

# Always Better

An Interview with Ira Coleman, Chairman, McDermott Will & Emery

**EDITORS' NOTE** *Ira Coleman is the Chairman of McDermott Will & Emery. When he took on this role in 2017, the firm embraced a new strategic direction focused on being indispensable to clients, enhancing performance, and nurturing a happy, fun culture encapsulated in the mantra of #AlwaysBetter. Since then, the firm has achieved the strongest upward trajectory among big law firms, become a magnet for top talent, and expanded its practices and geographic footprint.*



Ira Coleman

*Prior to taking on this role, Coleman led the Corporate & Transactional Practice Group and served as the Managing Partner for the firm's Miami office. Coleman still practices law, representing the healthcare industry. In particular, he advises private equity clients in navigating M&A and controversy matters that have "bet the company" implications. Coleman also serves as the general counsel for the Healthcare Private Equity Association (HCEPA). He presents regularly at private equity, national healthcare, and leadership-focused conferences on a variety of subjects. He has authored and been quoted in numerous articles on private equity, health law, diversity, equity and inclusion, and leadership. In 2021, he received the "Most Innovative Law Firm Leader" award by the Financial Times.*

**FIRM BRIEF** *As a top-ranked global law firm with more than 1,400 lawyers, McDermott Will & Emery (mwe.com) serves many of the world's leading companies and privately held businesses. Guided by its mantra of #AlwaysBetter, the firm focuses both on being indispensable to clients and creating a culture of happiness and excellence. In doing so, colleagues work seamlessly across practices, geographies, and industries to deliver solutions that propel sustained success.*

**How do you define the role of chairman of a leading global law firm?**

You are dealing with so many extremely talented people with such great minds, so the most important thing is to be a good shepherd, a good listener, a coach – you want to be there to support the talented team so that they can perform at their best. I am focused on making sure that our people have the tools and resources needed to serve our clients. My job is to make

sure we are putting star teams on the field, not just star players.

**How important has it been for McDermott Will & Emery to maintain its culture as the firm has grown in size and scale?**

Our culture is so important. It's our "why" – meaning, why do we do this? Our people do this tremendously difficult and draining job because they want to make a difference for our clients. Our culture is about excellence, and our mantra is "#AlwaysBetter." Our people are

committed to better themselves, better the legal services for our clients, better the work experience – this needs to be driven from the top down and the bottom up. You can't just talk about culture – your true culture is about the "why" for what you do and the reason for your existence.

During the pandemic, we learned how much we value and love being together as a firm, and the importance of being together in an office to share laughs, talk about our families, and discuss ideas. We care about

each other and support each other, and this has been a key part of the firm's culture and success.

**How do you describe the McDermott Will & Emery difference and what sets the firm apart?**

In addition to our differentiated culture, we are very evidence based and data driven. We measure everything. We send out surveys to measure happiness; we measure associate satisfaction; we measure staff and professional engagement. I don't think the differentiator is what your message is or what your mission statement says – you can look at many leading global firms and I am sure their strategic plan looks very similar to ours. We believe it is about how you actually execute against that strategic plan, and how well your team is aligned to it. This applies to every member of the firm, from our receptionists who greet and welcome visitors when they come to the office, to every contact that a person has when interacting with the firm.

I think another differentiator for us is the ability to listen and pivot, and not worry about what the crowd is doing.



McDermott Will & Emery's new office at One Vanderbilt in New York City (above and opposite page)



**What are the keys to building long-lasting client relationships?**

You need to be there for your clients and be great partners. We want clients for life. I think that many in our profession under-appreciate the client relationship part of the business. We differentiate by having our youngest lawyers not only learn the law from an apprenticeship model, but also learn how to treat clients and to develop clients for a lifetime. We invest heavily in this area – much more so than others – and we make this part of our partners’ performance evaluations. They need to develop young talent not just on the law side, but also on what it means to be a true client partner.

**Do you feel the McDermott Will & Emery brand is well-understood?**

Any good firm that is striving to be better wants their brand to continue to ascend. If you ask the leadership at Apple about their brand, I think they will say that it is great, but that they want it to go even higher. We want to be considered the premier law firm in the world, and we have that reputation in many of our power alleys, whether it is healthcare, private equity, tax, private client, etc. All of these areas have world-class honors. Our brand is ascending, and we need to continue to focus on brand awareness and brand positioning. We want to be known as a high-quality firm that cares deeply about its people, cares deeply about its clients, and cares deeply about its communities.

