



Passion and Purpose: Marianna Dyson's Leadership at Miller & Chevalier

In 2007, as her family celebrated 200 consecutive years of practicing law in Kentucky, Marianna Dyson became Chair of Washington, D.C.'s Miller & Chevalier. "I didn't know it before I got here that both Robert Miller and Stuart Chevalier, the firm's founders, were from Kentucky," she says.

Dyson chose Miller & Chevalier—a firm with 50 members and more than 50 associates, counsel, and senior business professionals housed under one roof in the District of Columbia—as a lateral only three years before she was asked to chair its Executive Committee. Passionate about its sense of tradition and about its deep history as one of Washington's leading regulatory and controversy practices, she sensed that her tax and employee benefits practice would thrive there. She is convinced that her commitment to the firm's roots and values was what motivated her peers to name her Chair.

She accepted the leadership challenge just as Miller & Chevalier found itself immersed in what Dyson now refers to as an intense period of "soul-searching" to determine the right course for the firm's future. As she recalls, Miller & Chevalier was a small one-office firm with a handful of highly specialized practices and with competition that was both bigger and global. The firm needed to decide—and quickly—whether its configuration and focus was the recipe for future success, Dyson says.

Once the firm recommitted to its highly concentrated practice mix, Dyson turned her attention to some of her other goals for the firm, including helping members find ways to serve clients more comprehensively; finding the right leadership model to permit real-time decision-making while respecting the members' sense of ownership and their need for consensus-building; and focusing on associate development and succession planning.

Dyson says she was "hardwired" to be a lawyer. Her father and both her paternal grandparents were lawyers, as are her siblings and their children. "It was just kind of expected of us," she says. But her move to Washington, D.C., was purely accidental. Dyson married a U.S. Army major and lived in Greece before settling in the nation's capital where her husband was stationed for his final assignment. Although in Kentucky she had litigated coal mine disaster cases, among others, Dyson always wanted to be a tax lawyer, and in 1990 she earned a Master in Laws of Taxation at Georgetown University Law



Courtesy of Miller & Chevalier

Center. Her career path over the next several years took her from the Internal Revenue Service, where she served as Special Assistant for Fringe Benefits and as a senior attorney in the Office of the Associate Chief Counsel (EBEO), to the D.C. offices of Weil, Gotshal & Manges and Baker & McKenzie.

For Dyson there was something about Miller & Chevalier's service model that appealed to her small-town sensibility, and the fact that many of her clients already used the firm sealed the deal. "I realized I could probably come here and have more fun with my practice and more control over how I delivered services to clients," she says. "Besides," Dyson says, "Miller & Chevalier is a 'crown jewel' for a tax lawyer." And although it's much more than a tax firm, she estimates it has the largest group of tax lawyers in a single office outside the IRS.

Dyson was passionate about Miller & Chevalier from the moment she got there. "There's an 'esprit de corps' that pervades here." She says it was that unabashed allegiance to the firm that landed her on the Executive Committee just a year after she joined. That and her partners' appreciation for her ability to field winning teams. "They had seen the positive client response," she notes.

Dyson quickly became one of the strongest advocates for the firm's rich potential. "My colleagues knew I would be like Cerberus at the gates of Hell—that I would be a mouthpiece for the firm at a time when somebody needed to stand up and say, 'We have a fine future ahead of us!'"

It is this passion and commitment to the firm, and not any formal leadership training—she claims she has none—that characterizes Dyson's style as Chair. In her early days in the position, she expended some of her newly earned good will helping the membership articulate and recommit to a vision that brought the firm back to its roots as a small, Washington-focused practice. At the time of her election, firm members were divided about whether the firm should stay put, grow its footprint, merge, be acquired, or develop new practices.

Dyson attributes the divergences in part to a 2001 merger with the D.C. trade boutique Ablondi, Foster, Sobin & Davidow, which ballooned Miller & Chevalier's international trade practice. "Mergers can be great, and they were great lawyers," Dyson says. "But the firms' cultures and leadership styles were different."

Once Miller & Chevalier embarked on a formal exercise to articulate its core strengths and, as a result, agreed to focus on its original practices, the firm reunited, Dyson says. "We decided that in four or five areas we'd be brain surgeons, and we were not going to apologize for not doing everything else." Dyson felt strongly that the membership needed to agree on and be enthusiastic about a vision that fit Miller & Chevalier—a small firm competing with much larger, top-tier firms. "From early on I said, 'We're the little firm that could,' and I wanted everyone to remember the firm's wonderful, respected history and its very proud traditions," she says. "I think our members realized that the firm deserved their loyalty."

