

Innovative Managing Partner: C. Lash Harrison

By Nick Brown

Law360, New York (June 21, 2010) -- More than three decades into a career founded on a gutsy risk, Ford & Harrison LLP's C. Lash Harrison has made his firm a labor law powerhouse thanks to his "12 C's of Law Firm Leadership" and his systemic focus on attorney development, earning him a place among Law360's Most Innovative Managing Partners.

Harrison, the firm's first and only managing partner, wasn't sure where he'd land in 1978 when he and 13 colleagues left Fisher & Phillips LLP to strike out on their own.

"It was arrogance of youth," Harrison quipped.

But lofty or not, the move paid off, creating an entity that now pays the bills for 180 attorneys in 18 U.S. offices.



C. Lash Harrison

Clients credit the firm's success in large part to Harrison's dedication to cultivating a strong work force.

"He really cares about the guys he recruited," said client Michael Campbell, a former colleague and one of Ford & Harrison's original 14.

Headquartered in Atlanta, Ford & Harrison has no billable-hour requirement for first-year associates, allaying clients' anxieties about paying hefty prices for associate training.

Knowing there's no cost involved makes both clients and lawyers more willing to give associates important roles, providing them a better overall learning experience.

"If you want to draw a crowd, have free drinks and food," Harrison said. "Certainly if clients know they're not being charged for certain services, associates will get to know how things need to be done."

Harrison said the rash of attrition among big-name firms mainly affected attorneys unable to originate new business.

“Teaching that skill is much easier on the front end than trying to hire a lateral and teach it on the back end,” he told Law360.

Harrison recently instituted a secondment program for first-years, allowing them to spend six to 12 weeks in-house with a corporate client. Results have been positive so far, with clients showing more willingness to rely on younger lawyers, Harrison said.

“If a client calls me and I'm not there, they'll ask for the associate,” he said. “That's an opportunity the associate wouldn't otherwise have, and a call the client would otherwise be reluctant to make.”

Harrison's commitment to employee development has surfaced in creative, unexpected settings, clients say.

Even the firm's pro bono work has become a substantive, meaningful skill-building tool, according to Elizabeth Blake, senior vice president for advocacy, government affairs and general counsel for Habitat for Humanity International.

Harrison in 2007 posed an international pro bono partnership with Habitat whereby the firm hand-picks associates to take on significant labor and employment responsibilities for Habitat, preparing and sending bills as if to a paid client.

The caveat: Habitat never makes the payments, Blake said.

“It teaches their younger attorneys how to handle a serious, billable outside client, and meanwhile, we get to act like we're a paid client and make various requests and get great services,” said Blake, also a longtime personal friend to Harrison.

The upshot, Blake said, is that Harrison has turned pro bono work into a valued, prestigious and competitive aspect of the Ford & Harrison culture.

“The lawyers that work with us are picked because they're good, not because they have extra time on their hands,” she said.

Harrison has also institutionalized a mentor program to help minority attorneys transition and prosper.

“We all need mentors or champions,” Harrison said. “We want to make sure we don't overlook the fact that minority attorneys sometimes aren't comfortable reaching out and trying to establish those relationships. It can be hard, because in most firms in America still, most partners are white.”

But the firm's individualized development programs aren't limited to new attorneys.

The Leadership Academy, launched in 2008, meets four times a year, pairing high-potential junior partners with senior partner mentors and outside coaches.

Harrison personally attends each meeting, presenting selections of his celebrated “12 C's of Law Firm Leadership”: commitment, challenge, control, communication, cohesiveness, collaboration, creativity, courage, catalyst, clients, constancy and continuity.

"I came up with the first three and they were all C's, and then I guess I wanted to make the rest of them C's," Harrison said. "It took a lot of thumbing through the dictionary."

The Leadership Academy aims to teach junior partners with strong legal skills how to augment their arsenals with leadership skills, a factor that separates good lawyers from highly successful ones, Harrison said.