**Will you highlight McDermott Will & Emery’s new offices at One Vanderbilt in New York City?**

When you visit an Apple store, or a Chanel store, or a Hermes store, or any other high luxury brand, they have a different look and feel and experience. We want our offices to have an experiential feel, whether it is the local artists we highlight, the soaring ceilings, bright colors – this has a lot to do with the brand and reflecting who we are as a firm. We want all of our offices to have a look and feel and experience that leaves you with a feeling of energy and creation and confidence and power.

**How is technology impacting the legal profession?**

I think we are at the forefront of huge changes, not only in the legal industry, but in the world. We have heavily invested in AI and the like – we are the only law firm that is a general partner in the only legal tech fund purely for legal technology investments – so we believe that we are at the forefront of technology. We are always looking for ways to be more efficient for our clients, and we are embracing technology. We are focused on solving the most challenging issues our clients face, and we need to use all the tools available to provide the best service and solutions to our clients.

**How important is it for McDermott Will & Emery to build a diverse and inclusive workforce?**

We are on record as saying that we want to be the most diverse Am Law 100 firm there is, and we are committed to achieving this goal. We are not doing it for recognition or to receive awards – we truly believe that a diverse workforce is a better workforce. A workforce that is representative of the population brings better ideas and better solutions for our clients. An example is that if I bring five people with the same backgrounds and experiences in a room and ask what we should do to entertain clients, chances are that they’re going to suggest something similar. Sure, this makes it fast and easy. However, if you have that same meeting with five people from different backgrounds and with different experiences, you are going to get a lot more ideas and creativity, and there will be more discussion and conversation which leads to a better outcome. This takes more time and work and understanding, but these differences make for better decisions. I think we are doing a fantastic job in this area when I evaluate us against our peers, but when I think of where we aspire to be, we have more work to do. As you know, nothing good in life comes easy – when you reflect on anything good that you have in life, it took pushing forward and hard work to make it happen.

**Will you discuss McDermott Will & Emery’s commitment to pro bono work?**

We strongly believe in pro bono and the feeling that helping people who need our help is not only a nice thing to do, but it is our duty. We want every one of our lawyers and every one of our staff professionals to provide services of a pro bono nature. We believe this is an obligation and it is one of the reasons you join this profession – to help people. We continue to add more people and resources to our pro bono staffing, and give a tremendous amount of money, time, and expertise to organizations in the communities we serve to help make a difference. One of the most exciting parts of pro bono is the interest and energy from our young lawyers to get involved in these efforts.

**There are many partners at the firm who have worked with you for many years. How do you think they would describe your management style?**

If they are being honest, I think they would say that I push them really hard, but never harder than he pushes himself. He is probably a little too forgetful, probably a little too emotional, and he probably thinks he is funnier than he is.

**How important is it for the firm to take moments to reflect on its achievements and to celebrate the wins?**

We are the fastest growing Am Law 50 law firm in any dimension that counts, and we have been pushing this for the past six or seven years. It has been an incredible run. We can sit back and celebrate and rest on our laurels, but at our partners’ meeting earlier this year, I said that one of my biggest concerns was complacency. I am a mountain biker, and I spend a lot of time on the bike, and I spend a lot of time on hills. If you are going up a hill, you are climbing and it is hard – it is a struggle. When you are going down a hill, you are coasting – it is easy. When you are running a business and it is easy, you are coasting and, by definition, this means you are going down. In order to have a growth mindset that our entire partnership rallies around, we must know that there is always something around the corner – a new achievement or advancement. It does not mean that you don’t celebrate the wins and congratulate the team, but you better get back to work quickly because we are in a very competitive industry with people who are smart and who work hard. We need to push to do better every day and live our motto of #AlwaysBetter.

**What advice do you offer to young people in law school hoping to build a career in the legal profession?**

You need to be resilient. You cannot fear rejection – you will miss 100 percent of the shots you don’t take. You are going to get knocked down many times, but it is about how many times you get up and push ahead. I think a key to success in business and in life is being able to handle rejection. This applies to any business – you need to have resiliency. It is not about being the smartest person, or the best-looking person, or the one working the most – if you can be resilient and get back up and try new things, you will continue to get better. ●