

12.27.18

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New Pa. Firm Leaders Broke With the Status Quo in 2018

Each year brings another round of baton-passing at Pennsylvania law firms, as one generation of leaders hands over its responsibilities to the next. In 2018, several local firms broke with tradition—at least their own—for leadership in the name of strategy and succession planning.

The new chairman at Weber Gallagher Simpson Stapleton Fires & Newby, for example, hails from outside the firm's hometown of Philadelphia for the first time after a transition this year.

Andrew Indeck, who took over for 10-year chairman Paul Fires [in July](#), is based in Bedminster, New Jersey. Fires said he had hoped for several years that Indeck would express interest in leading the firm.

During Fires' tenure as chairman, Weber Gallagher went from about 70 lawyers to 110, and from seven offices to 10, he said. That footprint growth is reflected in the firm's choice of its new Bedminster-based chairman, Fires and Indeck said.

"That was certainly something people questioned initially ... in terms of the leader of the firm being outside Philadelphia," Indeck said. However, the board of directors and management committee have previously included non-Philadelphia lawyers, he noted. "It reflects the reality that the firm is not entirely Philadelphia-centric anymore," he said.

At Philadelphia-based Dilworth Paxson, one chief operating officer was replaced by two co-COOs. Partners Patrick Northen and Brett Wiltsey took on the job together so they could each continue practicing law. Northen was already the firm's general counsel, since 2014, and said those responsibilities will now fall under the umbrella of the co-COOs' duties.

They took over for Jim Hennessey, who has been Dilworth Paxson's COO for eight years. The change, [announced in June](#), was in the works for well over a year.

How the co-COOs split their responsibilities will be determined case-by-case, they said. But both lawyers were "adamant" about being able to continue their practices, Northen said. Dilworth Paxson CEO Ajay Raju noted that the firm did away with the managing partner role several years ago, and the COO job is comparable to that in some ways.

Also embracing a multiperson leadership structure, Philadelphia's Kleinbard [announced in January](#) its plan for replacing its three managing partners over the course of three years. In 2018, that plan called for Michael Frattone to take David Hyman's place as a managing partner.

Mary Beth Gray is set to take Robert Bodzin's managing partner position at the beginning of 2019, and Matthew Haverstick is scheduled to become the third managing partner a year after that, replacing Howard Davis.

The 31-lawyer firm has operated with three managing partners for about three decades, and it had four before that, said Davis, who will have served two decades as a managing partner by the time he steps down. He said it allows the lawyers to maintain an active practice while leading the firm.

Even though that seemed to be working generally, Kleinbard hired a consultant a few years ago to help with leadership planning, Davis said. The firm decided it needed the managing partners to have staggered terms, so the firm would not experience too much change at once.

McNees Wallace & Nurick also stuck to a three-member leadership team when David Kleppinger stepped down from his post as chairman [in October](#), after 12 years in the role. Kleppinger and two other lawyers,

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Brian Jackson and Donna Kreiser, made up the firm's management committee.

With Kleppinger stepping down, Jackson moved into the chairman role and Mark Van Blargan, who had previously served on the management committee from 2006 to 2015, became the third committee member.

That means there is no new blood on McNees' latest iteration of its management committee. But the firm is already in preparations to change that.

Van Blargan has already said that he does not intend to serve a long term, Jackson noted, and he expects a younger lawyer to step up. To prepare them for that, the firm has elevated younger partners into practice leadership positions, Kleppinger said.

But not everyone finds the multi-leader structure to be successful.

Pittsburgh-based Am Law 200 firm Eckert Seamans Cherin & Mellott removed Dorothy Davis as a co-CEO of the firm, leaving Tim Hudak as the sole CEO. The firm said Hudak would take over management of day-to-day operations, but Davis would continue as a member of the executive committee, board of directors and compensation committee.

Executive committee chairman John McGinley [said in a May interview](#) that the firm had conducted a survey of its lawyers, who number more than 300, to get their thoughts on the two-CEO leadership model.

"Most of the lawyers here prefer a CEO model of one voice," he said. "They thought the duality created ambiguity."

Additionally, sources told The Legal in May, Davis as CEO made changes without communicating to others in the firm, including changes to practice group leadership that were not received well universally.

In a large firm, "you're always going to have a certain number of people that don't like the way a manager functions," McGinley said.

Am Law 100 firm Blank Rome, however, [announced an upcoming return](#) to a two-person leadership team, which will become official at the start of 2019.

Alan Hoffman has served double duty as the firm's chairman and managing partner since 2011. But come January, he will hand off the managing partner title to litigation department chairman Grant Palmer, and continue on as chairman.

Hoffman said the firm is large enough now that it needs two leaders splitting those roles. And, he said, it needs a younger partner to help steer the ship.

"I'm now a senior partner, and I think decisions that are made by the CEO of a law firm need to be made about what's going to happen at the firm over the next 15 or 20 years, and that person should be here over that period of time to implement those changes," Hoffman said.

Also in Big Law, Philadelphia-based Duane Morris saw a leadership change take effect in 2018, which they had [made public in 2017](#).

Matthew Taylor, who had been the firm's vice chair and trial practice chief, became chairman after John Soroko stepped down in January. Thomas Servodidio became vice chair as well.