

PLANNING TO STAY ON TOP

Weld, Riley, Prenn and Ricci manages staff transitions with a long-term focus

Steve Weld looked around the room at the principal leaders of the most successful and prestigious law firm in the Chippewa Valley and knew some things had to change.

It's not that he was spying weak links in his team. Quite to the contrary. Around the table were some of the best attorneys in the area, who had built a law firm highly respected across the state.

Steve Riley, Kathy Prenn, Dick Ricci, and Weld himself were among the founding members of the firm, all bona fide experts in their specialties. They had branched off from the Eau Claire office of another prestigious firm, Milwaukee-based Mulcahy and Wherry, in 1991. They since expanded the areas of practice, added multiple experts in the fields, and grew the practice in both size and reputation.

Still, 11 years ago, Weld looked around the room and declared, "We better start looking at what we're going to do. Nobody in this room is getting any younger."

Weld had the foresight to see that transitions brought forth by retirements and growth needed to be planned for and managed, for the long-term health of the firm.

Today, WRPR has a system for recruitment of new talent and managing transitions that any business offering professional services can learn from.

It's all about an aggressive search for new talent and an outstanding mentoring program that helps keep clients satisfied, even when a new attorney takes over a caseload.

Expansion experience

People in the practice of law know that when a good attorney retires, his or her client list becomes ripe for the picking, and a firm's reputation for expertise in a field can quickly erode with the loss of key people.

Weld was determined to keep that from happening to WRPR. One of the early measures taken was the establishment of a senior attorneys committee and a requirement that anyone over age 60, or within five years of expected retirement, file a



Photo courtesy WRPR

▲ **Among the leading attorneys for the Weld, Riley, Prenn and Ricci are, from left, William Thedinga, Melissa Kirchner, Steve Weld, Mindy Dale, Thomas Graham, Christine Gimber, Andrea Voelker, Mark Skolos, and Vicki Seltun.**

transition plan.

The idea, Weld explained, is to have as smooth a transition as possible so that when the senior attorney retired, there was already someone else there that the attorney's clients knew and had confidence in.

"We want someone with whom the client could develop familiarity," Weld said.

Of course, that requires a firm to have more than one expert in a given field. And that requires a solid recruitment strategy.

Even before working on its transitional plans, WRPR had good experience in recruiting. It came from expansion.



Weld

the people to answer those questions," Weld said.

The firm started to grow, in 1995 merging with the estate planning, litigation, business and workers' compensation sections of two other

At first, WRPR focused solely on labor and employment law.

"Our clients started asking business law questions. We decided we needed to get

Eau Claire firms. It has since added other areas of practice and the experts to go with them.

"We try to provide a depth of legal expertise. It's hard to find good depth and breadth," Weld said.

To continue strengthening its foundation, WRPR recently merged with the Black River Falls office of Skolos and Millis. Mark Skolos adds 26 years of experience as a real estate and transactional attorney. Skolos has assisted with more than four million square feet of retail development through all aspects of commercial projects. Paul Millis adds depth to the corporate and business law section from his



Behling

work as general counsel for Millis Transfer, Inc., Co-op Credit Union and Federation Cooperative, as well as many other business and banking entities.

“We want to have all facets of the business covered, so that when a client comes to Weld, Riley, we have all their needs met,” said John Behling, who

practices in administrative and municipal law with an emphasis on zoning and land use issues.

Recruitment key

One of the WRPR recruitment strategies is to keep an eye out on who’s close by.

“We look around the community and say, ‘who out there is good?’” Weld said.

That brought in people like Bill Thedinga, a Harvard Law graduate, who worked for a large Boston law firm before returning to Wisconsin to join his father’s firm in Menomonie. Thedinga’s firm merged with WRPR in 2003.

Thedinga practices in the areas of business and cooperative law and is a leading expert in telecommunications law.

Thedinga said he already established a relationship with WRPR before merging with the firm, as he used to refer clients to WRPR for areas that were outside his own expertise.

Looking for local talent also brought on board Emily Long, a former prosecutor with the Eau Claire County District Attorney’s Office.

WRPR was looking for a good litigator – an attorney who can argue a case in front of a judge and jury.

“We went to the judges and asked, ‘who appears before you who is a good trial lawyer,’” Thedinga said.

Today, Long handles civil litigation and white collar criminal defense cases for WRPR.

WRPR also recruits new talent through a clerkship program, in which law school students work for an established firm to gain experience.

Clerkships are common in law practice, but there is a big difference in how programs are structured. In many firms, clerks are assigned heavy research duties.

“They look at them as revenue generators,” said Behling.

At WRPR, the clerks spend time in every division and go out on the road with supervising attorneys.

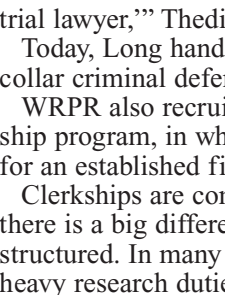
“They find out what it’s like to be a government relations lawyer, or what it’s like to be a labor relations lawyer,” Behling said.

