

How I Made Practice Group Chair: 'Focus on Helping Your Group and Firm to Thrive,' Says Robert Niles-Weed of Weil

By Victoria Pfefferle-Gillot

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Robert Niles-Weed, 37, Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP, New York, New York

Job title: Co-head of Weil's appeals and strategic counseling practice

Practice area: Appellate litigation, complex commercial litigation

Law school and year of graduation: Harvard Law School, 2016

The following has been edited for style.

How many years have you been at your firm?

I have been at the firm for six years.

What made you pick your practice area?

I love working with clients to creatively tackle their thorniest legal challenges. I love honing our positions into crisp and compelling advocacy. And I love doing it as part of a multifaceted team where everybody is aligned towards the same goal and bringing their energy and expertise to bear to achieve it. Working in appeals and strategic counseling allows me to do what I love every single day.

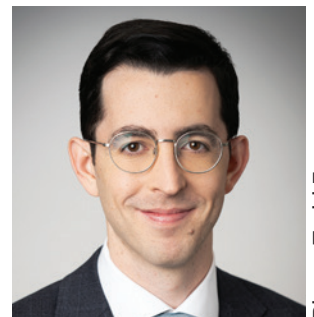
How did you develop your expertise in your practice area?

I clerked for three brilliant judges: Judge Oetken on the Southern District of New York, Judge Tatel on the D.C. Circuit, and Justice Kagan on the Supreme Court. They each taught me so much about legal thinking and writing.

But I did not really learn how to become an effective litigator until I came to Weil and had the opportunity to learn from some of the best strategists, counselors, and advocates in the business.

Why did you want to become a practice area leader?

Complex litigation is a team sport. I am energized by the challenge of leading a team as much as I am by the very different challenge of writing a brief or delivering an argument. I want Weil to be the premier destination for the strongest all-around lawyers and team players coming out of law school and clerkships. And



Robert Niles-Weed of Weil, Gotshal & Manges.

Photo: Todd France

I want our team to be the first call for our clients' most complex problems. As a practice group leader, I am in a position to continue making this vision a reality.

What skill sets do you need to be an effective practice group leader (i.e., knowing more about the practice, hiring, business development, financial management, etc.)?

I'm still figuring this one out. Fortunately, Mark Perry and Greg Silbert, my predecessors in this role, set a great example to follow, and Zack Tripp, who is continuing as co-head, is already an expert in the role. To get up the curve, I'm listening closely—to our clients, to our group, to colleagues across the firm—to understand how our group can best show up for them. And I'm remaining laser-focused on delivering the highest quality work product and strategic thinking, though now trying to do it at scale.

How do you balance client work with management work?

Prioritization is key. There is always going to be more to do than there is time to do it. I feel this especially acutely with a six-month-old at home. Given that I will never be able to do everything, the challenge is to focus my time where I can contribute the most and to be completely present in whatever it is that I am focused on. Critically, I'm not doing it alone. I have more talented and collaborative colleagues than I can count, including a deep bench of up-and-coming litigators who are my peers and role models.

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

My role is reflective of Weil's commitment to cultivating a new generation of talent and

firm leadership: my promotion to practice group leader was announced with more than a dozen other promotions across the firm. Empowering people to take on leadership roles earlier in their careers and drive long-term strategy and culture is energizing for the firm. It also opens up more senior leaders to flex their superpowers on the client service and business development fronts. Add in a set of exciting lateral hires, and Weil is firing on all cylinders.

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

I was a management consultant before getting a joint J.D./M.B.A. So I have had the chance to see many well-functioning (and less well-functioning) organizations firsthand and am excited to bring some of that perspective to bear. I am also a brand new father—my son was born (and I went on parental leave) the week after my promotion was announced. He's already taught me the importance of resilience, teamwork, and not being afraid to roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty. And he rarely responds to my appeals or strategic counseling, which is humbling and grounding.

What are key priorities for your practice area?

Weil's appeals and strategic counseling practice is special in the degree to which we are integrated into our litigation department and the firm as a whole. Of course, one of our top priorities is briefing, arguing and winning high-stakes appeals—and we do that day in and day out. But an equally important priority is helping our colleagues and firm clients present the highest quality advocacy and strategy at all levels and in all forums.

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

Always. As a practice group leader, I want to make sure that everybody in our group has opportunities to grow and develop quickly on whatever trajectory they aspire to. One of the virtues of taking on the practice-group leadership role relatively early in my career is that I know that practice group leadership is not a lifetime achievement award, but rather a challenge and an opportunity to build for the future. Nothing would make me happier than stewarding the group to the next level of success and handing the reins over to support the next person ready to take on that challenge.

Is there anything that surprised you about the role?

I've been delighted by how much fun it all is! Weil litigation is on fire right now—we're winning big cases for our clients, we're bringing in and growing top-tier talent, and we're doing it with our culture of generosity and collaboration. It's exciting to be at the heart of it!

How has the role given you insights into client needs?

Clients care about their own businesses, not about ours. They need the best advice to help them manage their most complex legal challenges in a rapidly changing technological and regulatory environment. These challenges are often cross-disciplinary and call for diverse expertise from across the firm. So as a practice group leader, it is my job to make sure that we are deploying our team's expertise in close collaboration with the other practices at the firm to provide our clients with the best legal services available, whatever the label on the tin internally.

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

Don't think about it! Just focus on doing the best work you can, being the best colleague you can, and helping your group and firm to thrive as best you can. My vibe is very JFK inaugural "ask not." Leadership opportunities may come (or they may not), but I've always found it more satisfying to know that I'm doing the best that I can where it matters the most, rather than focusing on the title on my business card.