

How I Made Office Managing Partner: 'It Is Critical to Develop a Team Environment,' Says Eileen Brown of Thompson Coburn

By ALM Staff

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Eileen Brown, 56, Managing Partner at Thompson Coburn, Washington, D.C.

Practice area: Transportation & Project Finance

Law school and year of graduation: Catholic University of America Columbus School of Law, 1993

The following has been edited for style.

How long have you been at the firm?

I joined the firm in 1998.

What year were you promoted/elected to your current role?

I became a partner in 2004, and I began serving as managing partner of the D.C. office in January 2020. I was honored to succeed my friend Margie Krumholz in taking this role and continuing our office's strong tradition of women in leadership.

Were you a partner at another firm before joining your present firm? If so, which one, how long were you there and when did you leave?

I was actually in-house as an attorney adviser with the U.S. Maritime Administration (MarAd) immediately before joining Thompson Coburn in 1998. And, for almost five years before that, I was assistant counsel at International Registries, Inc. (IRI) at the time it served as the corporate and maritime administrator for the Republics of Liberia and the Marshall Islands. Interestingly, I had never really wanted to work for a law firm and was not looking to make a move at the time. While at MarAd, I had been working



Courtesy photo

Eileen Brown of Thompson Coburn.

on a transaction with an attorney at Thompson Coburn. We really hit it off, and when the opportunity to presented itself, I decided to take the leap. It was the best decision I have ever made.

How would you describe your career trajectory (was it organic or an active pursuit)?

I would say it was organic in that my pre-firm experiences working in house and for the federal government gave me depth and insights that are really valuable today in my role as outside counsel. My practice has a focus on asset-based finance, equipment leasing and government guaranteed finance. I advise financial institutions on vessel and aircraft

finance and counsel vessel operating companies on regulatory and financial matters. I also routinely serve as special maritime counsel to other law firms representing clients who are making investments in companies with vessel operating subsidiaries. I have also had the privilege of serving as outside counsel to the Export-Import Bank of the United States on certain corporate, small project and sovereign financing transactions. My experience with MarAd and IRI provided me with a great foundation in the maritime space, of course, but also the international aspects of my practice.

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in electing/promoting you to your current role? Was it your performance on a specific case? A personality trait? Making connections with the right people?

I think it was the relationships that I built in the office and throughout the firm over 20+ years. Throughout my time at the firm, I have always tried to actively participate on firm committees and take advantage of every opportunity to work on projects involving cross-office collaboration. I also have been active with our women's initiative programming and have served as a mentor. As a result, I believe that I have developed excellent working relationships with partners in the D.C. office as well as throughout the firm. I think firm leadership recognized that I could be a strong advocate for our attorneys and clients alike and was equipped to make decisions needed at the management level to support growth and progress.

What unique challenges do you face as it relates to your role?

Our D.C. office is somewhat unique within Thompson Coburn as the clients we serve are national and international in scope. The key practices based in our D.C. office, including energy, transportation and project finance, international trade, public transit and lobbying and policy, have a broad footprint. We're proud of that and the recognition that our Firm has for providing excellent service in each of these industries, but we do still want to make sure we're visible in the D.C.

market. So I would say a challenge is just making sure that people in the D.C. market are familiar with the firm so we can continue to attract top-tier talent.

What's the best piece of advice you give to someone who wants to rise up the ranks to lead an office?

I would stress the importance of developing relationships with your partners and colleagues. While you also need to be able to anticipate changes in the business climate and the practice of law, it is critical to develop a team environment to be able to get everyone moving in the same direction. If you're clear about your goals and have an excellent team, you can achieve outstanding results for clients and the firm. It is also key to have an open door. Listen to problems and new ideas, and be willing to adapt to move things to the next level.

Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to your current role?

It is hard to say who had the greatest influence in my career because I have had so many amazing mentors both in and outside of the practice of law. As I started my first job, I remember my father telling me to look for ways to make yourself indispensable. This was excellent advice because in doing so, you become known as reliable. Margie Krumholz, prior office managing partner at Thompson Coburn, was one of my greatest mentors. I had the privilege of learning from her not only the technical aspects of the law practice, but also her leadership skills and practical advice. As a young associate, she told me that it was important to establish convey a parity with respect to the other counsel involved in a deal. A simple way to do this is to call everyone by their first names. Margie also often suggested before reacting to sleep on it. In today's fast-paced world, it is not always easy to hit the pause button but often yields better results.

Another former partner and mentor of mine, Roy Bowman, taught me his rule of showing our support staff the utmost respect. We couldn't do what we do without them, and, unfortunately, this is too often overlooked by many attorneys. Finally, a client

of mine who was also a seasoned former diplomat showed me the importance of recognizing the contributions of everyone on a team, no matter what their role. Most people try really hard to do a good job, and expressions of appreciation for that effort are never out of order.

How do you utilize technology to benefit the firm/practice and/or business development?

I am a member of the firm's AI task force, which we established this year. We're looking at how to best educate our team internally and increase AI literacy and the use of tools to improve our workflow and assist with routine administrative matters. More importantly, however, we are evaluating how to best leverage AI capabilities to improve client service, increase engagement, deliver practical legal solutions and proactive advice.

Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give to your younger self and/or what would you do differently?

Be yourself. As a young lawyer, I tried to have two personalities – one at work and the “real” me. While playing lawyer, I tried to hide the fact that I was also a wife and mother of two great kids. Likewise, while with my family, I tried to hide the “lawyer” me. Trust me. This was exhausting, self-imposed and completely unnecessary. As a young partner, I remember trying to schedule a call with a longtime client on the West Coast and mentioning a conflict with a kid pick-up. His response was, I didn't know you had children, tell me about them, and he proceeded to do the same. And, when my now 22-year-old son was in third grade, I coached their basketball team. I was working on a transaction and told the client that I would be offline for two hours while coaching basketball. This opened up a whole new dialogue with the client, who regaled me with stories of having coached his own son years ago. The bottom line is that everyone has a

life outside of the law, and it is OK to share that side of your life with your clients and colleagues. It often leads to richer and more fulfilling relationships.

Do you have a prediction on how the legal industry will evolve over the next several years?

I mentioned AI earlier, and I do think that's something we'll continue to see have an impact. I'd expect a continued rise in the adoption of automation and AI technologies within the legal field for routine tasks such as document review, contract drafting, and research. I think more generally, the legal technology sector will continue to grow as clients seek more efficiency as well as better transparency and cost predictability. And I believe that with businesses operating on a more global scale than ever before, there will be growing demand for cross-border legal experience. Corporate attorneys increasingly will need to navigate complex international regulatory frameworks and collaborate with legal professionals from different jurisdictions.

Please share with us any firm or industry initiatives that you are working on as well as the impact you hope to achieve.

As a firm, we are working on ways to ensure that our associates continue to develop professionally in the post-COVID hybrid working model. While we cannot replicate the in-person training that I would have received 25 years ago, that model is not necessary. We don't need to turn back the clock to ensure that associates get the support and training needed to be successful. What we do need to do is meet them where they are, ask questions, listen and look for opportunities to help younger lawyers advance in their careers. This will inure to the benefit of our clients by ensuring that we have an engaged, committed team ready to efficiently address client problems and the Firm by developing the next generation of partners and leaders.