



MEDIA MENTIONS

10 Years Later: Barnes & Thornburg's Culture And Staying Power In Minneapolis

July 9, 2019 | [Minneapolis](#)

When Barnes & Thornburg opened its doors in Minneapolis in 2009, the firm had 22 attorneys; 10 years later, that number has grown to 32, as new practice groups – in insurance recovery, bankruptcy, and family law – formed alongside the office's business litigation and employment, real estate, corporate, energy, and trusts and estates practices.

What's more, the firm has managed to do so in an increasingly competitive Twin Cities marketplace, where a high concentration of Fortune 500 companies continues to attract national and international law firms into the region. The success is due in large part to a budding culture of inclusivity and collaboration – a culture which just won the office a "Best Places to Work" award from the Minneapolis/St. Paul Business Journal. Barnes & Thornburg was the only law firm to receive this recognition.

Connie Lahn, Minneapolis managing partner, discusses a decade of growth and what's next for her team of attorneys.

How has the office changed over the past 10 years?

Well we've grown of course – adding new attorneys to the team, as well as new practice groups. But the greatest changes have come from an intense focus on being an awesome place to work. It may sound crazy, given the stereotypical law firm atmosphere, but we're really concentrated on culture and how we treat one another. And we're at the point now where we have an office of open doors, with people who actually talk to each other.

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What have you done to promote this new office culture?

For one thing, we engage in deliberate social activities. Every other Friday, for instance, is either Taco Friday or Donut Friday. At first I even made a rule: 'You don't get a donut unless you talk to two people.' It may seem silly, but I had to do it, because people were so used to only conversing with people they already worked with. It was necessary, too, in order to bridge the gap between new and old members of the office.

Simply giving people a chance to talk to each other, to build relationships with one another, to look for opportunities to work with one another – it breeds a better culture. From earlier in my career, I know what it's like to be a young attorney who's treated badly, not given a say, and told to make excuses for having a life outside the office.

Now that I have the ability to change all that, I take the responsibility very seriously. I can bring on more diverse partner and associate hires, and promote the careers of more women. And I can model the behavior I want to see. I own my family obligations: if my son has a hockey game, and I'm leaving the office to make it there, I'm going to be honest and vocal about that.

What enables you to make the changes you have made in Minneapolis?

What I found out when I took on this role was that Barnes & Thornburg does a great job of letting managing partners develop their own office culture. No one told me to do Donut Friday, for instance – I was given the space to observe, listen and learn from my colleagues.

This has resulted in endeavors that go beyond the office itself. Our annual women's event, "Women in Leadership: Exploring Pathways," was an extension of this freedom. As office managing partners, we're allowed to create our own initiatives, events, and decisions that make sense to our respective markets.

Were there any rough patches along the way?

We had changes we needed to make in who we were, and along with that came some personnel departures. It was a really tough time, but I'm ultimately glad we did it. Without it, we wouldn't have had the growth we have now, or the positivity. We're building a place here that's going to last, and we need to make sure we've got the right team and the right attitude in place to do that.

What do you envision for the office over the next 10 years?

I want us to continue down this path of growth we're on. And a lot of that comes down to recruitment. The nice thing about surpassing the 30-attorney mark is that you can really recruit for fit rather than a book of business.

So we're focusing our efforts on finding great people, those who have a fantastic attitude about practicing law, who are doing things in new and exciting and different ways, and who contribute positively to our culture

here.

As far as diversity and inclusion goes, the metric I set for myself was “make it better.” It’s an understanding that change in this area doesn’t come easy, but that we must dedicate ourselves to getting better day after day, year after year. We want it; our clients want it. With Dawn Rosemond, our partner and director of diversity, professional development and inclusion, we’ve been able to refine how we tell our clients about ourselves. Diversity is really and truly on the table; it’s something we’re all ready to talk about and act on.

I think we’ve made it better in Minneapolis this past decade. And I can’t wait to build on the momentum we’ve created here – for the next 10 years and beyond.