

For new managing partner, job in beginning a balancing act

Description

On April 1, commercial litigator Howard A. Merten took the helm as managing partner for Providence-based Partridge, Snow & Hahn.

The veteran attorney comes to the role after joining Partridge Snow as a lateral in 2005 and serving on the firm's executive committee for 11 years. Prior to that, Merten practiced for 22 years at Vetter & White, a litigation boutique.

Even with his new responsibilities, however, Merten doesn't plan on hanging up his litigator's hat.

"I'm still trying to figure out how a practicing trial lawyer can balance everything with being a managing partner, but I know a lot of people do it," he says. "Although I'll have a reduced level of expectations in terms of billable hours and the like, I think it's important to keep practicing. It keeps you focused on the kinds of things that everyone you're supporting and managing is also working on."

Merten recently sat down with reporter Barry Bridges to discuss the varied aspects of managing his 51-attorney full-service firm.

Q. What do you see as some of the challenges of your new role?

A. In terms of what I do, it varies from day to day. We have a great staff; our director of administration has been here for over 20 years; and we have directors for functions such as HR, technology, marketing and client development. They do a lot of the daily work, and part of my job is oversight and direction. Keeping all of that moving forward is fun and challenging. One of the difficult things will be to get my head above all that and focus on strategy. I consider the main part of my job as supporting the partners and the lawyers, helping them to be successful.

Q. Is there a practice area that is ripe for growth?

A. Our approach is more global. As much as the legal world is changing, you really need to focus on lawyers. Clients focus on lawyers, and firms need to do the same. We obviously have some concentrations that we work on, and we look around to see if there are areas that we can take advantage of. ERISA is a very hot area, and we have one of the top practitioners in the state. Litigation has always been a strong suit of ours, and we are growing that in Boston.

Q. What is your approach to training new lawyers? Does it depend on the practice group?

A. Yes, and it depends on the level where they come in. For laterals, we have a fairly detailed outline for orientation and getting them into the mix of PS&H culture.

For newer attorneys, it can depend on the person and the year. We don't have a formal walk-through-the-different-departments kind of training, because we're not big enough and there's a limited value in it. In some areas it's easier to train, perhaps for transactional and trusts and estates lawyers. But for trial lawyers, we proactively search for opportunities for someone to get experience.

Q. *In a similar vein, what kinds of things do you do to retain talent?*

A. We have a pretty good history in terms of retention. Fundamentally, it's a function of giving people opportunities and treating them fairly. We can't compete with giant firms in compensation. But in terms of being a part of something, building something, and having that opportunity to build your own career, we offer substantial benefits.

Every partner and associate here does a personal marketing plan where you recount what you did last year and what you're doing in the next year. It's a helpful and unique process, and people understand the value of it and appreciate that the firm invests in that kind of thing.

Q. *What kind of marketing has been effective for the firm?*

A. The tools by which we market are of course changing, with social media and the different platforms. But I'm very old school as far as how marketing for lawyers works. It's still all about expertise, relationships and client service. It's meat-and-potatoes boring stuff, but it's actually what drives people to hire you, and it's what drives people to stay with you.

Our old tagline used to be "Closer to the issues." I always liked that because one of the things that this firm does almost religiously is commit to community involvement. In Rhode Island, I think that helps connect us to clients. It's much harder to do that in Massachusetts, where you have to figure out a different methodology.

Q. *How is the firm staying on top of cybersecurity?*

A. There are a couple of levels to the issue. There's the technology side, and we have our data stored in a secure offsite facility in the side of a mountain in western Massachusetts. On that level, it's expensive, but you can get it done.

The other challenge is getting staff and attorneys to pay attention. People involved in cyber ransoming and phishing don't try to attack the mountainside secure facility; they attack your people. Interestingly, according to some studies, lawyers are particularly susceptible to the risks because they think they're smarter than everybody and are naturally inquisitive.

Clients are also driving our efforts. We do a lot of work for banks, which are rolling out their own protocols. Complying with audits can be healthy for us because banks are far more sophisticated on these matters and drive us to better cybersecurity.

Q. *So what keeps a new managing partner up at night?*

A. Everything's keeping me up right now [laughs]. I assume I'll reach a point where I won't worry about so many things. But it's doing everything I can to make sure our partners are happy and have what they want. As managing partner you really start thinking harder about what the future of the firm is. The prognosticators and experts all say that the legal profession is going to be much different in five or 10 years when Watson is doing half our work.

Q. *Looking ahead a few years, what are the "big issues" for the firm?*

A. One thing is that we're trying to grow not only in Rhode Island but also in Massachusetts, where we now have about 20 lawyers in three offices. The challenge there is breaking into a market which is very competitive. We're not out to conquer Boston, but we are out to add to our presence, one excellent attorney at a time.

And technology is a huge challenge for the entire profession. We're establishing basic technology capabilities that we want everyone to master. While we're ahead of the curve, that curve is accelerating. Being competent is good, but I think it's a strategic imperative that you develop a culture that's welcoming and accepting of change, as opposed to begrudgingly doing it.

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