

How I Made Law Firm Leadership: Get Involved Early and Learn to 'See Around Corners,' Say Michelle Kelban and Michael Haas of Latham & Watkins

By ALM Staff

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Michelle Kelban and Michael Haas, Latham & Watkins, New York

Title: Global Co-Chairs, Real Estate Practice

Year Graduated, Law School:

Kelban: George Washington University Law School, 2000

Haas: Cleveland State University – Marshall College of Law, 1994

How many years have you been at your firm?

Kelban: I'll celebrate my 23rd anniversary with the firm in October – I'm a lifer.

Haas: I celebrated 5 years with Latham in May.

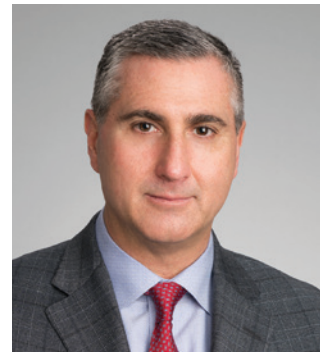
What made you pick your practice area?

Kelban: I came to Latham right after graduation and gained experience in a number of different practices through the firm's unassigned program, from capital markets to securitization to tax. Real estate drew me in because it is tangible. These properties relate to where people work, shop, and live. The extraordinarily broad nature of the practice also appealed to me because I knew I wouldn't do the same task over and over. Plus, I liked the people and the size of the group. I felt real estate was a practice where I could make an impact and be entrepreneurial.

Haas: I grew up listening to my uncle, a top labor lawyer, regale us with work stories. That sparked my interest in the law. In college, I interned with a developer and saw first-hand how real estate presented opportunities for anyone to create wealth. I wanted the ability to one day turn to my kids and say, "I did that deal." Even to this day, when I travel, I'll point out to them the properties for which I advised on the purchase or financing.



Michelle Kelban,
Latham & Watkins.



Michael J. Haas of
Latham & Watkins.

Courtesy photos

How did you develop your expertise in your practice area?

Kelban: I learned hands on, by doing the work. I also lucked out with an incredible cadre of mentors and supervisors, including Jamie Hisiger, who preceded Michael and me in leading Latham's Real Estate Practice. Jamie remains my first call for advice in difficult situations.

As a young associate, I was a dedicated listener, dialing into conference calls even if they didn't relate to the deal I was working on. I read a ton to keep up with market trends. And I embraced trying new things, like an innovative deal structure we could roll out to clients. All of that determination empowered me to learn faster, learn better, and learn more.

Haas: I followed the technological advancements in real estate, embracing the change instead of ignoring the evolution of the industry. I began my practice with traditional work but quickly moved to the innovations I saw in the market. For example, the use of private capital in real estate wasn't as mature as it is today, but became more normal as technology evolved. The 2009 financial crisis catalyzed that, and I saw the speed with which new deal structures started to grow, so I quickly adopted those into my practice.



Latham & Watkins offices.

Why did you want to become a practice area leader?

Kelban: I love the practice of law but also enjoy working with and managing people. I like figuring out how to incentivize and motivate a team, to help them achieve personal goals and navigate the nuances of their career. I learned under leaders who understood both business objectives and human dynamics, and I try to emulate them now in my current role. I find building and managing a business, which is really what this role entails, helps to round out my experience.

Haas: I started seeking leadership positions when I realized I had an ability to motivate teams to achieve their goals. I like securing buy-in for the future and holding myself accountable to reach new frontiers. When I joined Latham, Michelle and I created an ambitious five-year strategic plan, and the numbers we set for ourselves challenged us. I thrive on that, and bringing our plan to fruition motivated me every single day. We hit those numbers because we strove to secure buy-in from our partners and made sure we progressed with one shared vision.

What skill sets do you need to be an effective practice group leader?

Kelban: Good leaders must possess some degree of fearlessness — at least on the job. (I still have a healthy fear of escalators and heights!) We need to listen and express empathy, but at the same time, success requires a strong vision, a clear path forward, and the backbone to turn that vision into reality. For example, the other day I told someone, “If everyone likes me, I’m not doing my job.” I created the strategy for this group eight years ago, and while the ideas of others have helped morph our strategy over time, sticking with the plan has led us to the position we’re in today.

Haas: When I first took on a management role at a previous firm, someone gave me the advice that a good leader has clean windows. Your team has to see that you’re leading from the front. For example, when we completed a €1 billion deal for Apollo earlier this year, which had international components, we worked a lot of late nights and early mornings. Our team knew I was on every call, no matter when it was scheduled; they knew and appreciated my accessibility.

How does having a practice leadership role give you a sense of the broader strategic vision of the firm?

