

Law Firm Leadership Is About Actions, Not Words



"Saying we treat people equally is not enough; we must make sure we practice it every day," Greenberg Traurig executive chairman Richard A. Rosenbaum writes.

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Big Law leaders can be spokespeople for social change, but it is not about them, nor using their pulpits to impose their views on or cancel the views of others. If Big Law leaders wish to speak, they must do so by clear and consistent actions which express their values over an extended period of time.

Actions, Not Words

As a good example, allyship and leadership are action words.

The soap box does not make you a leader. True allyship and leadership take place on the ground, making things happen by what you do, not what you yell.

It is no different in Big Law. Even within the guise of attempting to level the playing field, the vocal, calling attention to themselves, often overshadow those who are truly making a sustained difference. Impact is a result and not a loud crashing sound. There is a difference between creating awareness of important issues and creating headlines for one's self.

I am extremely fortunate to be part of a law firm that always understood this.

Action begets action. Actions are louder than words.

While Greenberg Traurig is today one of the largest firms in the world, we were born of three founders in South Florida, when the “elite” firms there were, for the most part, not hiring them because they were Jewish. Then these founders became the first to hire Cuban immigrants, like Cesar Alvarez. Years earlier, Cesar had left his homeland in Cuba and arrived in the United States by water with his parents and siblings. He eventually became head of the firm. Cesar, who I consider my brother, eventually thought I deserved to succeed him.

Many are not aware that I joined the legal profession after helping to support my family from the age of 17. Growing up in Queens, New York, I attended law school at night and did every kind of job I could before landing in business.

When the leader of a well-heeled New York firm interviewed me before graduation, he asked: “Son, I know you are first in your class, but why would anyone want to go to night school?” The look on his face while sitting in his beautiful Wall Street office will never leave my memory. I did not begin to explain that few *want* to go to night school. I could not wait to leave and have been motivated ever since. When I returned to my car outside a subway stop in Queens, it was gone, without theft insurance, a necessary expense savings at the time. A memorable day indeed! Fortunately, just like Cesar, I felt opportunity in crisis, even humor sometimes. This is when we turn to action and thrive, just like our founders.

This legacy serves us well, even today. Not in the sense of revenue or numbers of lawyers or offices but because of the difference it has allowed us to make in the lives of so many individuals, organizations and communities.

Change comes in a whisper wrapped up in action over decades, not under pressure over the last few months.

Many of our leaders have acted, and not only leveled the proverbial playing field, but created a different and more inclusive and equitable playing field, focusing on intentional diverse leadership to create a better, more just society that values the rights of individuals around the world. Our actions have succeeded in taking that vision and created an internal reality where more than 40% of the executive committee is made up of diverse leaders, including women, minorities, and LGBTQ+ individuals. In addition, on the practice and office management levels, about one-third of our leaders are also diverse. This did not happen overnight, and it did not happen because we were dealing with elitist guilt by shouting from the rooftops.

OK, so those are internal actions. How is the “quiet” approach helping communities?

In 2020 alone, our diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) team expanded its programming, launching several new initiatives within the Social, Racial and Economic Justice Action Plan, including:

- Committing \$5 million over five years to address causes and effects of systemic racism.
- Joining in creating the Law Firm Antiracism Alliance.
- Observing the Juneteenth holiday in the United States.
- Sponsoring GTDRIVES for Social Justice “Day of Giving,” raising funds for 30-plus social justice-focused nonprofits.

- Incentivizing and rewarding associates by considering billable hours for diversity- and inclusion-related work.
- Launching the Greenberg Traurig Justice Initiative involving attorneys firmwide to augment the firm's current justice-oriented pro bono work.
- Launching the Greenberg Traurig Listening Tour for business staff.

Partnering with clients, community organizations or vendors without fanfare is something that can be rather quiet, but is extremely successful and amplifies the impact of and investment in diversity and inclusion programming. Each initiative focuses on delivering measurable progress and creating new opportunities together.

Our recent collaborations include:

- Creating a diverse mentoring program with a multinational investment bank with a focus on professional leadership and development while also offering mentorship and support. The goals of this network are to increase attorney retention and help strengthen leadership succession and success, especially within diverse groups.
- Partnering with a client in the telecommunications sector this past summer to virtually mock-interview their diverse legal interns with the goal of helping them prepare for future interviews, especially as they start their careers.
- Sponsoring a 1L with a multinational convenience restaurant through the Move the Needle Diversity Pipeline Collective with Diversity Lab. The program focuses on increasing the pipeline of diverse junior lawyers and legal departments.

In 2020, at our firm, 170-plus attorneys received over 170 diversity awards. We hosted or participated in 150-plus events, and received or responded to 100-plus diversity-centric surveys. This level of participation is crucial to the success of any initiative.

Success at a law firm must be defined the same way for everyone. Saying we treat people equally is not enough; we must make sure we practice it every day. The change doesn't happen overnight, but law firm leaders must stop talking and take more action. Everyone needs to stand ready to do their part to write that next chapter.

It's not just about having a few minority or female partners so you can check the box. The vision is about having a plethora of people at the table representing diversity of race, gender, religious belief and sexual orientation. Each of these individuals brings a different perspective, experience, upbringing and background to solving problems, which is what creates better solutions for everyone.

Personal responsibility is critical for everyone. All lawyers should take personal responsibility for their careers and should not solely depend on their firm or any single institution to provide everything they need to develop their skills and personal relationships or grow their practices—even if the firm has a robust offering of training and other opportunities.

Philanthropy Screams Where Screaming Fails

We give more money to fund pro bono work and set up pro bono interns than any firm I've ever heard of. While more effective in helping real people, we didn't play the game to get on the "A" list published by media which only counts lawyer hours not money. We give more money to charitable causes than any other law firm in the world, yet never publish it or get credit for it anywhere. This was never about credit or public relations, it is about doing good; who we are.

Bob Traurig, one of our great founders, used to say, "Give until it feels good." We always remembered where we came from and what it feels like to be held down, perhaps unable to eat, obtain proper insurance or care, or get a proper education, because of your color, your religion, your gender, or who you love; not who you are and your merit.

Because of this, we give money to fund pro bono work and set up pro bono interns—efforts that don't always show up in media coverage. We give money to charitable causes not for the credit or public relations, but because it's about doing good—who we are.

Agents of Change

As law firm leaders, we were not elected to public office or appointed to preach about what others should do or think. We are running our own firm, a big enough challenge. And we are agents of change within a noble profession we chose because we are deeply committed to the rule of law and to the democratic process. We are not confused nor enticed by the court of public opinion.

We primarily fight hard for our clients and show respect to and trust in our lawyers and professional staff, from top to bottom, as a unified firm in all our offices and practices worldwide. We empower them to compete, deliver unique value, feel free to do what it takes to fulfill what our clients need, and to win, all while maintaining integrity and being committed to excellence, fairness and an even playing field.

We comprise thousands of lawyers and staff serving thousands of clients in 40 cities across North America and worldwide, with many political, social and religious views, and we respect each and every one of them. We do not tell anyone what to think or feel, or what they may speak about. We are truly a firm of immigrants, outliers and true representatives of those we serve because we cherish the opportunity. Entitlement does not work for us.

And as for doing good in this world: Do not listen to self-serving words, watch the actions. Do not allow yourself to be preached to, coerced, or shamed by anyone who writes or says pretty words because it gets them great headlines or otherwise serves their interests.

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