



Portfolio Media, Inc. | 111 West 19th Street, 5th floor | New York, NY 10011 | www.law360.com
Phone: +1 646 783 7100 | Fax: +1 646 783 7161 | customerservice@law360.com

New Mid-Law Managing Partners Talk Leadership

By **Emma Cueto**

Law360 (July 3, 2023, 2:15 PM EDT) -- The first half of 2023 saw many Mid-Law firms announce new top leaders, including several announcing their first female firm head. Law360 Pulse spoke to some of these new leaders about their approach to leadership and their recommendations to younger attorneys looking to take on leadership roles of their own.

During the first six months of the year, half a dozen firms **named new managing partners**, including Day Pitney LLP, Wick Phillips Gould & Martin LLP and Shumaker Loop & Kendrick LLP. In addition, Moses Singer LLP named its **first-ever CEO**, Rebecca Goodman-Stephens, who will lead its operational and administrative side.

Many of the attorneys taking on top roles this year have been the first woman to head up their respective firms. Law360 Pulse spoke to four such women about their new roles.



Heather Kliebenstein

Merchant & Gould

Intellectual property firm Merchant & Gould PC **announced in March** it had named Heather Kliebenstein, who had been with the firm for two decades, as the managing director. She replaced Christopher J. Leonard, who joined Shook Hardy & Bacon LLP as senior counsel in February.

Her philosophy of leadership:

We want management to run smoothly so the rest of the firm can focus on client service. As a result, our more modern and collaborative approach to leadership at Merchant & Gould is to be prepared, consistent, transparent and inclusive. Our leadership team asks a lot of questions, listens to the answers and strives to understand various points of view as we work through different projects. We communicate our work to the rest of our firm frequently and clearly so that everyone is enrolled in

our future.

What has surprised her most about the job:

The most surprising challenge is that even though our management team runs the firm and is deeply involved with our attorneys and staff, it can be a challenge to truly know what is going on in each practice group, support group and office location.

Our practice group leaders, office managing partners and support team directors stepped in and stepped up to help gather information and report to the firm's executive committee so that we can have an eye on the various pieces of our business. It is truly a group effort and keeps us all connected.

Her advice for attorneys interested in leadership:

I recommend that attorneys looking to get involved in leadership roles should spend time learning about managing people and the business of law. The practice of law is entirely different from the management of a law firm. Different skills are needed, and those skills are not taught, unfortunately, in law school. This education can come through reading industry books, attending business leadership groups, listening to speakers, and talking with senior leaders in your firm and other firms.



Jennifer B. Compton

Shumaker

Jennifer B. Compton was announced as the next chair of Shumaker Loop & Kendrick LLP **in January** after previously serving as vice chair of the management committee and managing partner of the firm's Sarasota, Florida, office. She was the first female head of the firm — which has offices in Florida, Ohio, North Carolina and South Carolina — in its 98-year history.

Her philosophy of leadership:

My philosophy of leadership is definitely servant leadership. The people I view as the most successful leaders are not accepting the role out of ego, but instead out of the desire to serve. I firmly believe that my role is service to my firm.

With that perspective, I approach the role first seeking to understand. That involves a lot of listening and seeking input. Once I believe I have a solid knowledge base, I then reach out to others whose judgment I respect and bounce my thoughts off them. After I come to a belief as to the appropriate course of action, I then work to build consensus with the necessary stakeholders. I have found that

we can accomplish more and in less time by spending time to build consensus.

Finally, when we execute, I think it is imperative that we do what we say we are going to do. Credibility is easily lost if people do not believe you say what you mean and mean what you say.

What has most surprised her about the role:

The most surprising thing about my new role since taking it on is how much of the role is about listening. As lawyers, we tend to be problem solvers. When I took on the chair role, I assumed it would involve a lot of problem-solving within our firm. However, a lot of the time people just want to be heard and are not looking for a fix to a problem. I have to stop myself from offering up potential solutions and instead just listen. That can be a challenge!

Her advice for attorneys interested in leadership:

My advice for attorneys looking to take on leadership roles is to do it. Leading is a privilege and if you are asked to serve, you should.

