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Common Ground (Interview with Baker Donelson CEO Tim Lupinacci)

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Associate Kareim Oliphant sat down with Baker Donelson Chief Executive Officer Tim Lupinacci to explore the role New Year's resolutions can play in annual goal-setting, and Tim's personal approach to big goals.

KO: *New Year's resolutions present an opportunity for individuals to change behaviors and improve outcomes. From physical fitness to personal relationships, people use the new year as a catalyst for setting goals aimed at sparking change in various areas of their lives. Like other driven individuals, leaders of all stripes see great value in goal-setting, particularly when implementing organizational change strategies.*

As you reflect on your overall vision for the Firm, talk to us about why you think setting goals is important, and describe your process for setting goals for the Firm as we strive to set the pace for the new fiscal year.

TL: For as long as I can remember, I have used the New Years' time frame to reflect and set resolutions for the new year ahead. I think some of it has to do with the visual of turning the page into a new year or fresh start. I always think about the statement that "if you aim at nothing you will hit it every time." I think it is critical for individuals and organizations to have specific goals.

About 20 years ago, however, I realized that resolutions rarely take root in long-term habits without a disciplined process and system. This includes prioritization of the two or three key goals that will lead to the most significant impact if you invest your focus and time. The goals must be specific and measurable, and they must be supported by a robust, systematic process to keep you accountable and ensure you stay focused on achieving the goals. This could be as formal as an execution plan, or as simple as tracking actions towards your goal on a calendar. By way of example, I have spent months building out a full-scale execution plan for our updated strategic plan, BakerVision 2028. However, to track my goal to take a 24-hour unplugged Sabbath from iPhone/work each weekend, I note it on my personal calendar to keep track.

KO: *You're right that having a disciplined process and system is crucial, especially when navigating times of change and uncertainty. Indeed (speaking of change), the way we work is rapidly changing. Spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic, remote/hybrid work is becoming a more permanent fixture of our professional lives. This presents both noteworthy challenges and opportunities. For instance, while remote/hybrid work encourages the adoption of technological tools that make collaboration more seamless, it can also make building and maintaining organic professional relationships somewhat harder. What do you think is the relationship between goal-setting and building team cohesion in our increasingly hybrid work environment?*

TL: I think every person has a strong desire to have a clear purpose and be part of a thriving team. I have found no better way to build this intersection than to gather a small group of individuals committed to the same core principles and working together to set Big, Hairy, Audacious Goals (BHAGs). Some of the most rewarding times I have experienced have been getting a core group of our practice team together (shareholders and associates) to look ahead at opportunities and challenges and craft a group plan to expand our business and build deeper client relationships. We then put the big goal on paper (sometimes including a particular theme for the year) and then divided up responsibilities for various parts of it across all team members. This included

client visits, writing articles, and attending industry events where clients would be in attendance. While these examples are pre-pandemic, our team was spread out across multiple Baker Donelson offices. We built cohesion and engagement by working on our core plan together. And we made sure to take time to celebrate wins, including getting together in person for times of fun.

KO: *I really like the BHAGs concept, because it reminds me of a saying that I'm particularly fond of: "go big or go home." In my mind, it's not necessarily about having the biggest goals imaginable, but the fact that you can really make an impact when you set your sights high and establish clear objectives. Can you share an anecdote that speaks to the impact that goal-setting has had in your time as CEO (or in practice prior to becoming CEO)?*

TL: I think one clear example is our now-standard fourth quarter push on finishing our fiscal year out strong. A small working group of Baltimore leaders started meeting in late September 2019 to develop an initiative that could unite the office around a common cause to build momentum and success. We set a goal that was a significant stretch and would require everyone working together to achieve it, and also said that if we hit the goal, we would have a big celebration outside of the office. The Baltimore office rallied together and did hit the stretch goal. The lessons learned helped us refine and roll out a successful fourth quarter approach that is now standard practice for every office.

KO: *That's quite inspiring, and it shows what we can achieve when we get the entire team united and motivated behind an idea. I do wonder, though, whether you think there's such a thing as "aiming too high" when goal-setting. High-achieving people tend to set goals that are so lofty that they are either unattainable, or are achievable only through extreme measures. This makes the goal-setting process a frustrating exercise in futility that can end in burnout. Leaders need to be especially cognizant of these effects, as there is a risk that team members become demoralized by what feels like stagnated progress. Could you share with us some strategies that you've used to ensure that your goals are ambitious, yet grounded in reality, while keeping your team motivated?*

TL: This has been an area where I have certainly made mistakes and learned from them. About 30 years ago, I set a goal to write the next great American novel. That could possibly be attainable, but it would be so only through extreme measures (e.g., devoting full time and resources to it, which I did not have while starting a legal career). At some point, I narrowed the scope to publishing a short story. I did ultimately send a couple of short stories for publication (nothing was ever published), so I focused my non-legal writing energies on leadership articles, several of which have been published. I do think it is important to set BHAGs, but you do need to have a clear and articulated plan to achieve them. It is a balance, but I think individuals and organizations sell themselves short if they do not dream big as a starting point, but then test the goals with facts, data, and reality to craft a stretch goal that is achievable with hard work and everyone buying into the vision. Our updated strategic plan, BakerVision 2028, has some very ambitious goals; however, we have built a model and detailed plan on how it can be achieved if we can get all 1,300 of us firing on all cylinders across various areas.

