

# How We Made Law Firm Leadership: 'Lean Into a Long-Term Perspective,' Say Karen Kimmey & Holly Sutton of Farella Braun

By ALM Staff

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**Karen Kimmey and Holly Sutton, Co-Managing Partners at Farella Braun + Martel, San Francisco, California**

**Practice area:** *Kimmey:* Business litigation; *Sutton:* Employment

**Law school and year of graduation:** *Kimmey:* University of California College of the Law, San Francisco, 1994; *Sutton:* Stanford Law School, 1993

*The following has been edited for style.*

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

*Kimmey:* 31 years. I started with Farella as an associate in 1994.

*Sutton:* 27 years. I joined Farella in 1998. I was a summer associate in 1991.

**How long were you a partner at the firm before being promoted to firm leadership?**

*Kimmey:* 23 years. I was named a partner in 2002.

*Sutton:* 23 years. I was named a partner in 2002.

**Were you a partner at another firm before joining your present firm? If so, which one? How long were you there and when did you leave?**

*Kimmey:* I've spent my entire career with Farella.

*Sutton:* I spent a year in a federal clerkship and started my career with Sidley Austin before joining Farella in 1998 as an associate.

**What year were you promoted to your current position?**

We were elected co-managing partners in January.

**Were there any surprises you faced after becoming a leader at the firm?**

There really haven't been any surprises, and that was largely by design. We know each other well. We've both grown our careers with the firm for more than 25 years.



Courtesy photo

**Holly Sutton, left, and Karen Kimmey, right, of Farella Braun + Martel**

We have collaborated in the past, and we have both held leadership roles within the firm over the years. Our former managing partner, Brian Donnelly, has been involved in our transition and remains engaged.

While we are clear that law firm leadership is a difficult role, we've been encouraged by the tremendous amount of support we've received—from our colleagues, clients, and community.

**What's been the biggest change, day-to-day, in your routine since becoming a leader at the firm?**

More meetings and one-on-one time with people. Leading a law firm takes a lot of listening—from partners and practice group leaders to the staff and administrative team—and we're taking it all in.

**What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in elevating you to your current position? Was it your performance on a specific case? A personality trait? Making connections with the right people?**

We've both had the experience of serving in firm leadership roles, so we were well prepared for this transition.

In opting for a co-management structure, we're opening up more leadership opportunities for others at various stages of their careers, driving the firm forward, and continuing in our practices and serving our clients. Neither of us is driven by ego, and we are both very focused on doing what is right for Farella and its future. Co-management requires a belief in collaboration and respect for each other—and we've got that covered.

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

When Farella moved to our current offices at One Bush in 2023, we took the opportunity to design an environment that embraced and seamlessly integrated the latest technologies. As one for example, all of our conference rooms and huddle room spaces are equipped with wireless mics and video monitors to seamlessly integrate video calls. In addition, our space is 100% office hoteling, managed through an app with digital door name plates that change based on attendance.

Additionally, we are carefully evaluating how artificial intelligence can augment the firm's practices. We have an AI taskforce that boasts a fleet of lawyers and staff who are constantly evaluating how to best integrate AI solutions in our day-to-day work.

**What advice would you give to someone whose goal is to ascend to firm leadership?**

**Sutton:** Looking at things from multiple perspectives can be helpful in preparing for leadership. Seek out any leadership opportunities as they come up in your career, whether it is within your firm, regional bar associations, or other organizations. Demonstrate your commitment to both your own growth and the success of your firm.

**Kimmey:** Build relationships with the people you work with, demonstrating that you are interested in helping them succeed, and that you care about them as a complete person. These people can be your colleagues for long stretches of your career, and they may even become your co-managing partner!

**Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to your leadership role?**

Brian Donnelly, Farella's previous managing partner, has been influential for both of us. He was a champion

for pulling people into leadership and encouraging everyone to play up to their strengths. We both have more mentors than we could name, but the generations of firm leadership before us have laid the groundwork for us to succeed.

**Knowing what you know now, if you had a chance to advise or mentor your younger self (at any stage), what advice would you give to yourself and/or what would you do differently?**

Lean into a long-term perspective. While that may be hard, especially early in your career, it is helpful to be able to think and discern which challenges are short-term and which require a longer-term view. We can both attest to pushing through times that were especially challenging early in our careers, and once you are on the other side, you are glad you did.

**Do you have a prediction on how the legal industry will evolve over the next several years?**

**Sutton:** I think we'll see greater emphasis on efficiency. Everyone is looking for more efficiency in resolving matters, running deals, firm leadership, and more.

**Kimmey:** I expect that more lawyers will look to align themselves with firms that share their values and that offer opportunities to serve clients in a collegial and creative environment. Firms that uphold the highest standards of the profession even in challenging times will emerge in a strong position.

**What is the one behavior or trait that you have seen derail more leaders' careers?**

**Sutton:** Hubris.

**Karen:** Lack of transparency.

**Please share with us any firm or industry initiatives that you are working on as well as the impact you hope to achieve.**

We have seen particular growth in key practices—like employment, family wealth, and insurance—and we are always open to welcoming top-quality associates and laterals. Farella offers lawyers a different law firm experience, and we are actively recruiting to strategically grow where the firm sees opportunity. We want to leave the firm stronger than we found it, and we are building towards a future where Farella remains one of the best places to work and a powerhouse law firm.