I recommend the book "The Four Agreements" by Don Miguel Ruiz. It is based on ancient Toltec wisdom, and I have found it invaluable in bettering myself as a leader. The four agreements are simple but effective: Be impeccable with your word; don't take anything personally; don't make assumptions; and always do your best. If you live by those four agreements as a leader, I think you will find people trust you, which therefore allows you to accomplish more in your role. I so believe in the message of this book that I try to reread it each year and just handed it out to the 270 members of the Shumaker team that attended our firm retreat.



Laurie Carr Mims

Keker Van Nest

San Francisco trial firm Keker Van Nest & Peters LLP announced in March that previous chair Steven K. Taylor, who had led since 2013, had stepped down and Laurie Carr Mims had been **named as the new head of the firm**. Mims had previously held several leadership roles at the firm, including being a member of the management and compensation committees, chairing the attorney development and training committee, and running the summer associate program.

Her philosophy of leadership:

Make sure everyone has an opportunity to be heard on issues that they care about. Let others contribute their thoughts before weighing in as a leader. We have a culture, both for our casework

and our internal management and governance, of working in small nonhierarchical teams of people with diverse experience and backgrounds. Being a leader on a team like this means really getting to know the people you are working with, and building trust and credibility. I try to lead with integrity, and to be approachable, accessible and open to feedback.

What has most surprised her about the role:

It's been eye-opening how much work and planning goes on behind the scenes to make a litigation firm run. As attorneys, we often overlook the invaluable contributions that our professional staff bring to our firm, and ultimately, to our clients' success. This position has made me even more grateful for the work and dedication of our professional staff. I think many skills I've honed as a litigator — effective time management, adaptability, resilience, keeping a positive mindset — are serving me well now. My priorities are ever-changing and maintaining strategic focus is crucial.

Her advice for attorneys interested in leadership:

Volunteer for a group, committee or initiative that really interests you, even if it's a smaller, less visible group or committee. Come to meetings eager to participate, actively listen and amplify voices that may be marginalized in the room. After you're comfortable with your role, offer to take a leadership position for the group.

Starting or building on an interest you have — whether it's sustainability, [diversity, equity and inclusion], hiring, or an affinity group — is a good way to distinguish yourself as someone dedicated and passionate about that initiative. Use that leadership experience as a springboard to seek opportunities to broaden your impact through service in larger committees or in more senior firm governance roles.

Leadership is a journey, and it takes time and effort to develop the emotional intelligence, strategic mindset and communication skills to be effective.



Kristen Behrens

Dilworth Paxson

Kristen Behrens joined Dilworth Paxson LLP's managing partner Patrick Northen, who had led the firm solo since 2018, as **co-managing partner** in June. Behrens, a trust and estates attorney, has been with the Philadelphia-based firm for seven years.

Her philosophy of leadership:

I believe that effective leaders empower their partners by recognizing strengths and expertise. Providing our attorneys and staff with a level of autonomy and growth opportunity will hopefully foster a sense of ownership and motivation. Communication is vital, and I am open and transparent. I very much support and encourage feedback to address concerns or issues promptly.

As leaders, our work ethic should set high standards, inspire trust, and create a positive and productive work environment within the firm. Dilworth Paxson's culture is one of our greatest strengths, and it is essential to maintain. This role will require continuous learning and adaptability on a daily basis.

What has most surprised her about the role:

The increase in multitasking on a daily — aka minute-by-minute — basis has unquestionably risen dramatically. Focusing on administrative tasks, strategic planning, business development and employee management, in addition to maintaining my existing client relationships and legal work, has certainly been a test of balance.

Her advice for attorneys interested in leadership:

First and foremost, demonstrate strong work ethic, initiative and commitment. If there is a leadership opportunity, or a chance to merely "be in the room," take it. Attorneys should take those opportunities to show initiative, take on additional responsibility and demonstrate their willingness to be a contributor to the firm. We should all be open to embracing a growth mindset, which means being open to learning, embracing challenges and viewing setbacks as a reset or growth opportunity. One thing I have observed is that effective leaders have dedication, an ability to self-reflect and a commitment to ongoing personal development.

--Editing by Jay Jackson Jr. and Lakshna Mehta.

All Content © 2003-2023, Portfolio Media, Inc.