

## How I Made Partner: 'Learn as Much as You Can About the Law, Your Clients and Your Own Firm,' Says Charles Ricciardelli of Skadden

By ALM Staff

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**Charles Ricciardelli; 47; Partner at Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom; Washington, D.C.**

**Practice area:** Political law

**Law school and year of graduation:** Georgetown University Law Center, 2006

*The following has been edited for style.*

### **How long have you been at the firm?**

I have been with the firm for 19 years in total, if you start counting from 2005, when I was a summer associate in our Chicago office. I joined the New York office in 2006, as a first-year associate, and then moved to Washington, D.C., in 2011, to begin practicing in the political law group.

### **What was your criteria in selecting your current firm?**

At the start of my career, I had not zeroed in on any particular field yet. So, it was important to me to join a firm doing top-tier work across a broad spectrum of practice areas. Beyond that, I placed an enormous premium on collegiality and culture. I wanted to work at a firm where people genuinely enjoyed working together, and a firm that took a serious interest, not only in its attorneys' performance and development, but in the well-being of those attorneys and everyone who worked there.

You don't have perfect information when you're a law student interviewing at different firms, but



Courtesy photo

### **Charles Ricciardelli of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom.**

all of my interactions with the people at Skadden made me feel as though I had found the right place. People's doors were open, conversations carried on in offices and hallways—and, reassuringly, they weren't all about work. I was left with the distinct impression that this was a team of smart, dedicated people who liked each other and what they did for a living. Having been here now for my entire career, I clearly made the right choice.

### **What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you partner? Was it your**

**performance on a specific case? A personality trait? Making connections with the right people?**

I don't think it's possible to identify a single decision point or trait responsible for anyone making partner. Deep technical expertise, strategic perspective and a commitment to putting your clients first is the starting point. These traits allowed me to become a key resource for my group, the firm and our clients. As a result, I developed trust among the partners that I had the capability and desire to develop and maintain relationships and grow our practice in a meaningful way.

My willingness to serve as a resource to those around me in the firm helped round out my case for partnership. I enjoy serving as a mentor, or just a sounding board for more junior attorneys and staff members—as ensuring the strength of the firm's culture, and training the next generation of Skadden lawyers, is a key part of the partnership's responsibilities. I think my commitment to that role was an important part of my journey to making partner.

**Who had or has the greatest influence in your career and why?**

I have been very fortunate in my career to have worked with a number of incredible attorneys who have shaped my path. Most notably, having the opportunity to work for, and alongside, Ki Hong, the head of Skadden's political law practice, has had a profound impact on my career. There is almost no legal question in our field that he hasn't addressed, and, most likely, he considered it first and set the industry standard for how to approach the issue. Having the benefit of his subject matter expertise has been invaluable. But, perhaps even more important, has been learning from the manner in which he advises clients—quickly identifying the crux of an issue and methodically (and clearly) proposing solutions to the client to achieve their desired outcome.

Simply put, there is no way I would be here without his generous mentorship and guidance along the way.

I would be remiss not to also mention the first partner I worked for as a junior associate in our New York office, Toby D'Oench. Toby left an indelible impression on me, as an incredibly busy partner who always seemed to have time to check in on how I was doing—often stopping by my office late at night before leaving to ask if he could do anything to help me get home sooner. My experience with him did not exactly match the caricature of a “big law” partner people told stories about in law school, and, if anything, I hope I can model some of that behavior in my own career.

**What advice would you give an associate who wants to make partner?**

Honestly, try not to think about it too much. I would recommend focusing on developing your abilities as a lawyer, your relationships with your clients and your network within the firm, and let the process play out. There's certainly nothing wrong with setting that goal, but if you filter everything through the lens of a desire to make partner, you risk defining success or failure by the wrong metric. I would advise young attorneys to enjoy the journey—take on every project you can and, in the process, learn as much as you can about the law, about your clients and about your own firm. I suspect you'll find it more enjoyable, and it will hold you in good stead wherever your path leads.

**When it comes to career planning and navigating inside a law firm, in your opinion, what's the most common mistake you see other attorneys making?**

I think there's a reluctance among attorneys in the large law firm setting to speak candidly about what they want, or may not want, out of their

career. Noting my prior advice not to think about becoming a partner too much—the key there is “too much.” If it’s something you want, say so.

I wouldn’t let it consume you, as I mentioned, but let people know you’re interested in it. At the same time, if you don’t want to make partner, or you simply don’t know, I personally don’t think that should be a taboo conversation. Having frank and ongoing discussions about career paths and different options is healthy and productive for all involved.

**What challenges, if any, did you face or had to overcome in your career path and what was the lesson learned? How did it affect or influence your career?**

My mother used to tell me that I tended to “hide my light under a bushel.” Once I looked it up, I found out it meant she thought that I wasn’t much of a self-advocate. I would say that has been one of the more difficult challenges I’ve had to overcome in my career. Whether in the context of earning promotions or developing business, it’s important to strike the right balance of being clear and forthright about your abilities without, obviously, veering into being boastful.

When I relayed what my mother used to say about me “hiding my light” during my partner selection interview last February, the partner conducting the interview paused briefly and simply said: “Well, this certainly isn’t the time for that.” He was right, and I try to take that to heart these days.

**Knowing what you know now about your career path, what advice would you give to your younger self?**

I would advise my younger self, and any more junior attorney, to get as much exposure to different areas of law as possible. Taking on a variety of pro bono matters, for example, would be an excellent way to broaden your experience in a meaningful way. Personally, I feel more well-rounded having started my career as a corporate attorney doing fund formation and M&A work, and I still wish I had found ways to gain more varied experience.

**Do you utilize technology to benefit the firm/practice and/or business development?**

I turn to social media and news alerts as much as possible to stay on top of developments in our practice area, and also developments with our clients. It’s crucial to be up to date on both in order to anticipate what our clients might need and spot issues that they aren’t even thinking about yet.

**How would you describe your work mindset?**

I would describe my work mindset as creative. Especially in a regulatory practice, knowing the applicable rules is table stakes. The real value I strive to add is the ability to creatively address a client’s needs within that framework to allow them to most efficiently accomplish their goals, rather than giving simplistic “yes” or “no” answers.