

Leadership Spotlight: Abe Cole, Chief Operating Officer



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BKD's new COO shares early childhood values, current mentorship styles, and life outside of the workplace.

At BKD, the COO plays a critical role in the firm's success and is responsible for promoting firmwide operational excellence, one of the hallmarks that set BKD apart. The role is also expanding beyond operational issues to include a greater focus on entrepreneurial and innovative solutions to current and future challenges facing the firm. Abe Cole has spent his 25-year career with BKD and has succeeded former AICPA chair Eric Hansen as BKD's next COO. Abe is particularly excited to continue enhancing collaboration efforts and firmwide strategic focus throughout the National Office in Springfield, Missouri.



BKD COO Abe Cole with wife Shannyn and son Parker.

"We already work as a strong team, but I believe there are opportunities for everyone in the National Office to collaborate even more and develop a greater understanding of the strategic vision of all our departments, which will help us to achieve our long-term strategic goals more efficiently," he says. "If we continue being transparent, we'll reach our highest potential as one great team."

Becoming a first-generation college student

Abe has spent most of his BKD career in Kansas City where he also spent much of his childhood. He grew up with a family of four, including his parents and younger sister Amanda, and stayed active participating in sports throughout his childhood and high school years. His parents owned a painting contracting company and have been constant examples of what can be accomplished through hard work. "It was an unwritten rule in my household growing up that you were either working or playing sports," says Abe.

The family also prioritized group activities or vacations and always took great road trips whether they were headed to Nashville, Tennessee, or Ocean City, Maryland. As country music fans, they spent a lot of time in Nashville and loved what the city had to offer. Abe also enjoyed revisiting his dad's hometown, Ocean City. The family also had a place at the Lake of the Ozarks, so relaxing at the lake and spending time on the water were regular pastimes.

Once he was older, Abe found he had a passion for the business side of his parents' company and would often help with the financial records, pay bills, and do payroll. He realized early that he wanted to be an accountant and went on to study at Missouri State University in Springfield, where he joined the accounting program right away and earned his degree in 1994.

"My childhood taught me the importance of a strong work ethic, and I channeled that work ethic into my own path to college and public accounting," says Abe. "There are still so many things I want to accomplish in my career, but I'm extremely proud of my success at BKD."

Past role models and current mentorship style

Throughout his career, Abe has served as a client service audit partner, managing partner, regional managing partner, and an elected member of BKD's Governing Board. His contributions have brought many successes to BKD—and he stresses that each one has been a complete team effort. He's also had many mentors, including retired partners Jim Van Dyke and Barry Davis, from whom he learned how to serve clients and grow practices the right way, as well as how to successfully run the operations of a practice unit. In the next chapter of his career as COO, Abe is looking forward to collaborating with the entire management committee and governing board and to continue learning from these great leaders.

"While Jim and Barry are still mentors of mine, I now have this whole group of amazing leaders that I'm fortunate to work with every day. We hold each other accountable so that we can serve the firm at the highest level, and we bring different backgrounds and viewpoints to the table to help tackle significant firm issues. Because of our diversity of thought, I'm always confident in the decisions that we make for the strategic direction of the firm," he says.

Being a mentor and coach is also the most rewarding part of his job. Abe has always enjoyed helping BKDer's develop in their roles, navigate their careers, and challenge themselves. As a mentor, he encourages others to get out of their comfort zone and try different things, learn from their shortcomings, and bring their passion to work every day.

Parenting lessons and life outside of the workplace



Abe and Parker in Iceland.

Abe married his high school sweetheart, Shannyn, a few years after graduating college and moving back to Kansas City. Shannyn also came to Springfield to attend Drury University, where she was a national champion swimmer on the college swim team. The couple has been married for more than twenty years, in which time Shannyn taught kindergarten and coached high school swimming. Abe and Shannyn's son Parker recently turned 16 and is a second degree blackbelt in taekwondo. He also shares some of Abe's entrepreneurial spirit and is already studying business and market conditions.

"I'm extremely fortunate to have a tremendous relationship with my son," says Abe. "When the worst thing you have to worry about as a parent is whether your son's room is clean, you learn not to sweat the small stuff." Through Parker, Abe has learned to have more patience and flexibility in his home life.

"The small stuff matters a lot in the professional world," he says. "When I was an auditor, managing partner, or regional managing partner and now COO, the details and the quality matter. But I think you need to lose some of that mentality on your commute home every day. You should be disciplined with your kids and keep them

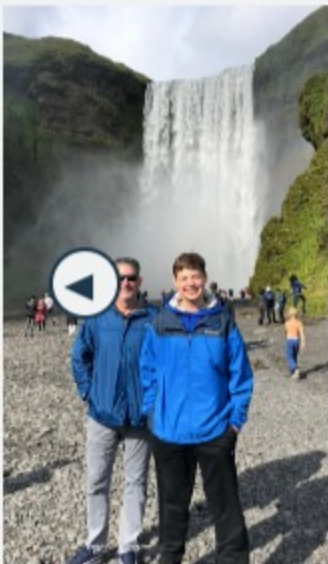
focused on moving forward in a positive way, but also learn how to pick your battles and try not to sweat all the small stuff at home so much."

From Kansas City to Springfield

As COO, Abe is currently commuting to the National Office two to three days most weeks and will eventually relocate permanently to Springfield once Parker graduates high school in 2022. He's so far made the most of his nearly three-hour drive each way by tuning into the news, listening to more audiobooks, enjoying his favorite country music, and scheduling work calls. What he appreciates the most about his commute is finding the time to call friends and family that are sometimes missed during the normal rush of the day.

Once settled in Springfield, Abe is looking forward to taking Parker and Shannyn out on UTV rides throughout the southern Missouri area. As a big outdoors family, they also look forward to visiting Table Rock Lake—although the Lake of the Ozarks will always be their favorite spot since their lake house is right next to some of their closest friends'.

"It's important to work hard but to enjoy your success and surround yourself with great friends and family," he says.



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