

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

Lewis, Longman & Walker, P.A

LEADERSHIP DEFINED BY PERSPECTIVE

Lewis, Longman & Walker, P.A., touts the importance of perspective in a very big way. The firm's position on the topic is clear, front and center in marketing materials, with the words: "Perspective isn't everything — it's the only thing."

That statement nearly shares topline space with the fact that LLW was established in 1994 and has five offices statewide (Jacksonville, Tallahassee, Tampa, St. Petersburg and West Palm Beach), along with 30-plus attorneys who practice in the areas of environmental, land use, real estate, litigation, legislative and governmental affairs.

Why perspective? The answers can be found in three of the firm's principals: Tara Duhy, Michelle Diffenderfer and Lori Killinger.

While Merriam Webster defines perspective as "the capacity to view things in their true relations or relative importance," this trio goes further — personifying what it means to take distinct views and shape leadership at a firm that consistently earns Martindale-Hubbell's highest rating for legal ability and ethical standards.

Today, Duhy is an executive shareholder in charge of land use and real estate law in LLW's West Palm Beach office. Yet, not too long ago — 2005, to be exact — she joined the firm as a second-year associate. "I grew up here," Duhy says with a laugh.

She found a nurturing environment, where her professional growth was "as important to my partners and colleagues as it is to me," adding, "I was given a path to leadership."

Now, Duhy wants to do the same for younger associates. Advice to them: Listen and watch, as was proved effective in her own rise. "A strong leader is somebody who recognizes their own strengths and weaknesses, listens more than they talk, and recognizes the strengths and weaknesses of their team," she says.

Diffenderfer, now president, also is a LLW lifer, beginning at the firm as a summer clerk while in law school. She graduated in 1994 and became a staff associate a year later. In turn, she eventually helped to establish the firm's workplace ground rules, which years later wound up benefiting Duhy through servant leadership — the sharing power of power.

"'I'm the boss, so do it' is not my style," Diffenderfer says. "... You can't be a leader without allowing delegation and knowing that you're relying on teams and people to get things done."

Such belief was reinforced as Diffenderfer also emerged as a leader in the community and in professional associations. "You have to even be more in a place of letting go because you're not the boss, really," she notes about her volunteer leadership style.

By contrast, Killinger, an executive shareholder, cut her teeth in the legal profession elsewhere — in the hardnosed world of legislative, lobbying and governmental affairs. She started with LLW in 2007, long after law-school graduation in 1988, and continues in those areas at the firm's Tampa and Tallahassee offices.

Particularly through her early years, Killinger's approach was straightforward and marked by "grit and always leading with my brain."

"By necessity, I had to be a leader because I was either going to lead or I was going to get subsumed," she says.

Now an industry veteran, Killinger's perspective has changed as she guides others, but by only just a little.

"Leadership," she concludes, "is an odd mix of grit and toughness and smarts and compassion and sensitivity. You have to be really well-rounded that way. ... And you always are growing into it."

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LORI KILLINGER
TARA DUHY
MICHELLE DIFFENDERFER