

New Year's Resolutions for 2016 ...

Leaders Say: Embrace Change, Enhance Diversity, Write (real) Letters & Help Others

Perhaps you've witnessed this scene play out over the course of a few weeks: You go to the gym on January 2nd and find it crowded with dozens of people putting into action their New Year's resolution: "This is the year I'll lose my pot belly and finally get in shape!" The next week you see fewer people there, as several resolutions have already died a relatively fast death. By the end of the month, the gym returns to its late-December normal capacity with "The Resolvers" back to their sedentary ways.

Let's face it. It's tough to follow through with New Year's resolutions. Of course, it doesn't make it easy to see them manifest if they're too lofty to begin with. As we did for an *Of Counsel* article that ran in January 2013, we recently asked some law firm leaders to offer resolutions for their firm—some important but *attainable* ones—for the new year. We received a wide range of pledges, some of them general in nature and some very targeted.

One wide-angle theme that emerged, not surprisingly, among several of these leaders was the need to welcome change. That's what Ben Adams, CEO of Memphis-based Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz, told us three years ago. "My resolution for the coming year," he said in December 2012, "... is to help our firm navigate the changing legal environment we face in this economy and with our clients."

And, when asked recently, Adams says he's maintaining the same vow for 2016: "I want to continue to be an agent of change in this demanding landscape we

work in, and I resolve to do a better job of connecting my colleagues to the necessity for change."

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*John Langan, managing partner,
Barclay Damon*

But Adams also has a more specific intention. "We've got to do a better job of inculcating our various tools such as alternative pricing and project management into the daily fabric of our delivery system," he says. "We also want to grow strategically in Texas and Florida so we can better serve those markets."

Rolling with or in Front of the Curve

Like Adams, John Langan says staying current or ahead of today's legal and management trends is one of his resolutions. As managing partner of Barclay Damon, he knows all about change as last year his Syracuse-based firm Hiscock & Barclay merged with Buffalo's Damon Morey, transforming the partnership and, naturally, increasing its size and reach. He hopes to impart the need for innovation to his new partners while reinforcing that idea with his long-time colleagues. He'll do that later this

month by videoconference in his annual state-of-the-firm address.

“What I’m going to say to the group is that we should continue to demonstrate acceptance of change,” Langan says. “We’re better than any firm I’ve ever seen at doing new things, being open to them.”

He also says he wants to make the most of the recent combination. “I resolve to make 2016 about bringing to fruition some of the synergies we gained with the merger,” he says. “For example, we doubled our health care practice, making it just under a \$10 million practice. So watching that [practice] come together and grow successfully would be an example of one of the synergies.”

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*Matthew Feeney,
chairman, Snell & Wilmer*

Langan says the firm increased its number of women and lawyers of color with the merger, which enhances Barclay Damon’s “robust” diversity and inclusion effort. “We want to seize on the momentum of 2015 regarding diversity and inclusion,” he says. “I’ll be doing what I can to make sure we see through a lot of our work in this area.”

Three years ago, John Murphy, firm chair of Kansas City’s Shook, Hardy & Bacon said he, too, considered innovation to be the key to success. That’s still the case in 2016. “We have resolved to continue to be even more creative,” he says. “I really believe that the firms that embrace change are the ones that are going to be successful as we move into the future. I’m talking about using technology in

an ever-expanding role, getting off the billable-hour system, getting away from the traditional law firm leverage model and using more contract, staff, and temporary attorneys, particularly in litigation matters so that you just don’t have that typical leverage pyramid.”

This year will be the last of Murphy’s 15 years of leading Shook Hardy, as he vowed at the beginning of his third five-year term that it would be his final one. And, he has a very clear goal to achieve during his last year at the helm. The firm recently opened offices in Philadelphia, Seattle, Denver, and Chicago, and he wants to ensure that they flourish. “I’m resolved to continue to grow those offices consistent with the strategy we have in place and also to make sure that they’re all fully integrated within the firm,” he says.

