

Leadership Spotlight: Tom Watson, CEO



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Meet Tom Watson, the regional managing partner recently named BKD's next CEO.

In August 2020, CEO Ted Dickman announced Tom Watson would succeed Ted as BKD's next CEO. Tom's incredible track record of building teams and serving clients is second to none in the firm, making him well-suited to embrace this role as an effective builder of revenue, practice areas, and people.

"We are blessed with a great next-generation leadership team within our firm, and we are especially fortunate to have someone of Tom's caliber ready to lead us into the future," says Ted.

'Let life come to me'

Throughout his college and early career years, Tom wasn't so sure he was a "lifer" in public accounting—but he didn't rule it out either.

His high school and college jobs included being a grocery store bag clerk, cook and cash register clerk at McDonald's, and greenskeeper at a golf course. Eventually, Tom started at an insurance agency where he became a licensed insurance agent during his college sophomore year. The experience taught him about the importance of customer service and truly listening to learn. Finally, Tom joined BKD's Little Rock office in 1992. In 2004, shortly after making partner, he relocated to Houston to help build the Texas healthcare practice.



Tom, sixteen, on his first day of work at Safeway.

"Moving to Texas and a relatively new BKD market was a key teaching moment for me as I learned the importance of leveraging the firm's resources and the significance of the phrase 'Don't go it alone.' Tapping into our entire firm's power and experience allowed our Texas team to take advantage of fertile ground and win nearly every proposal we submitted. We couldn't have done this using just the resources we had in Texas at the time—and to this day, I use this experience as a reminder as to why it's so important we work together. Our clients deserve that," says Tom.



BKD's Little Rock office celebrates three career advancements to the partner level: Tom, Ryan Underwood, and Scotty White.

In 2010, Tom relocated once again, this time to serve BKD's new Dallas office. He took on various roles, including healthcare regional industry leader, assistant managing partner, and managing partner. He then became regional managing partner for BKD's south region in 2019.

"I decided early in my career to do two things: First, excel at the job I

have today and trust the firm to recognize that and provide even greater challenges. Second, let life come to me. I didn't want to draw any conclusions about my career path before fully experiencing what BKD had to offer. I was confident that if it didn't work out, at least I was getting some great training along the way. Thankfully, it worked out really well and I had the best career opportunities I could have asked for," he says.

Tom's leadership beliefs, priorities, and firm vision

There's no question that Tom is taking on the CEO role in a time of notable change. The accounting profession is at the beginning of a technological transformation, which will influence BKD's vision and strategy for the next decade. It's clear that technology will be implemented more and more into how BKD serves external and internal clients. Keeping up with this transformation will require a lot of work and the ability to lean into the firm's innovation culture, but it will also bring plentiful opportunities for success at BKD.

Tom is eager to enhance client experiences and BKD career satisfaction through strategic investments in technological advancements. The Governing Board has already spent considerable time researching how the competitive landscape may change throughout the next 10 years and is ready to make the smart investments necessary to keeping BKD relevant as the profession evolves.

During the CEO selection process, the board wanted to ensure the next CEO's leadership style would help BKD continue to excel at its mission. In response, Tom described his leadership beliefs as well as the type of leadership and coaching culture he hopes to continue and even improve across all levels at BKD. The most important job of a leader, he explains, is to enable those they lead to reach their fullest potential.

"An effective leader sets high expectations for their team *and* provides the coaching, resources, vision, and perhaps the occasional nudge to help them achieve those expectations," says Tom.

He also urges all BKD leaders to use their influence to make those around them better. If firm leaders help others excel by sharing their experiences and talent, it can create exponential results that will far exceed what any one individual can do alone.

"Our best leaders create opportunities for others to grow and learn," says Tom. "We have a great group of professionals in BKD today because our leaders from earlier years made sure that today's leaders were given ample leadership development opportunities."

Tom is fully aligned with the direction of BKD partners and managing directors to be sure the firm is succeeding at both organic and mergers and acquisitions (M&A) growth. He will continue to influence innovation efforts and plans to develop a task force to modernize how we tell BKD's story in M&A opportunities.

Some additional focus areas include sustaining a cohesive approach to pursuing and serving clients, developing innovative product solutions, and building an up-skilled and tech-enabled workforce capable of solving clients' most complex problems. To help BKD achieve any and all of its goals most effectively, Tom stresses the vital importance of **BKD's SKY Initiative**.

