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An audience with...

'I can never accept finishing second'

Quinn Emanuel's global co-head talks about victory emails, growing up with a chip on his shoulder and why there's more to the US litigation firm than its fearsome reputation

Interview by **Adam Mawardi**

MICHAEL CARLINSKY



Employees at US law firm Quinn Emanuel receive a daily email ending with a four-letter rallying cry: NFLO. It stands for 'No firm like ours', and concludes what co-managing partner Michael Carlinsky describes as a "victory email" of wins by the world's largest litigation-only business.

"It is a simple yet powerful statement of the greatness of the firm and its people," he tells Financial News. "This is the message that everybody in the firm believes in. It is infectious. Sometimes it will also say NALO: No associates like ours."

Sent by the most senior person involved in a case, the internal memos detail the challenges and the tactics that led to victory. They also outline the role of each person in the winning team, from senior partner to junior associate, all the way down to the paralegals and secretaries. Sometimes the emails go out five times a day.

Victory emails aren't about boasting, Carlinsky says, but recognising the sacrifices and sleepless nights behind each win and putting rising talent in bright lights.

"At some firms, one person's success creates resentment from someone else who views it as that person is getting the spotlight," he says. "At Quinn, we abhor that. It is really both a meritocracy, but [also] a place where everyone wants each other to succeed."

Finding the right message

Our chat with Carlinsky offers a rare glimpse inside Quinn Emanuel, best known for its hard-nosed exterior, tenacious approach to courtroom battles and high-profile client base. Carlinsky has previously acted for private equity giants Brookfield, Centerbridge and HIG Capital, as well as Singapore's sovereign wealth fund GIC.

What exactly Quinn Emanuel stands for beyond that, however, is now the focus of an ongoing firm-wide messaging exercise that could ultimately reshape its public persona as the litigation house targets further growth.

The process involves a website redesign and has seen partners consulted about which of the firm's other qualities should be promoted publicly.

"It's a really long list. If you asked 50 different lawyers in our firm, 'what would be the one message you'd like to see associated with us in addition to "most feared", you may get 40 different answers," says Carlinsky.

He points to Quinn Emanuel's internal collegiality and support, its artificial intelligence tools, and its 800-plus pool of associates globally.

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“There are a lot of different messages in there. And what we don’t want is just one message necessarily obscuring all of the other important messages.”

The exercise comes with Quinn Emanuel set to hit \$3bn in global revenue and \$10m in profit per partner by the end of 2026, a target Carlinsky set with co-managing partner William Burck in 2023. The firm has recorded three years of double-digit growth, with Carlinsky leading efforts to increase output while pushing lawyers to focus more on winning new business.

To meet demand from clients and fend off competition, Quinn Emanuel is preparing for a global hiring spree, which could see headcount increase by a third, FN recently reported.

Fear us still

Carlinsky says reviewing its messaging won’t see Quinn Emanuel distance itself from its reputation as the world’s “most feared” law firm, a moniker that it has even embroidered onto baseball caps. “We’re never going to rebrand,” he says.

The title wasn’t one that Quinn Emanuel bestowed on itself, but one based on BTI Consulting Group’s annual ranking of litigation firms that strike the “utmost fear” in general counsel and legal decision-makers.

However, Carlinsky says the firm proudly wears the title as a “badge of honour” and in practice means representing clients “zealously” and being “really good and really scary” in its disputes work.

“We want our adversaries to respect us, and at some level to fear going up against us. That results in great outcomes for our clients, especially in resolving cases,” he says. “The power of the Quinn brand behind the great litigators at our firm cannot be overstated.”

Carlinsky says that he receives phone calls almost daily from existing or new clients, often referrals from rival firms that Quinn Emanuel has acted against.

“And what do the callers say? ‘You are the most feared law firm. We want you on our side. We need you on our side.’ And it makes sense,” he says. “We are in a firm where you’re hiring us because you need us to fight your battle.”

A chip on the shoulder

Winning has motivated Carlinsky since he was a boy. Raised in Canarsie, Mill Basin in south-eastern Brooklyn, he and his friends would play basketball on the concrete or window-breaking games of baseball in the middle of the street.

“It was really, really competitive,” he recalls. “I hated losing from the earliest date. And no surprise. It’s the way I am. I can never accept finishing second. So it really pushes me.”

CV

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| BORN March 1965 | CAREER 2002-present Partner, Quinn Emanuel |
| EDUCATION Class of 1986 Bachelor’s degree, Susquehanna University | 1993-2002 Associate (1993-97), then partner (1997-2002), Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe |
| Class of 1989 Doctor of Law (JD), Hofstra University School of Law | 1989-93 Associate, Weil Gotshal & Manges |

Carlinsky grew up in a four-generation house with his grandmother and great-grandmother living in the apartment upstairs, as was common in his neighbourhood. The confined environment cultivated what Carlinsky now describes as “street smarts”, having quickly learned to read people and assess situations.

His “lower middle-class” upbringing also bred survival instincts, having experienced financial struggles firsthand. Carlinsky’s father drove a yellow taxi and mother worked multiple jobs to put food on the table.

With money tight, Carlinsky started working at an early age. At 14 years old, after finishing school in Brooklyn he would take a bus then train to his retail job in Manhattan, which involved vac-

uuming the shopfloor carpet and being a salesperson until late at night.

He was also a busboy at a restaurant, a hotel bellhop, and although he never considered becoming a taxi driver, he would spend weekends riding upfront with his “socially more conservative” father and speaking with passengers in the back of the cab.

“I was a chatterbox,” he says. “I would sit there and chat up the passenger and I would always get the better tip. I’d make a couple of dollars. I was always an entrepreneur.”

We never want to be second

As a teenager, the thought of one day becoming a lawyer, let alone one running a \$3bn-a-year enterprise would have been “an unfathomable dream”. University was then a “mystery” to him, as no one in his immediate family had gone before.

“Having humble beginnings and humble roots, I really think helps ground you,” he says. “Now look, somebody will say, ‘Are you kidding me? You have all these accoutrements.’ But I guess the person I tried to be in what I do is still that person who grew up... with a chip on my shoulder. That drives me and drives me still to this day, every day.”

Carlinsky went on to become an associate at Weil Gotshal and a partner at Orrick before joining Quinn Emanuel.

However, inspired by his mother’s reminder not to judge others until you walk a mile in their shoes, Carlinsky’s philosophy remains the same: never forget where you came from.

At Quinn Emanuel, Carlinsky’s mantra translates in thanking workers when they’ve done a great job and building teams of lawyers from all walks of life, united by a common desire to be the best at litigating.

“You have to be 100% committed for what we do because otherwise you come in second place and second place is not where we ever want to be,” he says.