In New York, the Phillips Nizer partnership will “recommit” their allegiance to serving clients’ needs, according to managing partner Marc Landis. “That means it’s not just winning the lawsuit, but it’s also ensuring that they have a successful business resolution or making sure that the transaction that has closed gets them to where they need to be,” he says.

For 2013, Landis’s predecessor, Perry Galler, who’s now the firm’s administrative partner, told *Of Counsel* he hoped to help bring in more female partners. Landis says the firm has achieved that goal. “We’ve absolutely become more diverse over the last few years; that’s something we’re going to continue to do,” Landis says. “That’s beyond a resolution. That’s a fact. It’s part of what our firm culture is about.”

Making and Enriching Connections

At Snell & Wilmer, headquartered in Phoenix, chairman Matthew Feeney says he wants his partnership to reach out and communicate more often and at a deeper level—both externally and internally. “My resolution for every lawyer in this firm is

to deepen their personal and professional relationships with clients, with the communities they live and work in and with folks within the firm,” he says. “If we do that and do it well, the firm will continue to be successful.”

What’s more, Feeney says, sometimes good, old-fashioned communication serves as the best method, even in this digital age of ours. “I’m a big believer in people in the firm sending hand-written notes to clients and folks in the community because it’s a real differentiator,” he says, adding that new lawyers receive stationery when they arrive at the firm and that they’re expected to use it. “It doesn’t take much time or energy to bang off an e-mail. But when people get something that’s handwritten it really makes an impression. It’s the personal touch that makes a difference. If you build good relationships with your clients, not only will they stay with you, but it also makes your practice that much more enjoyable.”

Players in the consultancy arena agree that strengthening relationships is vital for any law practice and should be high on lawyers’ 2016 resolution lists. When asked what he recommends attorneys resolve to do this year, Wayne, PA-based consultant Robert Denney doesn’t hesitate. “They should say, ‘In our relationships with our clients and ourselves, we will be problem-solvers, not problem-makers,’” he says, adding that, in 2016, law firm leaders should also make security a top priority.

Another consultant, Tom Clay of Newton, PA-based Altman Weil, has a blunt resolution for law firm leaders, something he tells them in one-on-one meetings and public forums as well. “They need to resolve to quit managing and start leading,” he says. “Many of them are so caught up in a quagmire of management, often with that others could do and do well. Many of them are not doing real leadership, like addressing how they’re going to change the way the lawyers work and how to move forward to confront the really hard issues.”

Clay says a clear goal, albeit one that may surprise or even shock leaders, would be to reduce by 75 percent the amount of time they spend on compensation, which he says is often an agonizing time-drain. “Most of the time what they’re doing is listening to bitches and gripes about underperformers on one hand and trying to decide how much to give the super performers on the other,” he says.

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The problem of underperformers is evident if not obvious, Clay says: Get rid of them. “I’m not talking about the wholesale firing of people, but we just have too many lawyers and this overcapacity issue is a real problem,” he adds.

But perhaps the most important resolution Clay thinks managing partners and law firm chairs ought to embark on involves speed. “Whatever strategy they’ve devised to make the firm better and more competitive, they’ve got to double the speed with which they implement it. Right now, it’s so slow and ponderous.”

An Oath to Live By

Finally, Andrew Giacomini, managing partner of San Francisco’s Hanson Bridgett, offers a resolution that many would consider to be a guiding principle by which all attorneys should practice their craft. He plans to deliver it as part of his address at the firm’s annual meeting. “I say a few words every year,” he says, “and the words I’ll say this year will be something like this: ‘Look

for ways to help people every day, at every chance you get. Of course, we help our clients every day. But you can help also the other lawyers. You can help the secretaries.” He

pauses and adds with a dry wit, “I’ll also tell them, ‘Make sure you get enough sleep.’” ■

—Steven T. Taylor

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