



Insights from Nixon Peabody's CEO & Managing Partner on Leadership

This month we interview Stephen Zubiago, the new CEO and Managing Partner of Nixon Peabody. He took over as CEO and Managing Partner on February 1 and shares his observations on his first six months in the role. Steve has been with Nixon Peabody since 1999 and has practiced law since 1992.

Tell us about your practice and your management roles prior to becoming the CEO & Managing Partner. How did those prepare you for the Managing Partner role?

I am a Health Care lawyer focused on corporate and regulatory issues. In addition to practicing law, I have held just about every management position in our Firm including Office Managing Partner, Practice Group Leader, Department Head, member of our Policy Committee and now the CEO & Managing Partner. Before being selected for the Managing Partner role, I was the Department Head of our Business & Finance Department, one of three Departments in our Firm. Serving as Department Head, helped me get a keen understanding of the Firm and the business and get to know the partners in the Business & Finance Department, as well as partners throughout the Firm. I visited the Firm's offices regularly (pre-COVID) and had strong relationships with lawyers and professional staff across the country, which has helped tremendously as I have taken on a firmwide role. In addition, I worked closely with my predecessor, Andrew Glincher, so I gained good perspective on the scope of the Managing Partner role.

Your transition to the role was shorter than most. How did that go?

Our Policy Committee reached their conclusion in late January. Our official transition was 9 days later, on February 1st. While Andrew and I had flexibility to determine the timing of our transition, we decided to do it quickly, in large part because February 1st is the beginning of our fiscal year. We worked closely together to make the transition work.

While the speed of the transition might not be ideal in normal circumstances, it worked well because I was already heavily engaged in firm management. Our leadership selection process was open and transparent so there were no surprises for the partners. Andrew has been a trusted advisor and resource and continues to be engaged on firm projects.

The biggest challenge has been to quickly transition my practice and client responsibilities to other lawyers. The CEO & Managing Partner role at our Firm is essentially a full-time job, I expect to spend 95% of my time on the Firm. The transition process has gone smoothly because I had strong teams working with me on most client relationships and we have great lawyers who were willing to step in. Our clients have been very supportive of the Firm and of me – many are friends as well as clients.

You have now been in the CEO & Managing Partner role for 6 months. What did you find most helpful in your first months in the job?

First, I had long term relationships with many of our lawyers across the Firm. That allowed me to hit the ground running. Second, our professional staff is tremendous. I had a hunch that they were good, but as I have had the opportunity to work more closely with them I have found them to be proactive and forward thinking, in addition to doing a great job on the day-to-day. Third is the support from my fellow Managing Partners at other firms. I have had the opportunity to speak with 10-15 Managing Partners over the last 6 months and they have been generous with their time, advice, insights, and strategy. It is so helpful to get advice from people experienced in this role and be able to bounce ideas off colleagues. These conversations have been gratifying, and I attribute that in part to the fact that we are part of a profession which helps people be collaborative and share their experiences.

The law firm leaders I spoke with shared their experiences on how to determine strategy and how to figure out what's best for the firm strategically, how to balance time between internal and external responsibilities, including how much time they spend with their partners, mentoring and developing their colleagues, working with firm clients, and putting out fires. And we talked about diversity, equity and inclusion priorities, and how hard firms are working to advance these issues in their firms and the profession, which reinforced my resolve to continue to prioritize DE&I initiatives at our Firm.

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You took on your role at a time when the legal industry and the firm was working remotely. Were there any silver linings of that?

There were some positives of the timing of the transition. I was able to “meet” (via Zoom) with all of our partners in offices/practices groups, as well as meet with our associates, counsel and staff colleagues all within the first two months of stepping into this new role. Had I traveled for those meetings it might have taken six months or more. It was helpful to hear what was on people’s minds early on. Not surprisingly the hot topics included our vision for flexible work as well as our plan to return to the office, associate compensation and retention, and our plans for the direction of the Firm overall. We also had some fun in these meetings. Our DC colleagues enjoy cooking and baking and participated in an annual cook-off in pre-pandemic days. I was able to share the tradition of zeppole with them, an Italian pastry eaten on St. Joseph’s Day, which happened to be the day of our meeting.

I have now started to travel to our offices and meet in person again, which has been terrific. I have had dinners with partners in six different cities so far, with more to come.

What are the key responsibilities of the CEO & Managing Partner role at Nixon Peabody? How do you plan to allocate your time among those responsibilities?

My priorities include: growing our business; strengthening relationships with clients; attracting, developing, and retaining top talent; and leading the strategic plan for the Firm.

I have a detailed business plan, aligned with our strategic plan, which focuses on 4 key points - Firm, People, Clients, and the Communities we serve. I intend to spend 40% of my time on Firm, 30% on People, 20% on Clients, and 5% on Communities. Of course we have other firm resources dedicated to each of these as well. The last 5% of my time is spent on partner compensation, which is such an important part of firm management.

What surprised you most about the CEO & Managing Partner role?

As the CEO of an international law firm, it is knowing when to get involved in the pressing social justice issues around the globe. This aspect of the role was new to me and it became apparent that this was a necessary role for the CEO & Managing Partner, both for people in the Firm and for our clients. We need to balance when it is important to make a statement and when it may not be appropriate for us to make a public statement. For example, with the advent of violence against Asian Americans, we felt it was critically important to take a stand. The internal response we received from our staff was validating.

What is your vision for Nixon Peabody? What are your top priorities?

Our top priorities are to ensure that our clients are getting high quality legal services, to improve our Firm’s depth – we are competing at a high level and doing complex deals and we need top talent to do that, to strengthen our relationships with our existing clients and develop new clients, and to increase the diversity and inclusion of our team at every level - leadership, lawyers and employees.

We expect that remote work will be part of the future in the post-pandemic environment. As a result, we are also focusing on how to maintain what we believe is our special culture at Nixon Peabody. We saw the good points of our culture come through in the remote work environment and need to keep the culture strong.

Any final tips for our readers who may be new leaders?

Yes. First, stay authentic and true to yourself. Second, don’t let the job overwhelm you. Break it down into parts and let your team handle the parts while you set priorities. And last, transition from thinking like a lawyer to thinking like a CEO. You must think long term, and you can’t jump in and solve every issue yourself. You need to delegate to and rely on your team.

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