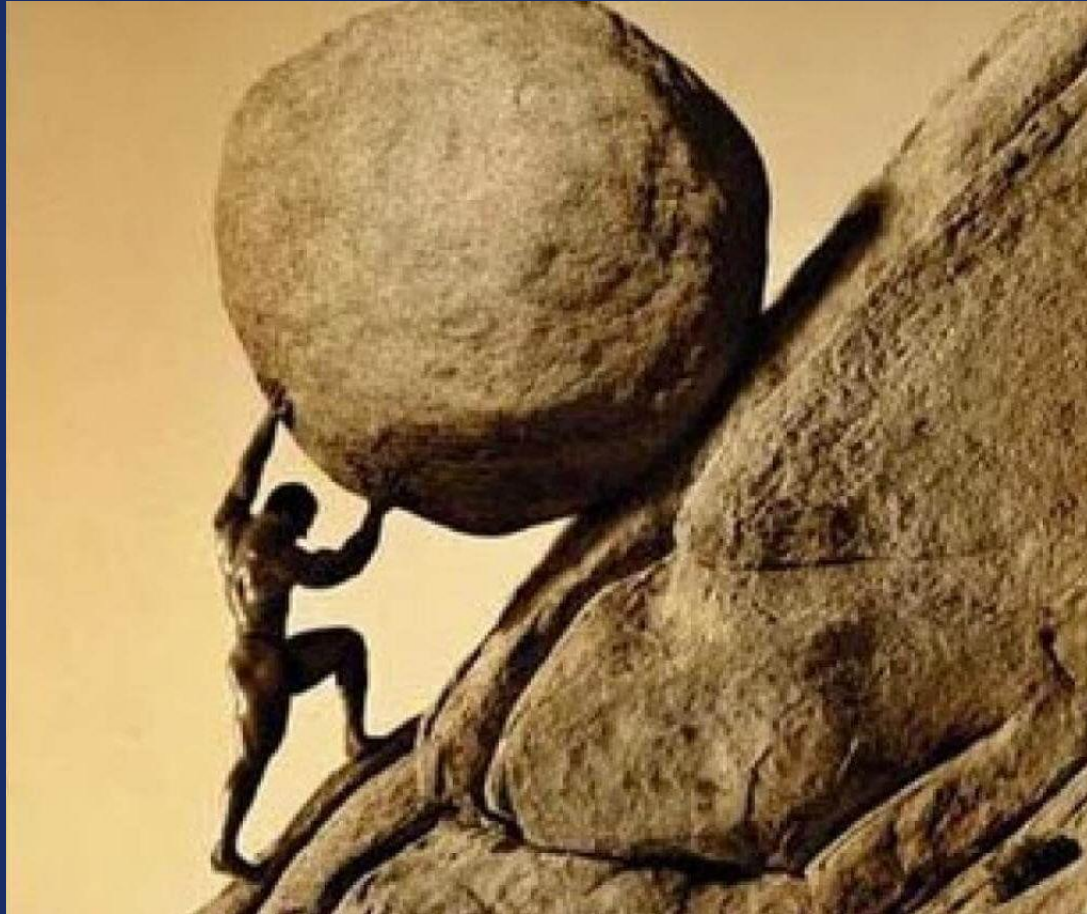
# Assimilation Culture



- Many misfits hold identities different from the dominant norms of the legal profession.
- We are expected to monitor and adapt our presentation to approximate as closely as possible accepted professional norms.
- Conscious awareness that an unmonitored, authentic self will clash with professional norms and the effort to recognize and avoid conforming to “unprofessional” stereotypes is exhausting.



# Resilience Culture



- So much is said in our profession about the importance of grit and resilience in overcoming setbacks.
- Misfits don't commend people for being resilient, they redesign the systems of the profession that inherently make people suffer.



