

PUBLICATION

What I Learned About Leadership This Summer

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Each year, our Baker Women team makes a point to engage with our summer associates, particularly getting them involved in some of our signature projects, such as our leadership issue of *Strive*. For this article, we tasked four summer associates – Allison Kennington, Anna Gowen, Megan Wong, and Samuel Brodigan – to interview four Firm leaders and then summarize what they personally learned about leadership from those interviews.

We interviewed four leaders at Baker Donelson to learn more about their perspectives on leadership. Each leader we interviewed – Tim Lupinacci, Christy Tosh Crider, Marcus Maples, and Mark Baugh – articulated distinct qualities they believe are essential for guiding their teams and fostering a positive work environment. Together, these leaders exemplify a commitment to resilience, empathy, and dedicated service to their teams and the Firm as a whole.

Interview Questions

What is your leadership role in the Firm?

Tim Lupinacci: Chairman and chief executive officer.

Christy Crider: Chair of the Health Care Litigation Group, chair of Baker Women, and member of the Firm's Board of Directors.

Marcus Maples: Chair of the Commercial Litigation Group.

Mark Baugh: Chief diversity and Inclusion officer and member of the Firm's Board of Directors.

What do you believe are the most important qualities or traits of an effective leader? How do you embody those traits in your own leadership?

Tim: "An effective leader has COURAGE: Curious, Ot-front, Unshakable, Resilient, Adaptable, Growth Mindset, Encourage." Tim has embodied these traits in his own leadership by placing the best interests of the Firm above his own to take the next right step. Even in times of uncertainty, he relies on his team to build momentum and belief in the Firm.

Christy: "These characteristics come to mind when asked the most important qualities of an effective leader: *enthusiasm* and joy for the position you are in, *service* to your team members, *trustworthiness* and transparency, and *work ethic*." Christy embodies these traits by spreading enthusiasm about team members' careers and about the mission of the team, reaching new levels with her team by serving them, giving and receiving constructive feedback as investments, and doing the job that needs to be done – not just the job that she was specifically asked to do.

Marcus: "You must be passionate about what you are doing and care about the people you are representing; care about the mission of your group. If you do not care, you run the risk of everything eventually becoming mind-numbing labor."

Mark: "The most important thing for a leader to do is lead. It's important to get input from everyone on your team, but at the end of the day, it's up to you to make a decision, even if it is not the one everyone wants. It is also important to respect people when you assign them with a task." Mark's rule is that he will never delegate a task to someone else that he is not willing to do himself. "You must do that for people to feel valued. You also want to be careful and not back into decisions; go into decisions or new challenges headfirst and with a plan."

What were some challenges or setbacks you faced in your career and how did you overcome them?

Tim: At the beginning of his legal career, Tim struggled with "figuring out how to be a lawyer," which included asking for help or maintaining professionalism. He emphasized the importance of learning to apologize, seeking feedback, and applying the feedback to grow. Shortly before the pandemic, Tim stepped into leadership during a period of economic uncertainty. Similarly, he regularly met with Firm leaders and solicited feedback to take the next right step.

Christy: Two challenges that Christy had to overcome in her career are balance and failure. Christy recognizes that when you mix a legal career with spirituality, exercise, friends and family, and all that might make someone fulfilled, it is very difficult to balance. Christy wrote an article called "*The Secret to Finding 'Balance'*" that illustrates her struggles with balance and how she was able to overcome them. For failure, Christy abides by a quote from Betsy Broun, the longest-serving female director in the history of the Smithsonian Institute, who said, "If you hit the bullseye every time, you have the target way too close." Christy reminds herself that every time she fails, she is shooting for something big.

Marcus: "Being bold is a challenge." Marcus is always impressed when leaders make bold decisions, something he strives for as a leader. "Leaders also must understand they are not always going to be popular – it is not always a popularity contest – it can be, but you must be able to make tough decisions which can be unpopular with others. You must be comfortable with your decisions and challenge yourself to make those unpopular decisions."

