

What Managers Can Learn From Lilly Ledbetter

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At first blush the autobiography of famed Equal Pay Act plaintiff Lilly Ledbetter might not seem all that much of a draw for those whose work involves defense against employment discrimination claims. Yet the recently published book, *Grace and Grit: My Fight for Equal Pay and Fairness at Goodyear and Beyond*, (Crown Archtype 2012) has much to offer for employment lawyers, human resource executives, and front-line managers who are involved in employment law compliance.

We all know how the story ends – with the enactment of the law that bears her name, the [Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act](#). But the book also spins a compelling narrative of the person behind the nearly decade-long legal dispute that resulted first in a \$3 million jury verdict in her favor and later a stunning 5-4 defeat for her at the [U.S. Supreme Court](#). The latter part of the book, which includes descriptions of the litigation and its underlying facts, includes some of the most interesting lessons for managers who seek to prevent – and if necessary, defend – employment discrimination cases. Simply put, when faced with an employee like Lilly Ledbetter who is both a tenacious advocate and sympathetic individual, the best defense will be early and decisive detection and correction of conduct that could rise to the level of harassment or inequitable treatment before it leads to litigation. The book also provides insights into trial strategy from the plaintiff's perspective that can assist those who find themselves preparing to take an employment case before a judge or jury.

The book recounts in great detail Ms. Ledbetter's life from her childhood in rural Possum Trot, Ala., all the way to her presence as a 70-year-old in the White House Oval Office in January 2009 as she watched President Obama sign the Ledbetter Act into law. In between, of course, is a vivid description of her experiences as an overnight manager at a Goodyear tire plant for nearly 20 years that led to her sex discrimination and equal pay lawsuit.

While executives often focus, for good reason, on the bottom-line, dollars-and-cents impact of employment law compliance and litigation, Ms. Ledbetter's story serves to remind employers that they also can be well-served to consider the personal aspects of the employment relationship.

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