

The Power of Collaboration

An Interview with Richard A. Edlin, Vice Chair, Greenberg Traurig

EDITORS' NOTE Richard Edlin is Vice Chair of Greenberg Traurig, where he chairs both the Litigation Practice in New York and serves as a member of the firm's executive committee. First and foremost, he is a trial lawyer with broad experience in both trial and appellate courts including the U.S. Supreme Court and the Delaware Supreme Court. He is a fellow of the American Bar Foundation and a member of the Commission for the Reimagining of the New York Courts.



Richard A. Edlin

Did you always want to be a lawyer?

My earliest career goal was to play in the NFL, but after that it was to be a lawyer and there is no greater thing in the legal profession than to lead a trial team in a case that matters. It's as close to raw competition as you can have in the profession. When you're working on a deal, it's competitive and both sides are trying to get the better end of the deal – but both sides want the deal to happen. In litigation, each side is trying to beat each other at every step, so it is hugely competitive and hugely strategic. The day I stop finding all that exciting will be the day to stop doing it, but I've never been more excited about trying cases than I am today.

How would you describe the culture at Greenberg Traurig?

That's probably the most important question that you can ask about a big law firm these days, because a lot of firms look remarkably the same on paper and most firms have some very good lawyers. What we have created at Greenberg Traurig is one of the world's great legal platforms for lawyers to collaborate, because what we have stripped out of the firm are most of the mechanisms that lead to politics and internal competition; what we have enhanced is a platform that rewards lawyers' collaboration. Our lawyers are entrepreneurial and understand the business advantages that clients will obtain from our platform and to then expose those clients to the benefits of that very robust collaboration. We are one firm, with one worldwide voice. That lets us not merely service our clients' legal needs, but we do everything we can to use our platform to enhance and advance our clients' business needs.

Has the pandemic made that kind of collaboration more challenging?

The things that allowed us to be so successful through the pandemic were all the things we were doing before the pandemic. Perhaps we now

spend more time on video conferencing when interacting amongst ourselves, but we were already collaborating across cities and time zones. I'm not talking about lawyers in New York working with colleagues in Boston. I am talking about collaborating with lawyers in London, Berlin, and Seoul – so that was all happening already. We just ended up doing more of it and everyone adapted. If you would have said at the beginning of the pandemic that we would be able to take a client in and out of bankruptcy without setting foot in the client's office

or be able to conduct every aspect of major litigation without ever meeting face to face, everyone would have said it cannot be done. As it turned out, it can. We had a record year in 2020, and we had another record year in 2021.

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How is diversity and inclusion baked into the culture of Greenberg Traurig?

If you go back to when the firm was founded in 1967 in Miami, that city wasn't the dynamic multi-ethnic community you see today. It was a sleepy town, and the law firms there were not generally hiring diverse lawyers, including Hispanics and Jews. The people who started this firm focused on hiring the absolute best lawyers and providing a New York-type of work ethic – work through the evening, on weekends – and they hired hardworking people regardless of ethnic or religious background who could not get jobs at other firms at that time. Ten years earlier, there might not have been the market for that kind of firm, but our founders' timing was perfect and it all created our foundation of providing opportunity to anyone and to promoting people based on merit. Those values have been burned into this firm ever since. We have many diverse professionals throughout all levels of the firm's management.

How do you balance your legal work with service?

I tell people that balance is an exercise over time. You are not going to find balance on a daily basis. If you are on trial, you're not focusing on anything else. If you are on vacation, hopefully you are not working every day. It's the same thing with community service. I don't think that as a person or a lawyer, you can have a balanced life without making a strong effort to give back in whatever way that you can to your community. I've long worked with disadvantaged youth at New Jersey SEEDS, and with the Urban Justice Center, whose clients have almost no ability to tap into legal services. I have also been so pleased to be on our Chief Judge's Commission to Reimagine the Future of the New York Courts, because a major focus of that work is equal access to justice.

Who have been your mentors and what did you learn from them?

I had an exceptional opportunity as a new lawyer to clerk for one of the great federal trial court judges in New York, Lee Gagliardi. He was wonderful to his clerks in terms of teaching and mentoring us – something he took an enormous amount of interest and pride in doing. Then I had a chance to work with Ross Perot when we were representing him; I learned so much about how one of the smartest business leaders of his day thought about running a business. And of course, I have learned an enormous amount from Richard Rosenbaum, the Executive Chairman of Greenberg Traurig. He's taught me how important it is to show respect to and be direct with people, especially when things are difficult. ●