"We must continue to expand our work on diversity and inclusion. We already see a healthy increase in our workforce's diversity, and my hope is this will continue as we hire professionals who have different skillsets and come from different backgrounds. BKD's greatest firmwide success will come when we have removed any unintentional barriers to any individual's success," says Tom.

Next steps

BKD's financial stability allowed the firm time to think strategically on how best to respond to COVID-19. The firm's response involved creating an effective plan that monitored charge hours, financial results, and the firm's overall economic health on a short- and long-term scale. Unlike many other firms, BKD was able to avoid layoffs and significant salary reductions.

"It seems like we've hardly missed a beat when it comes to taking care of our clients and each other. Our collective discipline in how we take care of our clients and our business allows us to do this, and I'm committed to not letting our discipline or excellence slip," says Tom. "I love the open and honest transparency we've had throughout COVID-19, and I plan to continue that."

Over the short term, Tom will work with our management committee to evaluate COVID-19's impact on the work environment, as remote work will become more common once normalcy returns. One of the main challenges will be balancing this change with the importance of building and maintaining BKD's culture.

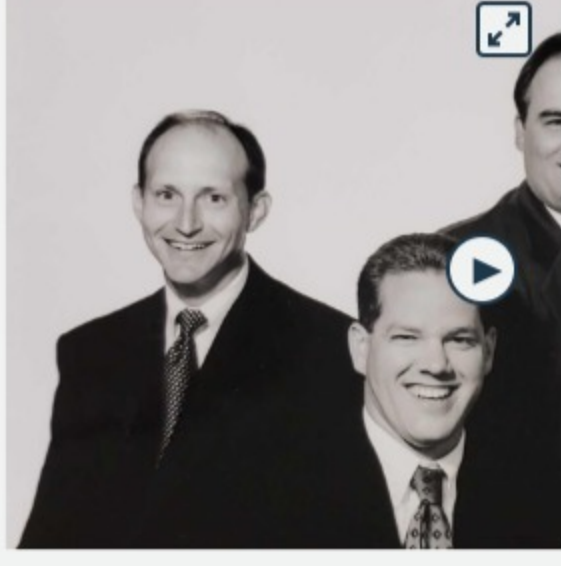
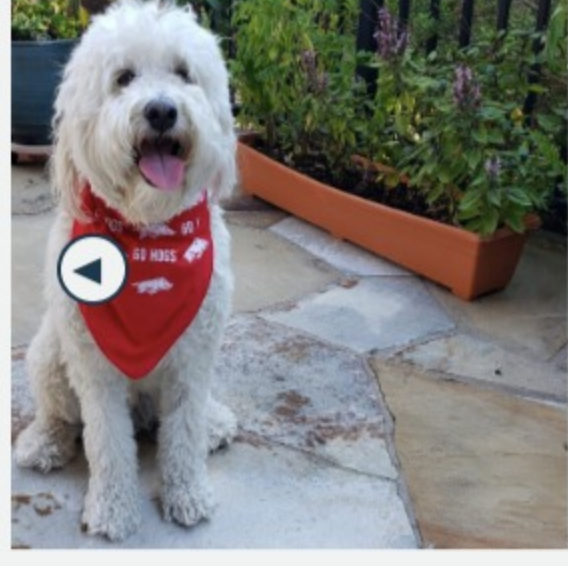
"It's so important we take the extra effort to stay in contact during the COVID-19 environment," says Tom. "The culture we all live and breathe is both unique and unmatched. It sets all of us up for success if we are willing to commit to our PRIDE values and lean into our **Unmatched Client Service**® principles."

As work strategies change, the firm will also need to consider how its people engagement programs should evolve to ensure BKD maintains a strong culture and offers effective connections between personnel. Further, the industry's technological transformation will require BKD to evolve its training approach so teams can do more critical analysis and less data input, which Tom hopes will create even more rewarding career opportunities.

"What's great about BKD is that it's big enough to provide extensive opportunities, but small enough that those who really excel can be noticed and given even greater opportunities. I'm excited that I can now play a greater role at connecting high-performers with more complex and impactful experiences," says Tom.

An early step of the CEO selection process was evaluating input from all BKD personnel on important firm issues and leadership attributes. BKDers identified employee engagement, training and upskilling teams, and client service as three key issues for leadership to address. BKDers also expressed the importance of a leader who is a strategic thinker and an effective team builder and possesses the humility needed to learn from others. Tom checks all these boxes.

"When I look at the team of next-generation leaders at BKD under Tom's amazing leadership, I am confident we are making tomorrow better than today for everyone at the firm," says Ted.



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