Daneille Strong and MaiVue Xiong are products of WRPR’s clerkship program. At the end of her summer of clerking in 2008, Strong was offered a position in the firm’s litigation section. Xiong joined the firm in 2010 after her clerkship and is now a member of WRPR’s business section.

Having people out there that once had a positive experience as a clerk at WRPR provides a direct recruitment tool should the firm be looking to hire in that former clerk’s area of expertise. It also provides great word-of-mouth support in the profession, as those clerks



Long



Strong

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share with others that WRPR is a good place to work.

The clerkship program brought Andrea Voelker back. The University of Wisconsin Law School grad went off to Flint, Michigan to practice labor and employment law.

“We kept in touch with her,” Behling said.

Now she’s back and representing a lot of area school districts on labor and employment issues.

Coming home

One of the challenges WRPR faces, familiar to many businesses in the Valley, is convincing people that this is a good area to work and build a career.

“Kids coming out of law school don’t necessarily think the Chippewa Valley is where they want to go to practice law,” Weld said.

But sometimes after they’ve worked a few years, “They want to come back to their roots,” Weld added.

WRPR keeps an eye out for that kind of talent. And so, Dustin Van Ruden, raised on a dairy farm near Cashton and a graduate of UW-La Crosse, came back to his roots after receiving his law degree from Marquette and working for a large international firm. Now he practices real estate law with WRPR.

And Cindy Hangartner, originally from Pigeon Falls, came back to

Wisconsin after establishing a career advising clients, including Fortune 500 companies, on taxation.

“She represented a number of large scale retail companies on tax matters,” Behling said.

Nick Hennemann, raised in River Falls, once worked in Washington D.C. in complex litigation and Congressional investigations. Now he’s with WRPR’s government relations section.

Mentors

The cornerstone of WRPR’s transition program, though, is an outstanding mentoring program for new attorneys on staff.

And that means new attorneys, not just young attorneys not long out of law school. Behling, for example, served as a lobbyist for a Madison-based firm and served as an aide to former Gov. Tommy Thompson, both in Madison and in Washington D.C. He could hardly be considered a neophyte when he came to WRPR.

He was teamed with partner Kathryn Prens as his mentor in the firm.

“It takes time, learning how the firm’s system



Hangartner



Hennemann

works, the best strategies for keeping a client in the loop and updated on the case,” Behling said. “No matter what you’ve done before, law school doesn’t teach you how to run a business.”

The heads of the various sectors within WRPR serve as the senior mentors. Their goal is partly to coach the new attorney on the WRPR way, and also in some cases to prepare for transitions in which the new attorney will eventually take over responsibility for the mentor’s clients.

That goes back to Weld’s decision to form the senior attorneys committee and keep tabs on who is contemplating retirement.

It worked beautifully with Prens, who served as a school administrator for 10 years before practicing law for 25 years. Named one of the best lawyers in America and a Wisconsin Superlawyer, Prens is one of the most highly respected attorneys in the school and education law field.

Prens mentored Andrea Voelker, who got to know Prens’s clients personally. When Prens retired, Voelker was no stranger asking that a school district stay with WRPR for its legal work.

Voelker retained 100 percent of the clientele after Prens’s retirement, and that was the goal.

“In Kathy’s case, it took about three years (for clients) to go from a confidence level with Kathy to a confidence level with Andrea,” Weld said.

WRPR’s mentoring tradition extends to its administration. Prens, the firm’s managing partner, mentored Christine Gimber for a full year before stepping down. Gimber, a member of WRPR’s litigation and business sections, has been the managing partner for the past three years.

“It’s important to have continuity in the management of the firm and so we mentor in those positions, as well,” Weld said.

Around the office, Thedinga is known as a “master mentor.” A big part of his practice involves cooperatives, and he has clients throughout the state.

He takes the lawyers he’s mentoring in that field to the co-op meetings, and works with them to learn about their business.

“Without mentoring, that associate is never going to get that experience,” he said.

WRPR actually hired a lawyer primarily to be a mentor and advisor to the staff attorneys.

Thomas Sazama, who retired last year as a Chippewa County Circuit Court Judge, works part time with WRPR. Among other things, Sazama is able to advise attorneys on how an argument or strategy is likely to play with a judge or jury.

“He’s an excellent sounding-board for the young lawyers,” Weld said. “I think he’s been invaluable, and I think he’s enjoying it.”

The WRPR team is now over 30 attorneys strong, with at least 60 people on the firm’s payroll, making it easily the largest law firm in the Chippewa Valley. And with its extensive work in business and municipal law, it has to be considered the most influential law firm in the Valley for the work it does for business and government leaders throughout area.

As Weld expected, the time of those transitions came. Founding members Steven Riley and Dick Ricci have passed away. Prens transitioned into retirement.

Weld has no plans at this time to retire from the firm he has led since 1991.

But even when that and other transition times come, the law firm will continue to be a leading force in the practice of law in the Chippewa Valley. The leaders of the firm today are planning for it. ▲

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