

How I Made Law Firm Managing Partner: 'Lean Forward and Continue to Adapt and Innovate in a Rapidly Changing Landscape,' Says Jim Lehman of Nelson Mullins

"To be a great law firm leader you need to understand what drives the strategy and economics of the firm."

By Tasha Norman

Jim Lehman, 55, Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough, Columbia, South Carolina.

Job Title: Managing partner of the firm.

College/advanced education and year of graduation: University of South Carolina School of Law, J.D., magna cum laude (1990), Bob Jones University, B.A., magna cum laude (1987).

How long have you been at the firm? And were you promoted to your current position or hired at your current position? I joined Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough in 1995, left to serve as senior vice president, general counsel, corporate secretary, and chief ethics officer of Safety-Kleen Corp. in 2001–03. Returned to Nelson Mullins in 2003 and was elected managing partner in 2012.

Did you work at another firm before joining your present firm?

I was an associate at Davis Polk & Wardwell (1991–95). Principal areas of practice included professional liability, antitrust, securities and financial institutions litigation, and white-collar defense.

In your role, what's your day-to-day routine? I generally divide my days into three segments focused primarily on clients and partners: In the morning, I spend time responding to emails and issues and initiating actions for others; I spend most of my day with in-person and online meetings focused on more strategic topics and initiatives and then spend the final part of the day responding to others, correspondence, and various presentations as needed to address issues of the day and expectations for the next day.

What aspects of your role do you think are most critical and relied on by firm leaders? Setting



Courtesy photo

James K. Lehman

strategic direction with a longer-term focus; navigating the current disruptive business and legal environment; working on growth initiatives (both organic within the firm and outside the firm such as lateral recruiting); and ensuring that we are proactively addressing the needs of our clients with appropriate know-how and resources.

What's the best piece of advice you could give to someone who would like to advance to

leadership? Understand the business of a law firm. To be a great lawyer you need to be able to solve your clients' business and legal challenges, but to be a great law firm leader you need to understand what drives the strategy and economics of the firm.

Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to your leadership role? Inside the law firm, former managing partner and current executive committee member David Dukes not only mentored me as a lawyer, but taught me the nuances of firm management and cultural considerations to lead lawyers. Outside the law firm, when I left for three years to be general counsel of Safety-Kleen Corp. when it was in bankruptcy, the CEO at the time, Ron Rittenmeyer, taught me how to run a business.

If you had a chance to advise or mentor your younger self (at any stage). What advice would you give to yourself? Understand and solve for the client's business objective rather than getting wrapped around the axle of legal issues.

How do you keep your team motivated during these unprecedented times? We have been in an almost Churchillian environment these last two years, and leaders have had no choice but to put their heads down

and forge ahead, even when we can't see the future. I try to be an example and set the tone of discipline, perseverance, and resilience. I remind my colleagues that our clients need us more than ever during challenging times, and our 1,600 families are counting on us to continue to lead.

What are the threats to your business and how are you handling them? In addition to competitive threats within the legal profession, I believe the legal profession is facing more external threats than ever before from nonlegal companies competing in traditional legal spaces. My approach has been to lean forward into the disruption and continue to adapt and innovate in a rapidly changing landscape.

What's an accomplishment that you are proudest of? I have been very fortunate to be part of great causes that have made differences in our communities—from helping develop a Transitions Homeless Recovery Center in downtown Columbia to chairing the board of trustees of Claflin University, a historically Black college in Orangeburg, South Carolina. However, I hope my greatest accomplishment has been to create a culture within the firm that has younger lawyers demonstrating



that same desire to provide community and pro bono service.

What's one core message you received from your mentors? Investing in and preserving firm culture is more important than any strategy.

What is the one behavior or trait that you have seen derail more leaders' careers? Becoming so engrossed in their work that they lose perspective on other important things in life and then regretting having worked too much.

Is there anything else you'd like to add about your journey to becoming a member of the firm's leadership team? Leading a partnership is one of the most challenging and rewarding tasks I've ever undertaken. Serving as a leader in a professional services firm is quite different from leading a corporation; I engage our clients and owners (partners) on a daily basis.