

How I Made Managing Partner: 'My Colleagues Admired My Collaborative Approach,' Says Bob Bodian of Mintz

'I would tell my younger self to pursue what interests you and above all else, remain true to who you are. Be kind to others, don't be petty, and don't sweat the small stuff. And aim high.'

By Tasha Norman

Robert I. Bodian, 66, Mintz, New York.

Title/Practice area: Firm Managing Partner/Litigation.

Law school and year of graduation: Stanford Law School, 1980.

How long have you been at the firm? Nearly 22 years.

How long were you a partner at the firm before being promoted to managing partner? I joined Mintz in 2000 and just a year later was named managing partner of the firm's New York office. I was elected managing partner of the firm in 2009, during the heart of the Great Recession. I recently was appointed by my partners to a fifth three-year term as managing partner, which will end in May 2024.

Share with us your legal career journey? I began my career as an associate at Simpson Thacher in New York immediately after graduating law school. As a fifth-year associate, in 1985, I started a small law firm in Manhattan which became known as Bodian & Eames. In 1998, after

the untimely passing of my partner David Eames, from pancreatic cancer, I wrapped Bodian & Eames into mid-sized firm O'Sullivan, Graev & Karabell. In 2000, Mintz opened the doors of its New York office with just four attorneys, including two partners from O'Sullivan. I was approached by my former partners to join Mintz and saw an opportunity to grow and build something from the ground up with the support of a highly regarded large firm. I joined Mintz in March, 2000, a few months after the office was opened. O'Sullivan merged into O'Melveny several years later, and to this day I remain friendly with some of my former O'Sullivan colleagues and we sometimes have the chance to work together.

What was the biggest surprise you experienced in becoming managing partner? It took me a while to realize that other people took me a bit more seriously than perhaps I took myself. So I had to be careful in how I expressed myself and I tried to be a bit less irreverent than I had



Robert I. Bodian

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been before. But that didn't last too long. Also, I realized that when I sent an email requesting a call or meeting I needed to explain up top the purpose of the call or meeting. I had no idea, but apparently just asking to connect, absent an explanation, created some level of consternation and anxiety. So I needed to account for that. Finally, one of the very pleasant surprises was that my partners truly appreciated my efforts and, despite common wisdom, the job was not in fact "thankless." I get thanked a fair

amount, which was both surprising and appreciated.

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you managing partner? I think that because we were in the midst of a recession and had just missed our budgeted profit by a fair amount, some clueless rube was needed to step into the role, and I fit the bill. Or maybe it was that a sense of humor was needed to get us through. Or just plain good looks. Really hard to say. I suppose there could have been other factors as well. I believe that my colleagues admired my collaborative approach and felt that I set a good example in acting in a way that put the firm ahead of individual interests. I had built a reasonably strong practice, and worked with many of my partners, so I had some credibility on that score as well. And I had plenty of confidence, whether merited or otherwise. So the firm took a considerable risk in making me the first head of a major Boston law firm to be based in New York. On another level, I was appointed managing partner during a time when law firms, and many other businesses, were suffering across the board. By transitioning the firm's central leadership away from its headquarters, Mintz sent a message to clients and its staff that it was resilient and focused on expanding its national reach. In the first few years, I focused on maintaining stability and not rocking the boat, but then I got to work positioning Mintz as the fast-growing and forward-thinking firm that it is regarded as today. The pandemic has brought on a similar

level of economic and social disruption as the 2008-2009 recession, and in many ways, has reiterated the importance of staying steady, calm, open-minded, nimble and proactive as a law firm, and as a leader.

What is one mistake you witness leaders making more frequently than others? I like to say: "Don't take small problems and turn them into big problems." Nothing is perfect, and there always will be problems, particularly in managing an AmLaw 100 firm and all that entails. But sometimes I see, in our efforts to try to solve all problems, taking a problem that really could be given short shrift and turning that into something more tangible. I also believe that sometimes we try to be political, which I do not believe is the best way to go. Do what you think is right, and if that works out, great. If not, at least you did what you thought was right. Once a leader of a firm gets political, it is hard to have the respect of your partners.

