

A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

MANAGEMENT:

KEYS FOR BUSINESS SUCCESS IN 2020

>>As 2019 draws to a close, an uncertain political and economic environment, competition for talent and the desire for diversity are a few of the challenges facing today's leaders.

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SCOTT J. FISHER is the managing partner of Neal Gerber Eisenberg, one of the largest single-office law firms in the nation, where he leads its efforts to build and foster an inclusive, industrious and collaborative culture. As a litigator, he focuses his practice on class actions and complex business disputes. He also guides Fortune 500 companies, entrepreneurs and wealthy individuals in high-stakes disputes and transactions. Inside and outside the firm, he mentors the next generation of lawyers. He is an active supporter of the American Jewish Committee, actively champions Equality Illinois, and serves as a trustee on the board of WTTW/WFMT.



NEAL GERBER EISENBERG

How is your organization identifying new customers or new market opportunities?

Scott J. Fisher: Every successful business must appreciate what it does well, and recognize that it doesn't do everything well. Accordingly, we focus our efforts on identifying new customers where we already have a market advantage and where we offer something that's unique. We identify new market opportunities where our clients have needs. For example, we focus on solutions at the intersection of private equity, wealth planning and technology companies—each of which is a space where we have a market-leading position. Similarly, we made a significant investment over the last decade in intellectual property, where we established unmatched breadth and depth, as reflected by the fact that we have more IP professionals in our office than any other general practice Chicago firm.

How are you dealing with the uncertainties of today's political and economic environment?

Fisher: While I expect that the volatility of the markets gets the most attention, real attention must be given to the divisive politics and rhetoric we hear, read and see every day. This is not about politics; it's about respect and the emotional toll that the absence of civil discourse has on our people. It's incumbent on leadership to remind our colleagues that not everyone shares the same views, and while you can disagree, you cannot disrespect another. Our strong economic environment requires leaders to plan for the reality that it won't last forever, and to continue to make the "difficult decisions" even when performing well. When a downturn arises, our planning during the "good times" will put us in a position to capitalize on our good

financial health and ensure we're agile and ready to take advantage of the market opportunities, which history tells us will exist.

What role does culture play in your organization's success?

Fisher: Culture is critical to every decision we make, and it takes a lot of hard work to maintain. Your culture is not the words below your sig block, or the words on your website. Your culture is the sum of the daily experiences of your people. For example, collaboration is part of our culture, and we view it as a competitive advantage. We constantly evaluate whether we have the right systems in place to facilitate collaboration and whether we incentivize it. Inclusivity is part of our culture. We work hard to ensure that our decision-making is not impacted by implicit bias, that we celebrate each other's strengths, and that all of our employees feel like they can come to the office and be their authentic selves. Our culture is an essential part of our strategy, and a distinguishing factor for our clients and people in the increasingly homogenous legal industry.

What role does technology play in your organization's success?

Fisher: Our vision has always been twofold—to provide the most sound and sophisticated counsel and service to our clients, and to attract and retain exceptional people. Today, technology is an important component of achieving both goals. Whether through cutting-edge collaborative platforms to work with our clients in real time, or predictive analytics to improve legal and pricing strategy, or an infrastructure that affords our attorneys the flexibility to provide service seamlessly from anywhere around the globe, technology has been key in the progressive solutions

we've deployed to benefit our clients and our people. With our strategic use of technology, we're mindful of the risks of an increasingly digital business ecosystem, and we ensure best-in-class security protocols are in place by frequently testing, evaluating and upgrading our technology systems.

How are you attracting and retaining talent?

Fisher: We believe it's important to recognize the attributes that will lead to success at our firm, so we're very intentional in our recruiting efforts. We look for people who know themselves and are proud of it, who are hardworking and enjoy working hard, and who crave the challenges and rewards of individual enterprise. Our platform is collaborative, entrepreneurial, interdisciplinary and innovative. Our goal is to give each individual the opportunity to have a fulfilling career and a full life in a way that works for them. We're intentional about meeting our talent where it wants to be met, and about offering innovative solutions to today's challenges. For example, instead of performing only exit interviews on departure, we periodically conduct "stay" interviews with our existing colleagues on why they're here, what they love, and what we could do better. From that we developed myriad initiatives, including remote-working programs and a more robust parental leave policy.

How is your organization increasing diversity in your leadership pipeline?

Fisher: Generally, large law firms have done poorly promoting anyone other than straight white men; that's unacceptable to us. At a strategic level, we've evolved the conversation. For example, adding an agenda item on inclusive culture at every executive committee meeting. Likewise,

recognizing that opportunity is essential to advancement, every major talent decision at NGE includes a candidate pool with at least 30 percent women, attorneys of color and/or LGBTQ+ lawyers. Similarly, our leadership team supports traditionally underrepresented junior partners to ensure their success through our sponsorship initiative. We're fortunate to have straight white male leaders committed to the success of traditionally underrepresented lawyers, willing to be vulnerable, to share what they might not know about another's experience, and to use their influence to impact the future of someone who doesn't look like them.

What do leaders need to be successful in the coming year - both individually and as change agents for their organizations?

Fisher: Emotional intelligence is a critical leadership attribute in this era of sound bites and short(er) attention spans. Likewise, awareness of your own limitations and strengths, as well as an understanding of the experiences of others, have never been more important. Those qualities engender confidence in your people and clients, and provide the base from which you can effectuate meaningful change. In these uncertain times it's important for leaders to be visionaries and change agents, to recognize emerging industry and environmental changes, and to provide leadership in implementing the vision of the firm. As we chart a unique path in our industry, there also must be consistent, clear communication, as well as an ability to listen with the intent to understand. Above all, an effective leader must be honest, have integrity beyond reproach and demonstrate—to customers, shareholders, partners and employees—that the leader will do the right thing.