

The Business of Law

Babst Calland Managing Shareholder Don Bluedorn on the pursuit of a sustainable growth strategy built on opportunity, flexibility, collaboration, and culture.

by Daniel Bates, Contributing Writer

Some things never change.

And that's a good thing, according to Donald C. Bluedorn II, managing shareholder of Pittsburgh law firm Babst Calland, who has devoted most of his career at the firm to championing a business model and culture that, he said, have fostered long-term, sustainable growth since the firm's inception in 1986.

That business model and culture, Bluedorn said, are what attracted him to the firm in the first place as a young lawyer, only a year after Babst Calland was established. He also credits this with fueling the firm's growth across five office locations, including Pittsburgh, Washington, D.C., Charleston, W.Va., State College, Pa., and Harrisburg, Pa., along with several remote "outpost" offices. Such growth also has made Babst Calland one of Pittsburgh's top law firms.

"When I came to Babst Calland from another larger firm, there were two things that really impressed me and made me want to become part of Babst Calland," Bluedorn said. "One was there was a lot of flexibility and a lot of ability to control your own destiny as a lawyer and become what you want to be – an opportunity to practice law, manage clients, and gain a lot of hands-on experience, and that really appealed to me as a young lawyer."

The second factor, he continued, was – and still is – the firm's culture. "I loved the culture. People were treated with mutual respect, and everyone worked together. And although we've grown in size and we've added lawyers and practice areas, I think those two attributes of the firm have really stayed the same. They're part of what define us and are part of what we work to make sure we maintain because this is what differentiates us and makes us so successful in the marketplace."

He added: "It allows us to retain and attract really sophisticated talent. There are opportunities at lots of other places, but our people choose to spend their careers with us."

Bluedorn shared his insights on sustainability and the growth strategy that has built Babst Calland's legacy as a successful law practice for more than three decades during a recent interview.

The strategy really begins with Bluedorn's own philosophy about the practice of law, which goes back to his undergraduate engineering degree he earned before attending law school.

"My first engineering professor described engineering as solving unsolvable problems," he said. "To me, that's what the practice of law is, and I've always enjoyed that. I love taking on clients' problems and working with them to find solutions."

Depth and collaboration

To "solve unsolvable problems really motivates me and keeps me coming in every day with a smile on my face," Bluedorn explained, Babst Calland has taken a more focused approach to law, specializing largely in helping its clients navigate the legal and regulatory challenges of businesses today.

"Our business model is different than many of our competitors," Bluedorn said. "We don't want to be all things to all people, and we don't want to grow just to grow. Although we've been fortunate to grow in many ways, we put together teams in certain areas of law. We want to practice with as much depth and sophistication as anyone in the country."



Donald C. Bluedorn II
Managing Shareholder

"And we provide our legal services at a lower price point with a greater focus on client satisfaction," he continued. "That's what has allowed us to grow. That's the external difference. The client never has to worry about not getting a returned phone call, which blows my mind when I hear clients talk about taking days to hear from lawyers. That just doesn't happen with us."

The cultural difference

The firm's collaborative depth-and-sophistication approach wouldn't succeed, though, without a strong internal culture, Bluedorn said.

"The internal difference is just as important as the external difference," he said. "Every business in the country talks about culture. Culture is a really critically important lesson. The first thing we talk about as lawyers and the last thing we talk about – and all of our internal practices, all of our formal and informal methods of dealing with people, are based around fostering that culture."

Here's how he describes the Babst Calland culture: "A culture of mutual respect, a culture of teamwork, and a culture of support. We don't have the silos and disconnectedness that you sometimes see in other organizations. Everyone wants to work together, and everyone is treated with respect. This has allowed us to grow in ways that we otherwise wouldn't have been able to if we had a more traditional model."

Bluedorn summed up the firm's overall goal like this. "Our goal is to grow a strong and vibrant business by serving clients well and, in turn, providing a positive experience and opportunity for our people."

Growth investments

To support the firm's growth and culture, Babst Calland continues to invest substantially in its people, practice areas, and service delivery, Bluedorn said. Among its priorities are stronger infrastructure, new technology that helps people succeed and collaborate more efficiently, and leadership development.

"We encourage our people to step up for new challenges with a client or on one of the firm's key initiatives," he said. "This is happening at each of our office locations."

Bluedorn credits the firm's collaborative culture with getting the firm through the formidable challenges of the COVID pandemic, when Babst Calland had to shut down its offices and send people home to work remotely.

"We were fortunate because we had a strong culture and a strong history of working collaboratively to solve difficult issues," he recalled. "So early on in the pandemic, we came together cohesively as shareholders – as a law firm – and said, 'we're going to get through this together, just like we always do, and we're not going to implement draconian measures like massive pay cuts.'

"But the underlying theme, the constant thread throughout all of that was we wanted to come together, to work together, to take care of each other," Bluedorn continued. "And in doing that, we wanted to be in a position where we could take care of our clients and each other, and we are proud to say we did that."

Babst Calland's hybrid future

Why the pandemic was so important, Bluedorn said, is that it set the firm up to provide more flexibility to its employees going forward, thanks to new technology proven to work during the pandemic, as well as to facilitate the collaborative culture moving forward. The result? A three-day-a-week hybrid work schedule for most employees, where the employees can choose which three days of the week they want to work in the office, and which two days they'll work remotely.

"We came to that fairly early on in the return to office period, and we actually initiated it with a broad-based survey to all of our people, and we asked them to identify themselves (not by name but by position) so that we had an idea of our different constituencies and what their concerns were," Bluedorn said. "And we're investing in technology that makes us more productive at home and makes it more seamless in terms of communications."

"We continue to refine our practices to make it better for our people," he continued, "so we have no intention of walking away from three days a week and in fact, we're hoping to continue it forever."

Strategic growth mode

Flexibility aside, Bluedorn said the firm's lawyers maintain a strong affinity for Babst Calland because of the growth opportunities ahead.

"We are in strategic growth mode and looking toward the future. This is not a situation like some firms that maximize what they can do for the next six or seven years and then see where they are, and then get acquired. We're growing and taking steps today, and we expect it to really pay off in the next 10 to 15 years."

He added: "We're taking a long-term view, and so it's a great opportunity for someone to come in and be able to control their destiny, work with people they like, and have an organization that's really looking toward future growth and opportunity for all of its people."

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