What's the key to successful business development in your opinion? At the base of all successful business development is a demonstrated ability to consistently produce high-quality work and add value for clients. Without this bedrock of a strong legal practice, any business development efforts will be futile. In addition, successful client engagements stem from genuinely caring for existing/potential clients and investing time to understand the complexities of clients' businesses and industries. I think there is a certain level of risk tolerance that also benefits clients, and as a firm, Mintz is not afraid to fail



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or be unsuccessful. Finally, it helps to have a personality/firm culture that is attractive to clients and relationship leaders with the confidence to place the right people in the right places and follow up as needed. Ultimately, we want to develop business that is a strong fit for our capabilities and our people, which results in a mutually beneficial partnership. Oh, and it's 24/7. Without that level of dedication and commitment, business development doesn't happen.

Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to your leadership role? I wouldn't say there has been one person to help propel me to leadership in particular but rather many who have provided mentorship, friendship and lessons along the way. While at Simpson Thacher, I was lucky enough to work under Conrad Harper, the first black partner at a major Wall Street firm, Barry Ostrager, who is now a Justice in the New York State Supreme Court's Commercial Division, as well as Melvyn Cantor, who passed away in 2011 after a remarkable 29-year career as a litigator at Simpson. They all trusted me

with a great deal of responsibility, even allowing me to try a case as a young associate. My partner, David Eames, was a brilliant attorney and helped me to see around corners and formulating creative solutions. He also taught me the grammatical difference between “was” and “were” and when to use each. Retired Mintz Partner Ken Novack, who served as managing partner before me, has played a key role in my development as a leader. He was a terrific advocate for me and helped to ensure a smooth transition by instilling confidence in my abilities amongst firm leaders, and has served as a trusted adviser ever since. Finally, I would say my mom had a lot of influence. She always thought everything I did was great, so I figured I would try to meet her at least partway there. Sadly, she died in 1987, so she has not been able to share in much of my success. But she laid the foundation.

What’s the best piece of advice you could give a partner who wants to make it to firm leadership?

- My first piece of advice would be not to give up your practice. I have maintained a vigorous litigation practice throughout my time as managing partner and have found this to be really important for my career and perspective as a leader. In addition to your practice, put in time to get to know your partners and listen to their concerns.
- Then, I would encourage partners to show leadership and

build their own personal brands by engaging in behaviors that align with what is in the best interest of the law firm, whether that be in practice, business development, community involvement or otherwise. Volunteer for roles that interest you and through these efforts, your partners will witness your interest in and capacity for leadership.

- Collaboration is a hallmark of our firm, and as such, I would also encourage partners to bring their colleagues into matters and networking opportunities. Understand that as a leader, people don’t work for you, but rather you are all working toward a common goal. Show good judgment, kindness, fairness and the rest will come naturally.

If you had a chance to advise your younger self, what advice would you give to yourself? I remember preparing for my first oral argument as a young associate at Simpson. I asked the relationship partner for advice, he fixed me with a steely look and said: “Don’t F... up.” That was great advice. As a father, I have had the opportunity to give my children advice, and I would tell my younger self something similar: Pursue what interests you and above all else, remain true to who you are. I would add, be kind to others, don’t be petty, and don’t sweat the small stuff. And aim high.

What initiatives are you working on at the firm that you are most proud of? Several years ago, we decided to revamp the firm’s origination credit, breaking with longstanding practice throughout the industry. Our new system, in which no partner gets 100 percent of origination credit, has had a big impact on collaboration and also gives young and diverse attorneys more incentive to drive new business.

Last year, we doubled down on our commitment to addressing racism and injustice in the United States, as well as increasing diversity and inclusion at the firm. Some of the actions we have taken include setting a firm goal of increasing the number of Black attorneys by 50% by June 2022; appointing Narges Kakalia as our first-ever director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion; and undertaking greater social reform work on a pro bono basis.

A few years ago, the firm established its Client Service University (CSU), which more than 100 of our partners have now gone through. We believe that a service mentality can be taught, and through outside speakers and activities, CSU educates our attorneys on how to provide the highest level of client service.

All of these efforts surround the creation and continuation of a culture of collaboration and inclusion. As managing partner, each new initiative I draw up is focused on growing and nurturing an environment in which people enjoy coming to work each day and feel respected.