Even at senior-most levels, attorneys at Ford & Harrison are eligible for mentor initiatives.

LEAP, an integrated two-year program unveiled in 2009, pairs limited equity partners with full equity partners, and includes monthly personal coaching, group mentoring sessions and competency training aimed at helping limited partners reach full partner status.

"These are 12-to-15-year lawyers that have developed legal skills but maybe don't know how to originate business," Harrison said. "It takes people that are right on the cusp, and helps them get over that hump."

LEAP — which Harrison says is not an acronym for anything — helps ensure the long-term growth of the firm, a result that, if achieved, makes up for any money lost or spent on the careful, individualized mentoring programs offered to each and every attorney.

"All these things are simply investments for the long term," he said. "By that I mean, you hope it will allow people to be more successful, and if they are, the firm will be, too."

Harrison said too many firms have tried to hire the best and brightest, assuming they'll teach themselves the job. As a result, lawyers unable to create business have found themselves expendable, and the collegiality that long characterized the legal industry has disappeared, he said.

"No one is born a true leader, and no one comes out of law school knowing exactly how to be a great lawyer," he explained.

Longtime client Kenneth Cutshaw, executive vice president and chief legal officer of Cajun Operating Co., which runs the international fried chicken chain Church's Chicken, said Harrison has found rare balance as a business-minded manager who hasn't abandoned his dedication to the team he put in place.

"He's almost a shy personality," Cutshaw said. "But, you know, it doesn't impact his ability to go out and make hard decisions."

Cutshaw called it "strange," in this era, to see someone remain in charge as long as Harrison has.

"But he does it with energy and vigor," Cutshaw said.

Harrison said most of his ideas come suddenly, and not all of them pan out.

"Most of this stuff comes to me like a flash of lightning in the middle of the night," he said. "If you don't remember next morning, it's probably not a great idea. So these ideas are things I not only remembered the next morning, but have continued to remember."

His unique approach could have been seen as risky, clients acknowledged.

The resources his programs demand might have scared off many managers, and Harrison's willingness to pursue them makes him a visionary, according to Campbell, Delta Air Lines Inc.'s executive vice president for human resources and labor relations.

"The firm didn't go from 14 to 180," said Campbell, who spent nearly 20 years at Ford & Harrison before leaving in 1997. "It went from 14 to 35, then 35 to 70, and so forth. In my mind, Lash has a vision of how to get to one plateau, then prepare to move to the next one."

Campbell characterized Harrison as a savvy observer of the industry.

"Lash was looking around corners when other firms were doing what they always do," he said.

Indeed, while Ford & Harrison has largely bucked the trend of high attrition rates at law firms, innovation should not be defined as fighting or setting trends, but by an ability to identify them, Harrison said.

"I don't think it does any good to fight the trends," he said. "Just find out which way they're moving and stay ahead instead of catching up."

Harrison said he's merely planning for the future, expressing doubt that the prerecession, hire-heavy legal business model will ever return.

"The industry's going through more of a revolution than an evolution," he said.

But clients say his innovations are about more than economic survival, noting that programs like the first-year secondment, Leadership Academy and LEAP are no more than two years old.

After 32 years at the helm and into his golden years, clients say, Harrison could have used the recession as a chance to slink off into the sunset, and bid adieu to the nationally respected firm he's built.

Instead, he keeps on building.

"People that set out a vision, it's never all about them," Blake said. "And he doesn't behave as if it is. He behaves as if it's about the future he's creating for the people he works with."

Cutshaw said Harrison wants to leave a legacy.

"Obviously, his name's on the masthead, but it's about more than that," he said. "He wants to make sure that what he's spent 30 years of his life building is going to be around for a lot longer."

Campbell said Harrison enjoys the work and cares about the clients.

"It's what makes him get up in the morning," Campbell said. "Besides, he doesn't play golf."

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