

Innovative Managing Partner: Baker Donelson's Ben Adams

For Ben C. Adams of Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz PC, managing his firm all starts with listening, giving straight answers and simply treating employees with respect, an approach that has distinguished him as one of America's Most Innovative Managing Partners.

With great people skills and a deep commitment to transparency, Adams, who took over as Baker Donelson's chairman and CEO in 2003, has guided the firm through an expansion that has added several new offices and brought its number of attorneys to about 630 from a little more than 250 less than a decade ago, landing him on Law360's list of America's Most Innovative Managing Partners.

The firm's recent success comes in large part from having a deft hand at the tiller, said William S. Painter, Baker Donelson's chief strategic planning officer. "Ben has probably got the finest touch of any law firm leader that I've ever seen," said Painter, who has worked closely alongside Adams in recent years.

Painter went on to say that Adams' approach to leadership starts with the attention he pays to those under him and the "visceral caring" he shows for the people — shareholders, associates and support staff alike — who fill the firm's 18 offices and carry out its work. One way that caring manifests itself, in a practical sense, is that Adams, who is based in Memphis, Tenn., is often on the road, making the rounds at different offices.

On one recent trip to Johnson City, Tenn., for instance, Adams said he had lunch with the office's partners one day, dinner with the associates later that night and breakfast with the support staff the next morning. He made a similar trip to Baker Donelson's Knoxville, Tenn., office shortly after.

Beyond more formal meeting and luncheons with staff, Adams makes a point to spend some of his time on each trip casually stopping by people's desks, catching up on what's going on in their lives, both at work and outside it.

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