

Innovative Managing Partner: Baker Donelson's Ben Adams

By **Scott Flaherty**

Law360, New York (October 01, 2012, 6:38 PM ET) -- For Ben C. Adams of Baker Donelson Bearman Caldwell & Berkowitz PC, managing his firm all starts with listening, giving straight answers and simply treating employees with respect, an approach that has distinguished him as one of America's Most Innovative Managing Partners.

With great people skills and a deep commitment to transparency, Adams, who took over as Baker Donelson's chairman and CEO in 2003, has guided the firm through an expansion that has added several new offices and brought its number of attorneys to about 630 from a little more than 250 less than a decade ago, landing him on Law360's list of America's Most Innovative Managing Partners.

The firm's recent success comes in large part from having a deft hand at the tiller, said William S. Painter, Baker Donelson's chief strategic planning officer.

"Ben has probably got the finest touch of any law firm leader that I've ever seen," said Painter, who has worked closely alongside Adams in recent years.

Painter went on to say that Adams' approach to leadership starts with the attention he pays to those under him and the "visceral caring" he shows for the people — shareholders, associates and support staff alike — who fill the firm's 18 offices and carry out its work. One way that caring manifests itself, in a practical sense, is that Adams, who is based in Memphis, Tenn., is often on the road, making the rounds at different offices.

On one recent trip to Johnson City, Tenn., for instance, Adams said he had lunch with the office's partners one day, dinner with the associates later that night and breakfast with the support staff the next morning. He made a similar trip to Baker Donelson's Knoxville, Tenn., office shortly after.

Beyond more formal meeting and luncheons with staff, Adams makes a point to spend some of his time on each trip casually stopping by people's desks, catching up on what's going on in their lives, both at work and outside it.

"He also just wants to wander the halls," Painter explained.

For his part, Adams said the time he spends with attorneys and other employees during office visits helps him learn what's working and what isn't, information that he soaks in and often relies on when it comes time to make management decisions or consider the firm's future.

"It helps me understand my firm that much more deeply," Adams said.

Taking the time to listen and develop relationships with employees has the added benefit of making his job a bit easier, Adams said, explaining that it helps motivate people to take charge when the firm needs something.

"If you treat people with respect," he said, "you get great returns."

The visits, and Adams' approach in general, also have a deep impact on morale that has helped Baker Donelson win a host of awards as a top place to work and keeps people "genuinely happy to be here," said Jerry Stauffer, the firm's president and chief operating officer.

"Ben lifts people up," Stauffer said. "When he's in the office, people say they can feel it."

Stauffer, who takes on many of the more behind-the-scenes leadership tasks at Baker Donelson, said that having Adams out front as the visible leader makes a great deal of sense, given his personality. Adams' style, he said, fosters a sense of teamwork and "inspires confidence and loyalty" among the firm's staff.

"Ben is the ultimate cheerleader," Stauffer said. "He is, just by nature, relentlessly optimistic."

Stauffer echoed thoughts also expressed by Painter, saying that Adams displays a brand of caring for the people working at the firm that exceeds the ordinary.

One example Stauffer pointed to is the firm's recognition of employees who have reached milestones for spending a certain number of years with the firm. When the Chattanooga, Tenn., office recently held its awards luncheon to recognize long-standing employees, Adams happened to be on vacation. But Stauffer said that didn't stop the Baker Donelson CEO from bringing a list of cellphone numbers with him "to the beach" and personally calling all the recognized staff members to congratulate them.

Both Stauffer and Painter said that another aspect of Adams' personality — his penchant for giving honest, but compassionate answers to almost any question — contributes to a culture of transparency that has permeated throughout the firm, and which is part of the reason Baker Donelson has done so well under Adams' leadership.

"He combines directness with compassion," said Stauffer. "As a result, we have a lot of transparency."

Painter said Adams has the ability to "deliver tough news in a very human way," adding that his approach is "straight shooting — if you ask him, you'll get the answer."

Adams explained that the transparency and his style are aimed in part at creating a positive work environment, something he said is especially important in a field like corporate law, in which the demands placed on attorneys and other staff, in terms of time and energy, can often be daunting.

“I just don't believe that you motivate professionals negatively,” Adams said. “I don't see any reason, since what we do is so demanding, to make the work environment negative.”

The focus on transparency displays itself in a number of ways, including a periodic “Ask Ben” video series, in which Adams answers questions about the firm's future plans and shares information with staff about Baker Donelson's financial standing.

Under Adams, the firm has also adopted what it calls a “clients first” initiative, which was designed to establish a common set of client service standards that everyone in the firm, across offices and job titles, would follow. Part of that initiative is the “daily docket,” a small group meeting held everyday in each office, during which employees of all levels discuss recent firm successes, as well as shortcomings or individual concerns, all with the goal of sharing information that can help everyone work together to better serve clients.

“It's a way for the staff to be on equal footing with the lawyers, and it permanently improves that relationship,” Adams said of the daily docket.

Adams also takes pains to have a hand in other initiatives — everything from the firm's pro bono practice to diversity training to community service days — that aren't pointed directly at serving Baker Donelson's corporate clients. But while he likes to keep tabs on these types of programs, in part because they are important to many of the firm's staffers, Adams is not an overbearing presence, according to Stauffer.

“Ben wants to be directly involved in anything that involves the people,” Stauffer said, adding that Adams isn't the type to walk into a meeting and take over the room. Instead, he's more likely to sit in the back listening, only chiming in when appropriate.

“He's a real servant leader,” Stauffer said.

Adams said most of the various firm initiatives — even those that don't relate specifically to client service — are focused on creating a real sense of cooperation and collaboration between attorneys and other staff, which, in turn, allows the entire operation to run more smoothly.

“Delivery of legal services in a large firm requires teamwork,” Adams said. “If there is a breakdown anywhere, it creates problems.”

Or as Painter put it, “We're only as good as the person that's answering the phone.”

The formal initiatives Adams has put in place, combined with his personality and the example he has set from the top, have all defined and strengthened a firm culture that Painter said he believes has allowed Baker Donelson to expand to new locations through mergers and to attract top attorneys to join as lateral partners.

“We can show that culture, manifested by Ben, and what it will mean to them,” Painter said.

The culture and Adams' leadership has led to a firm that has “dynamically and dramatically” changed over the past decade or so, the same years that saw other large law firms and businesses contract with the economic downturn, Painter said. He added that the real trick, one which Adams has mastered, is to make sure everyone is on board with the firm's direction.

“If we're going to change, we've got to change the people,” Painter said. “And that takes someone with people skills.”

Adams, for his part, said there is an inherent challenge in growing and changing at such a rapid pace, and the expansion makes it necessary to “work hard at keeping the firm glued together.”

A strong firm culture that emphasizes transparency and keeps people motivated has provided that glue, and, as Painter and Stauffer both said, the openness all starts at the top with Adams, a chairman and CEO who wants to hear what people have to say and doesn't hesitate to give direct answers to honest questions.

It's an approach to leadership that stems directly from Adams' personality.

“What you see is what you get,” Adams said. “I don't hide the ball, it's just not my nature.”

--Editing by Andrew Park.

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