As a labor and employment law partner at Chicago’s Laner Muchin Dombrow Becker Levin & Tominberg Ltd, Joe Yastrow represents employers in cases involving contentious discrimination and harassment issues, numerous other types of employment disputes, collective bargaining, and a broad range of employment counseling. But although the former marathon runner and competitive rugby and tennis player embraces the challenges of his practice, he adds, “I enjoy employment law because I like dealing with people, from the plant floor to the boardroom. I view my clients as my friends—they’re the reason why I’m in this business.”

Yastrow’s career accomplishments are substantial: for example, membership in the College of Labor and Employment Lawyers and the International Who’s Who of Management Labor and Employment Lawyers, and selection for The Best Lawyers in America. But client comments in Chambers Guide to America’s Leading Business Lawyers define his real strength, describing him as “a top-notch guy and a classy litigator,” “a wonderful gentleman,” “very much appreciated on both sides of the aisle,” “a terrific problem solver” and someone who “knows when to fight and when to settle.”

Many of Yastrow’s client relationships (which vary from multinational corporations and small family businesses to other law firms and the Brookfield Zoo) are long-term, stretching over several decades and multiple changes in management. “My goal is for clients to involve me at the start of their decision-making process based on their trust of my understanding of their business needs. That’s the ultimate demonstration of a client’s confidence.”

Yastrow believes that he provides the greatest value to clients by putting legal issues in their proper business context to make sure that the strategy employed in each case makes good business sense. “Lawyers make a ton of money trying cases, and nobody loves a good fight more than I do, but before the fight starts, I want to make sure everyone understands what we are doing, why we are doing it, and what it will take to get there,” Yastrow says.

It’s About the Service

Yastrow believes that his approach to client relationships is best exemplified by his firm’s Two Hour Commitment, which he was instrumental in creating as the firm’s chief marketing officer. The Two Hour Commitment is a written promise to clients that every telephone call will be returned within two hours or less.

“This commitment reflects our culture of responsiveness. We continuously deal with sensitive issues and disputes that must be addressed and resolved promptly. Our clients can’t be made to wait hours or days for us to return a phone call when they are dealing with an intoxicated employee on the plant floor or need an emergency injunction to prevent the loss of trade secrets or confidential information. We respect them and their problems, and we want to be there to help resolve these problems any time day or night—just like we would if they were family members.”

“There are legions of very talented lawyers
“Out there who do what we do?” Yastrow says, “but they aren’t of any value to their clients if they aren’t available when the crisis hits. This is what really distinguishes how I and the other members of our firm do what we do. From top to bottom, we have established a culture of responsiveness that demonstrates our respect for our clients and their needs.”

Yastrow takes great pride in his role in implementing the Two Hour Commitment because he believes that it represents a focal point of the firm’s legacy. “Long before I got here, responsiveness was a priority and an expectation. This was passed down to me, and now it has been formally institutionalized and backed by a written commitment.”

“No other law firm has ever come close to something like this, but we do it day in and day out. Clients may not always understand every detail in the fine points of the law, but they know when you’re there for them and when you’re not. I am proud to be part of a firm that is always there for its clients.”

Sports and Charity

Yastrow’s approach to his practice is a natural product of his background and temperament. “I was raised in a North Shore Chicago family where our only acceptable career options were to become a doctor, an engineer or a lawyer,” he recalls, “and largely because my uncle was a successful general counsel at McDonald’s and a cool guy who related well to people, that was the path I chose.” At Southern Methodist University’s Dedman School of Law, Yastrow’s own enjoyment of dealing with people and the influence of mentor William Keller (who became chair of the ABA Labor and Employment Section) steered him to practice labor and employment law.

While in college and law school, Yastrow played team rugby. “At 5′6” and 150 pounds, everybody was bigger than me, but I worked hard to try to make up for it,” he says now. “When I interviewed for a job after law school, someone at a competing firm looked at my resume and asked, ‘Who are you, Jack Armstrong, the “All-American Boy” from the old radio show?’ I replied, ‘No, but I’d like to be.'”

The combination of toughness and civility among rugby players has the same appeal to Yastrow as his practice. “I hate to lose at anything, and that is why nobody will out-prepare or out-work me. But, it is equally important that I compete in a way that earns the respect of everyone I come into contact with, including my clients, my opponents and neutrals including agency officials, judges, arbitrators and mediators.

After giving up his rugby career, Yastrow turned to competitive tennis and marathon running. “As with my practice, preparation and discipline are critical to success in these activities. I have found you can outperform others and exceed your own expectations if you are willing to push yourself. Once you realize how much you can accomplish with this kind of mentality, it becomes infectious,” Yastrow says.

After beginning practice in 1978, Yastrow soon found the right environment at Laner Muchin, where he has been nearly his entire career. “I wanted to be at a firm where I was judged by people who really knew who I was and what I did, not just numbers on a page,” he says, and as a member of the Executive Committee he strives to maintain such an atmosphere. “We’ve grown substantially since I joined the firm,” he notes, “but if you emphasize how best to involve all the people in your organization, bigger doesn’t have to mean less personal.”

Yastrow has devoted much of his time to charitable activities. He is a founder and Executive Board Member of the Children’s Brittle Bone Foundation (CBBF) and has testified before Congress on behalf of the CBBF. His involvement typifies his emphasis on people and relationships. “I’ve been part of a strong group of friends since high school, and the daughter of one member of our group, who was born at the same time as my own youngest daughter, had children’s brittle bone disease,” he explains. “We realized that there was no fundraising group to combat the disease, so we created one. That was almost twenty years ago, and since then we have provided millions of dollars of funds for research designed to find a cure for brittle bone disease.”

Yastrow set up the organization as a non-profit and helped organize an annual golf tourney and a jazz event that has drawn artists like Ray Charles and B.B. King. When he speaks of the CBBF, he at the same time describes his approach to law and life: “It’s gratifying and not at all surprising what a group of friends can accomplish by working together.”

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