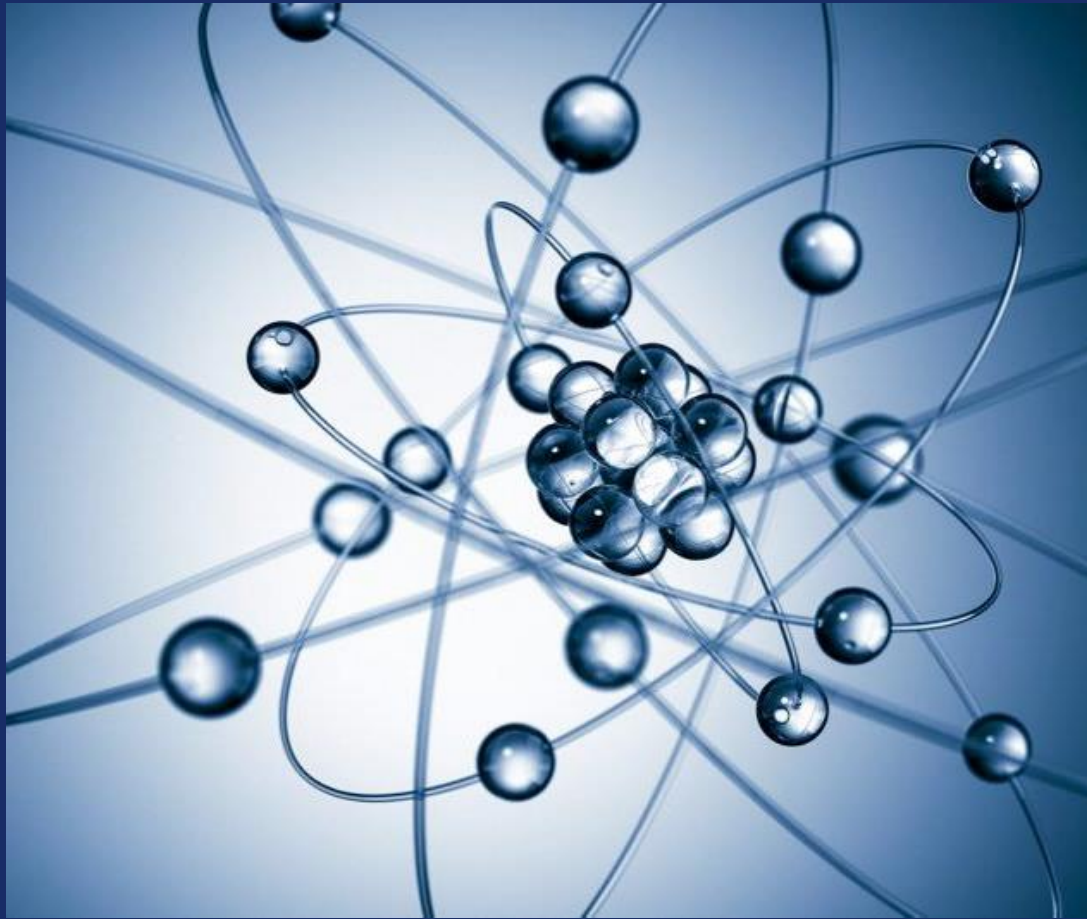






**Enter the Atomic  
Legal Organization**

# What Do We Mean By Atomic?



1. The word "atomic" can mean tiny or small, like an atom. And it is a core part of this philosophy that misfit actions should be small and easy to do.

2. The word atomic means "the fundamental unit in a larger system." Atoms form molecules, molecules form compounds, etc.

In a sense, lawyers and legal employers are like the atoms of our profession. They are fundamental units that combine into the overall system and culture that make up our professional world.

3. Atomic is "the source of immense energy or power."




A person wearing a blue flight suit and goggles is looking through a telescope. The background is a blurred mountain landscape under a bright sky. The text "1. Focus on Purpose" is overlaid on the image.

# 1. Focus on Purpose



## 2. Create the Conditions for Good Lawyering



### 3. Don't F&%# Your Disruptors





| Strategy 1                                              | Strategy 2                                      | Strategy 3                                           | Strategy 4                                                                                  |
|---------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Unilateral decision-making, ignoring disruptor concerns | Leadership only engages defensively when forced | Leadership attempts to anticipate disruptor concerns | Leadership has ongoing relationships of mutual respect, openness, and trust with disruptors |





## 4. Be Boldly Inclusive



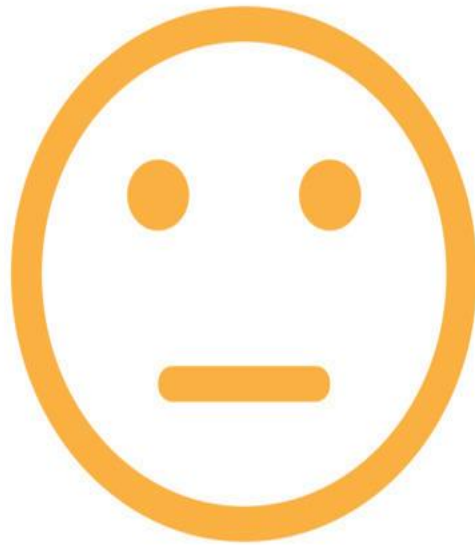
# 5. Embrace Feedback Mechanisms



Excellent



Good



Medium



Poor




Very Bad

# 6. Be Patient and Keep Going





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6. Be Patient and Keep Going
5. Embrace Feedback Mechanisms
4. Be Boldly Inclusive
3. Don't F&# Your Disruptors
2. Create the Conditions for Good  
Lawyering
1. Focus on Purpose



# Connecting with CAMP

**[www.coloradomentoring.org](http://www.coloradomentoring.org)**

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