Mark: In 1992, Mark graduated from law school during a recession and had a difficult time landing a job which led to him clerking part-time at a state court of appeals. Mark then joined a small firm in Nashville in an unpaid position and eventually, ended up working for another small firm that was understaffed. However, this last experience taught him how to be a litigator because there were not enough attorneys to handle the amount of litigation cases. From these challenges, Mark learned that no matter how bad things are, you need to find opportunities and grab onto them.

How do you build a positive and inclusive work culture?

Tim: "The legal profession is demanding; it requires discipline and prioritization from everyone in the Firm." Although it will always be a work in progress, Tim is committed to building a positive and inclusive culture. He is currently focused on creating alternate career paths for associates that continue to promote advancement yet help reduce burnout for young attorneys.

Christy: As a leader, Christy uses a framework that utilizes symbols to help get to know her team as individuals and understand what motivates each of them. The heart symbol represents what each team member is passionate about outside of work, and knowing what part of their careers they most enjoy. This helps Christy look for ways to support her team members in those particular areas. The star symbol represents how different team members like to be recognized, allowing Christy to recognize each team member in a way that motivates them personally. Lastly, the tree symbol embodies the short- and long-term goals of each team member, which helps Christy plug her team members into opportunities to help meet their goals. By recognizing that each team member's views of these symbols are very different, Christy is able to promote an individualized, inclusive, and positive work culture.

Marcus: "Know your people and their needs; what is important to them and what is not? Know how people see themselves. Instead of leading in the direction we want them to go, lead them where they want to go."

Mark: "The most important part is being inclusive." To Mark, a positive culture is an outcome, but being inclusive is how you get there. "Inclusion encompasses more than gender, race, sexual orientation, or other identities that are commonly discussed." To Mark, inclusion is about accepting different ideas and perspectives, even unpopular ones. "Inclusion is also about breaking down divisions between different professionals by including non-attorneys, business professionals, paralegals, etc., in decision-making. You must understand what other people think of success, and embrace their idea of success, to help them reach their goals. Otherwise, people will not feel included if you do not respect their goals or understand their measures of success."

What is one piece of advice you would give to people, particularly members of groups that are traditionally under-represented in Firm leadership positions, about seeking out those leadership positions?

Tim: "If you are interested in leadership, meet with a Firm leader and inquire about any leadership opportunities. These positions may range from leading periodic meetings at your office, serving as a practice group leader, or joining the leadership and administrative team. As you continuously strive to become a better 'impact leader,' these leadership opportunities will also grow."

Christy: "Get your head around the group that you are hoping to lead and identify which of their goals you are best suited to advance. Then, set up a meeting with the leader of that group and ask them what you can do to help with those specific goals. Leadership is about service and demonstrating your commitment to serve. The surest way to demonstrate your potential as a future leader is by moving goals forward before you have an official position as a leader."

Marcus: "Start small and get involved early. Always operate within the mindset that you belong and do not let anyone make you believe otherwise; own it. Identify yourself as someone who can be very effective in practice, but who can also advance business objectives."

Mark: "Be prepared for the ask and for any role that you think you want. Know what the job entails and make sure you are willing to doing it. You need to know not just what it means for you, but what it means for everyone else on your team. Do not take a role simply because you think it would look good on your resume. The most important thing to realize is that if you want to be a leader, the measure of success is how the people who work under you are doing. If you are the only one succeeding, then you may not be doing your job."

Takeaways

Despite varying definitions of what an effective leader and a successful legal career look like, these Firm leaders all emphasized the impact of people-oriented leadership; they view each employee at the Firm as a valued partner. By embracing each member's individuality and aspirations, these leaders strive to build an inclusive and positive work culture. These leaders recognize that growing as an "impact leader" involves consistently challenging themselves. They stay proactive, consistently setting goals and working towards achieving them. There is an element of boldness to all this; leaders must be comfortable taking risks and making tough decisions but understanding that they are not going to "hit the bullseye" every time, is part of the process.

Here at Baker Donelson, leadership and service go hand-in-hand. All the leaders we interviewed operate under that ideal, providing a strong sense of direction and support to their teammates and staff. Whether through

creating alternative paths within the Firm, following a framework of inclusion, or supporting their team members' passions, these leaders promote the success of the individual, the team, and the entire Firm.