Dyson is adamant that the credit for the firm's revitalization goes to the entire Executive Committee, as well as to the firm's executive director, Pamela Bernstein, and a marketing team that was assembled to help the firm reposition itself, including CMO Maura Brandt.

At the point where she was confident the firm was on the right track, Dyson turned her attention to promoting the best practices she defines as essential for its long-term success. Feeling that the firm was walking away from work it could be handling, she began to help members "expand the edges" of their practices. Though she had advocated against extending the firm's focus to new service areas, Dyson wanted her colleagues to realize that they had skills in-house to broaden the margins of their existing core practices. Dyson urged her colleagues to "de-silo" their practices and to collaborate on client matters across practice groups. "It just takes communication for everyone to understand what everyone else is doing," she says. Early on, she held a retreat where each practice group explained what it did; she wanted every lawyer in the firm to understand how interconnected their practices were. In encouraging the firm's lawyers to accept new challenges and develop additional expertise related to what they already do, she was met with the enthusiasm she expected. "We have such a lovely culture here, that when I suggest to lawyers that they push out their practice a little, I always get an enthusiastic, 'I can do that,'" she says.

Dyson also has been cultivating a management model that fosters participation by the firm's members but entrusts the leadership to run the business. "If they want to have an Executive Committee, then they have to be prepared for that group to make decisions for the

common weal," she says. But she believes just as strongly that members should be given ample opportunity to participate meaningfully in important conversations. She wants members to act like invested owners, which requires keeping the communications channels wide open. "I respect the members who built this thing long before I showed up, and I try to work very hard to keep their trust, so the Executive Committee—with membership involvement—can make the tough decisions," she says.

But her focus extends beyond Miller & Chevalier's members. Dyson also prioritizes providing meaningful development and training opportunities for associates at all levels. "A firm will not survive unless it has a succession plan for every practice," she says. She recently took an associate along when she spoke at a meeting of the Tax Executives Institute in San Francisco, and she urges members to include associates in client meetings and visits. "Associates need to learn to have conversations with clients, and to solicit their feedback," Dyson says, adding that she wants the firm's associates to have the formal leadership training she never had. "If I'm ever thought of as a role model, I want it to be for having helped younger lawyers build confidence."

Shortly after Dyson became Chair, she was confronted with the additional challenges of a collapsing economy. The firm has been affected in much the same way as its competitors, and has had to reexamine expenses from top to bottom, Dyson says. But because the firm had overcome its 'mid-life crisis' by the time the recession set in, Miller & Chevalier felt ready to face it. "We had a lot of muscle going into this downturn, and we were ready," she says.

The biggest challenge for the firm—not unlike that for most other firms—is to retain its clients' trust and loyalty in an increasingly competitive market. Much of Dyson's time is devoted to business development, and she urges the firm's members to visit their clients regularly and solicit feedback on how they can best serve them during the downturn. An essential part of her job has been to make herself available to discuss concerns with her own clients and with every client of the firm. "I want our lawyers to feel they're not in the trenches by themselves. I want to maintain the quality of our services and treat our clients fairly. That's my job. That's what takes up my day," Dyson says.

Dyson regrets that she spends only about 50 percent of her time on client matters, though she is grateful that she can share her client work with able colleagues. "When I go back to full-time practice, my clients may want to work with my colleagues instead, which proves that succession planning works," she quips, a few months into her third one-year term.

ZG LEADERSHIP PROFILES



Zeughauser Group is the firm of choice for legal industry leaders seeking to increase their competitive advantage and profitability, enhance market position, and strengthen organizational culture.

Ron Beard
beard@consultzg.com
949.360.0122

Jerome L. Coben
coben@consultzg.com
323.937.8195

Mozhgan Mizban
mizban@consultzg.com
415.868.0100

Norm Rubenstein
rubenstein@consultzg.com
202.483.7089

Jack Walker
walker@consultzg.com
323.664.2881

Mary K Young
young@consultzg.com
301.320.1518

Peter Zeughauser
zeughauser@consultzg.com
949.760.6800

Kent Zimmermann
zimmermann@consultzg.com
312.810.8008

Lonnie Zwerin
zwerin@consultzg.com
415.387.4623

consultzg.com

Copyright © 2009 Zeughauser Group LLC. All rights reserved. *ZG Leadership Profiles* is a marketing and informational communication sent to you electronically by Zeughauser Group LLC, 3701 Sacramento Street, Suite 444, San Francisco, CA 94118. If you would prefer not to receive future *ZG Leadership Profiles*, please write to Zeughauser Group at the address above, call 415-868-0100, or email zgadmin@consultzg.com