

How I Made Office Managing Partner: 'Good and Frequent Communication Is Absolutely Critical to Leadership,' Says Michael Mugmon of WilmerHale

"It is important to demonstrate that you are a great firm citizen and develop the institutional knowledge, skills, and vision necessary to serve as a leader."

By Tasha Norman

Michael Mugmon, 44, WilmerHale, San Francisco.

Job title: Partner-in-charge, San Francisco office.

Practice area: Government Investigations, Securities Litigation, Internal Investigations, White Collar Criminal Defense.

Law school and year of graduation: University of Pennsylvania, 2002.

How long have you been at the firm? For 19 years across three offices—Washington, D.C. (2003-2007), Palo Alto (2007-2019) and San Francisco (2019-present).

How long were you a partner at the firm? Since 2013.

Were you a partner at another firm before joining your present firm? No, much like retired shortstop Cal Ripken Jr. of my hometown Baltimore Orioles, I've been a one-team guy for my career.

What year did you make office managing partner at your current firm? 2021.

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you office managing partner? I can't purport to speak on behalf of our managing partners and management committee, but I hope they saw me as a leader who was a driving force behind the opening and growth of our San Francisco office and viewed me as a key ingredient in the overall success of our lawyers and staff there. Certainly, my earlier tours of duty in various offices helped me learn how the firm operates and provided me with the opportunity to build a broad network of connections across geographies. And handling a wide array of matters over the years has introduced me to lawyers and administrators I never would have met, had I focused on a narrow area



Courtesy Photo

Michael Mugmon

of practice. At the end of the day, though, I hope that my selection was about genuine leadership and vision for the office. We opened our doors here in San Francisco in 2019, and it's been a great experience. I've watched the office grow from day one as we've added new team members and forged strong camaraderie and a unique culture, and I'm excited to see where we go from here.

As office managing partner, what are your key responsibilities

and what challenges do you face in your role? My principal responsibility is to be an advocate for our San Francisco lawyers and staff, both internally and externally, on matters large and small. Any challenges that I face are positive ones. How do we manage our outstanding growth sustainably? How can we continue to raise our profile in an increasingly crowded marketplace filled with other great firms? How can we position our lawyers and staff for maximum success and fulfillment? The answers to these questions will shape the direction of the office for years to come. I take this responsibility very seriously, and I focus on the firm's long-term goals as we seek to build from our current strong foundation.

What's the best piece of advice you can give to someone who wants to rise up the ranks to firm leadership? Above all, I don't think it's any different in the law firm world versus any other industry: to paraphrase Conan O'Brien, work hard and be kind. But it's also important

to demonstrate that you are a great firm citizen by serving on committees, mentoring associates, supporting and connecting with your colleagues and generally taking a keen interest in how the firm works. When you do that, you not only build stronger relationships within the firm, but you develop the institutional knowledge, skills and vision necessary to serve as a leader.

Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to managing partner? I've been fortunate to have had many positive influences during my time at the firm, from partners to associates to legal assistants to clients. But I always come back to my good friend Chris Davies—a partner in our Washington, D.C., office who was my first mentor at the firm and who continues to be a mentor to me to this day. He's among the smartest and best lawyers I know, and he has an insatiable curiosity about people and the world. He cares about excellent management and has taught me many tools of that trade.



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What would you tell your younger self? Relax, it'll be OK.

As a law firm leader, what impact would you like to have on your firm and/or the legal industry as a whole? To bring civility back to the practice of law. We should be able to be tenacious advocates for our clients without being discourteous, and we should treat everyone on our teams with the highest respect.

What lessons, if any, did you learn in 2020/2021 (the core-COVID-19 years)? The time away from the office taught me two critical things. First, good and frequent communication is absolutely critical to leadership. Second, forgive yourself if you can't accomplish everything that you want to in a workday; there are other important priorities in life.