

Law Firm Leaders: Katten's Noah Heller

By **Xiumei Dong**

Law360 (June 3, 2020, 6:54 PM EDT) -- Noah Heller started his job as Katten Muchin Rosenman LLP's first chief executive officer in 2013, when the firm split its leadership structure by dividing the national managing partner role into the CEO and chairman roles.

For his role, Heller steers the strategic and operational direction of the roughly 700-lawyer firm, which has 13 offices in the United States, London and Shanghai.

Here, Heller talked to Law360 about his firm's strategy for having two leaders, the challenges of managing a large law firm in today's environment, and his goals for the law firm.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Why did the firm switch from one firmwide managing partner to two leaders — a chairman and a CEO? What are your core responsibilities as the firm's CEO?

I've been the CEO of Katten since June 2013 as part of a broader plan for leadership succession. The firm decided to move to a two-leader model from one managing partner role that we had had for our history up until then.

We have a chairman and chief executive officer, and we work together a tremendous amount. But the easiest way to describe the differences is that my role is primarily more of an inward-facing role, whereas the chairman is more of a strategic and client-facing role. My role is more focused on managing our practice groups, ensuring that our practice groups are working well with one another, ensuring that the firm develops its talent and implements standards of excellence.

There are many benefits about having a two-leader model, but one of the ones that I think is most important is that it makes the succession of people into roles a little bit smoother. Let's say you're having a succession of one of the roles, you have some continuity already built in with the person who is continuing.



Noah Heller
Katten
CEO

What are some of the challenges of managing a large law firm in today's legal industry?

The competition in the legal industry has gotten really intense over the last number of years. The economic crisis and the health crisis caused by COVID-19 makes it that much more challenging and that much more competitive than it ever was before.

Making sure that the law firm is differentiated in a way that resonates with our clients is important for us. The law and BigLaw have become so sophisticated and so specialized that to truly be a full-service law firm takes multiples of 700 lawyers. So, to be successful at the 700-lawyer size, it's very important for us to know what we are, and to know the type of work, the types of clients and the types of engagements that fit us really well so that we can differentiate ourselves in such a competitive marketplace.

Other than the cost-cutting measures Law360 has reported, is there anything else the firm is doing in response to the coronavirus pandemic?

The uncertainties of this crisis are enough to really scare anyone. In reality, the most productive thing that we can do, now that we've determined those steps that will ensure the firm's continued strength, is to be a catalyst for conversations about how we can do things better than we ever had before, given all of the lessons that we are all learning on a regular basis from the remote work aspects of this, the benefits of technology.

I spend a tremendous amount of time with my team and with my practice group leaders, trying to challenge and encourage them to think not about the severity of the challenges that are in front of us but to focus a lot more on the unbelievable opportunities that will emerge from such a disruptive event.

How has your firm changed over the past decade?

For the financial results that we've been able to generate and the growth that we've been able to generate, it is relatively a young firm.

In its infancy, the firm was driven by pure individual entrepreneurialism. In our earliest days, we weren't well known, and there were many more firms that were in existence for far longer than us with more well-known brands, so we had to fight for the work that we had to do based on our individual desire to be the best lawyers and to do the best work that we can do.

Over the last 15 and even probably five or 10 years, we've done a nice job at channeling that individualism and that individual drive to be much more collaborative. But we're driven by many of the same characteristics that drove the firm in its early stages, the willingness to go the extra mile, to make sure that we are staying close to our clients.

What is your approach to attracting and retaining that talent?

For me and for the people who spend a lot of time recruiting, I think it's a strength of the relationship. It's a reputation in the market. It's a willingness not only to be out there selling, but also a willingness to integrate into the firm and truly operate within our partnership.

We certainly are willing to go into the market and bring in great laterals. We do it probably at a little bit

of a slower pace than some because we really like our firm, we really like our culture. We really like one another.

When we recruit we are at our best, we're recruiting on the basis of developing personal relationships with our targets, and with those candidates coming to ... develop relationships with us, but having had an opportunity to get to know enough people around the firm that they see that there's a good fit.

What are your goals for the law firm over the next five years?

The key for us in terms of growth is to maintain the right amount of depth of expertise and breadth of specialty to continue to compete for that work.

We don't grow with a size in mind. We know that to continue providing the highest level of client service that we always have provided requires greater amounts of specific expertise, and that greater amount of specific expertise requires additional lawyers. Our growth will be focused on those lawyers and those practices that allow us to continue to be best in class in the areas we practice in.

If you could have lunch with any lawyer, alive or dead, who would it be?

I have just been watching with my 12-year-old daughter and 10-year-old son Michael Jordan, "The Last Dance." It brought back into my mind a guy who I have great admiration for: David Stern, the ex-commissioner of the NBA who just passed away recently. [Because of] his vision and the way that he was able to grow the game, and his ability to see how the game could adapt and become the global powerhouse that it is and he's probably just got some great stories.

So, the answer I've got for you is David Stern.

--Editing by Alanna Weissman.