

How I Made Office Managing Partner: 'Stay True to Yourself, and Things Will Work Out to Your Benefit,' Says Stuart Sostmann of Marshall Dennehey

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By ALM Staff

**Stuart H. Sostmann, 50,
Office Managing Partner at
Marshall Dennehey,
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania**

Practice area(s):

Construction injury litigation, products liability, construction defect litigation, premises and retail liability

Law school and year of graduation:

University of Pittsburgh School of Law, 1999

How long have you been at the firm?

I have been at the firm for 26 years.

What year were you promoted/elected to your current role?

2024

Were you a partner at another firm before joining your present firm? If so, which one, how long were you there and when did you leave?

No.

How would you describe your career trajectory (was it organic or an active pursuit)?

Over the course of my 26 years with the firm, I have developed a great deal of institutional knowledge which has put me on track for a promotion of this type. However, I have also actively pursued this promotion by taking on a number of supervisory responsibilities in past years. Initially, it started with successfully litigating cases and obtaining solid trial results. I then pursued marketing opportunities which ultimately led to me being named a shareholder in 2008. From there, I actively worked with a number of attorneys in our various offices to market the Pittsburgh office and the firm in general.

In 2017, I was promoted to the position of supervisor of the casualty group for the Pittsburgh and Erie offices. In that role, I was responsible for managing 20 attorneys, from the youngest associates to the most senior shareholders. My

mindset shifted from being the best attorney that I could be to providing the knowledge, mentoring, and supervision to enhance the professional excellence of the attorneys within the group. In the end, that is what's most rewarding, seeing those efforts over the years result in a number of successes in our group and the ascension of many of those associates to shareholder. I hope to take that experience and replicate it for the entire Pittsburgh office.

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in electing/promoting you to your current role? Was it your performance on a specific case? A personality trait? Making connections with the right people?

I think it came down to my experience and my ability to encourage and bring out the best in the attorneys I've worked with.

What unique challenges do you face as it relates to your role?

The largest challenge I face is maintaining the standard that has been set in the Pittsburgh office since it opened 31 years ago. For almost the entirety of that time, the office was managed by Scott Dunlop, my immediate predecessor, who will be retiring at the end of the year. Replacing the person who developed this office from a few initial attorneys to the present 40 attorneys is a daunting task. However, I have learned a great deal from Scott, and I look forward to the challenge to continue to grow the Pittsburgh office and develop the next generation of litigation attorneys in Pittsburgh.

What's the best piece of advice you give to someone who wants to rise up the ranks to lead an office?

The best piece of advice I can provide is that it really comes down to personal relationships. If you would like to be a leader of an office someday, you need to learn about and develop relationships with everyone in the office. From the legal assistants to the file clerks, to the office management and, of course, all of the attorneys, each person in the office is important. They all fill critical roles in keeping the entire office performing at its best. Once you develop those personal relationships, trust naturally follows, which is a hallmark for any good leader. Then, it is a matter of committing yourself every day to retain that trust.

Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to your current role?

The person with the greatest influence in my career is our firm's current chairman of the board and former casualty department director, Howard Dwoskin. In his role as director, Howard regularly mentored and counseled me on supervising the casualty group in Pittsburgh. He provided sage advice on managing with patience, listening rather than acting, and looking at issues from another's perspective. He always provided the necessary encouragement for me to take my career to the next level and helped me guide others in the firm to do the same.

I also owe much to my first mentor in the legal field, Thomas Birris. Tom was a brilliant attorney and shareholder of the firm who retired earlier this year. We started working together 24 years ago

and handled many catastrophic and high-exposure cases together. He taught me everything about how to litigate a case, respecting the legal process, and treating opposing counsel with courtesy. Over the years, I have worked to pass on those same lessons to many of the attorneys in our Pittsburgh office.

How do you utilize technology to benefit the firm/practice and/or business development?

Technology is ever-changing in the legal field. It's incumbent upon us as leaders to utilize the latest technology out there to obtain the best results for our clients, and that's what we do.

Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give to your younger self and/or what would you do differently?

When I was a younger attorney, I displayed arrogance at times to cover up various insecurities. My advice would be to stay true to yourself, and things will work out to your benefit.

Do you have a prediction on how the legal industry will evolve over the next several years?

The defense litigation business is constantly changing. I expect to see more consolidation in the field and a greater emphasis on the use of firms that can adopt and utilize next generation technology to further a client's goals.

Please share with us any firm or industry initiatives that you are working on as well as the impact you hope to achieve.

A few years ago, when I was president of the Pennsylvania Defense Institute, the legal industry was recovering from the pandemic. One of my goals was to ensure that in-person arguments remained the standard and that the courts did not move to a purely remote system for all arguments, except for jury trials. We were reasonably successful in that regard. The purpose of that initiative was to make sure that the next generation of litigation attorneys would continue to have opportunities to develop courtroom experience. I am proud to say that Marshall Dennehey has been a pioneer in this regard. Through the firm's internal Advanced Trial Advocacy and Mock Trial Program, and leadership of the firm's professional development director, Chris Devlin, the firm has prioritized trial training for its associates and developed new programs to ensure that they are participating at every stage of litigation up to and through trial. I am looking forward to working with Chris to promote those initiatives in the Pittsburgh office and provide the next generation of attorneys the same type of mentoring as was provided to me 25 years ago. ■