Haas: As practice co-chairs, we interface quite a bit with firm leadership, participating in cross-practice calls, strategy sessions, and retreats. As the firm has grown, so have the responsibilities of global department chairs as we stay in constant communication with the firm’s executive committee. For the Real Estate Practice in particular, hard assets have become such a key factor in the market that we often contribute to management strategy as it relates to the confluence of real estate and infrastructure.

How do you balance client work with management work?

Kelban: Don’t forget about balancing both client work and management work with *life*. Administrative work can seem easy to put to the side, but that approach doesn’t work — nothing gets done magically. Like anything that needs attention, I set aside time. I’ll spend the extra hour a day to play whack-a-mole or triage; I’ll catch up on administrative tasks and follow ups during a flight.

But the support we receive from staff also plays an instrumental role in getting everything done. Because of the incredible team we have, I can keep up with routines that matter to me, including taking my daughter to school every day and getting my workouts in, which I need to function optimally.

What other roles or experiences help you in this current role?

Kelban: Certainly, my time spent on various committees with the firm prepared me for some of the unique aspects of this role. Serving on the recruiting and associates committees helped me understand the needs of our younger lawyers, and how to relate to colleagues at all levels of seniority. I served on the client intake team for our New York office for eight years after I made partner — talk about email traffic! But seeing every single new matter underscored how the firm touches almost every aspect of the law.

Haas: My wife and I care deeply about giving back to our communities, and are fortunate to sit on several national and community boards, including the Basser Center for BRCA, which funds research, education, and care for breast cancer. Sadly, we are a poster family for the issue. We've chaired a couple of boards as well, and all of these experiences have informed how I manage multiple parties and acknowledge the value of patience.

What are key priorities for your practice area?

Kelban: The Real Estate Practice's priorities evolve constantly. We've expanded our geographic footprint and bench of top talent globally. We've improved across the board and have raised our reputation as a market leader, internally and externally.

Haas: Our main goal, as I see it, focuses on articulating a simple message for the market that emphasizes our areas of strength. We do real estate finance and real estate private equity – we excel anywhere in the capital stack that private equity plays. Additionally, we represent publicly traded real estate companies and operators in every facet of their business. Few firms operate in all of those spaces at a high level, which provides us a competitive advantage.

From a global perspective, we're continuing to expand, bringing the standard of excellence we have in our established and growing markets, including London and Germany.

Is succession planning a part of your role as a practice group leader, and if yes, how so?

Kelban: Succession planning plays one of the most critical roles in whether we consider someone's time as practice group leader a success. If you fail to think ahead, and I mean longer than a month before someone's retirement, you run the risk of losing clients.

Every year, we evaluate our group org chart, determining where we need to deploy resources based on specialty, vintage, and so on. Sometimes we start conversations about succession earlier than people may expect, but client relationships shouldn't revolve around one person. The infrastructure should be in place so that the transition feels seamless.

Do you have a broader influence in this role over improving diversity at your firm? If yes, how so?

Haas: As chairs, we directly promote the firm's diversity, equity, and inclusion mission. From progression

recommendations, to lateral hiring decisions, to recruiting unassigned associates, we are uniquely positioned to advance DEI in our profession and in our communities. That's something Michelle and I value immensely in our practice, and we keep it at the forefront of our conversations.

Is there anything that surprised you about the role?

Kelban: The level of detail surprised me. As co-chairs, we have to keep the big picture in focus but also to dive into the weeds. Some of the administrative aspects can get quite granular in order to do the job the right way.

Haas: The most surprising aspect for me is how much the firm governs by consensus. Leadership truly seeks out collaboration and engages us in every process thoughtfully. That culture requires a different frame of mind from other places I've worked, but I'm appreciative that I'm never speaking into a void. Our input always carries weight.

How has the role given you insights into client needs?

Haas: Serving as a co-chair of the practice group provides the extremely valuable experience of learning how your partners and colleagues interact with their clients. We hear what clients look for, what business actions they're undertaking, the support they need. And then we take what we hear and apply it to our own client relationships. We get a constant stream of insights to better position ourselves in the market and be the best advisors possible for our clients.

Is there any other advice you'd share for those looking to become a practice leader?

Kelban: If you show interest, you'd be surprised at how involved you can become, even early in your career. As a third-year associate, I asked our office managing partner how I could participate in firm governance, and he helped seat me on Latham's recruiting committee. Two years later I joined the firm's associate committee. Those roles allowed me to see the impact that firm decisions had at the individual level and set me up for success as I grew in seniority.

Haas: Lead from the front, not the rear. You have to stay on top of trends and constantly evaluate the bigger picture in terms of the market. Honing your ability to see around corners will equip you with the skills to make the decisions you need to as a practice leader.