KO: *I'm excited for BakerVision 2028, and what this initiative will mean for the continued success and growth of the Firm. I'm curious whether, generally speaking, your vision for the Firm is fueled by a hopeful disposition. I don't think it's any secret that you're a generally optimistic person. Anyone who's met you would pick up on this within the first few minutes of speaking with you. To what extent do you credit your goal-setting proficiency with your optimistic outlook?*

TL: I had not previously tied optimism to goal-setting, but I do see the connection. I think that as I became more focused on working collaboratively with teams on dreaming big and setting specific, and at times audacious, goals, the fact that we were able to fail, learn from mistakes, overcome obstacles, and then

accomplish goals did infuse me with increased optimism to drive to "conquer the next mountain." However, at our core, I think optimism is something that comes more from where you center your life and your focus, so I would say it is much broader than the goal-setting process.

Since my late teens, I have been drawn to leaders and others who have seen the good in people and situations regardless of circumstances, people like St. Francis, Gandhi, Jim Elliott, Mother Teresa, and Martin Luther King Jr. My life creed has been "do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." So while I think goal-setting and achievement of BHAGs has certainly added to my optimism (and why I believe we will achieve the ambitious goals of BakerVision 2028), I think living an optimistic outlook on life has to start and build from a deeper core.

KO: *I certainly agree that optimism has to be based on fundamental convictions. Things get really interesting, however, when convictions diverge. I'm sure that you've had to co-lead many initiatives where your vision for the project diverged from that of your co-leader. How do you handle situations like this? How do we find enough common ground to set goals together when we disagree?*

TL: I think the crucial first piece of advice is to always be open to discussion and constructive feedback in helping the team or organization get better. I have worked to instill an internal desire to "always be learning" so I want to hear about other ways of approaching problems to arrive at an agreed solution. I think you have to start from a place of understanding where the co-leader is coming from (which may include background or outside forces completely unrelated to the situation you are working together on). If you gain understanding into what is driving your co-leader, it can help assess the situation. Winston Churchill famously used "dinner table diplomacy" (particularly with FDR), which I think can be helpful. I have found that sitting down for discussion with a colleague where there is disagreement, over drinks or a meal, helps diffuse tension and enables us to build towards a common future.

I would add two important points, however. Ultimately, with sufficient dialogue and insights, a leader has to make the decision and lead. You cannot get bogged down in "paralysis by analysis." This does get challenging in a co-leading situation (and I have learned over time it is far better to have one designated leader who ultimately has to make the call). The other thing is that if you have a co-leader who is not interested in listening or working towards a common solution, at some point you have to disengage to the extent practical. I have learned that it is not healthy to engage in hand-to-hand combat with an individual approaching life or teams with an unyielding selfish, egotistic, or cynical view of the world, the team or its work. I have not always been able to do so, but at a minimum, I do not want to be in a co-leading situation with them, and I try to minimize working together with them where practical. Fortunately, this has been a rare occurrence in my professional career.

KO: *The "dinner table diplomacy" concept seems so simple, yet effective and readily applicable with just a bit of will and determination on both sides. I'll definitely add this idea to my conflict resolution toolbox. I'm impressed that our discussion on goal-setting took us from New Year resolutions to Winston Churchill. As we wrap our conversation, what are two or three actionable things that someone reading this could go do right now to get their goal-setting process started for the year, if they haven't already?*

TL: I would get a blank sheet of paper and make a list of all your dreams, goals, and ambitions down the left side of the page. Don't put any constraint on your list. This is a brainstorming session without judgment. I would focus on creating a list of goals in big bucket areas like professional, financial, family, fun, fitness, faith, philanthropy, etc. Think about it as the left side column of an Excel spreadsheet. Then go through the list and begin to prioritize those goals/ambitions that can have the biggest leverage impact over the next 90 to 120 days. Move those items to the second column of the spreadsheet. Continue moving right on the spreadsheet in narrowing your goals. Once you identify your core goals to focus on for the next period of your journey,

begin mapping out the steps needed to accomplish the goal. What data or resources do you need? Who do you need to assist? How are you going to remain accountable to press on to success? I would also build out a system to track your progress. A couple of systems that I have found helpful include Darren Hardy's "Living Your Best Year Ever" workbook and Sean Covey's "The Four Disciplines of Execution." I also recently read "Hero on a Mission" by Donald Miller, which I found a helpful resource with a structured process to set and achieve your goals.