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Looking to do much more

Accepting a challenge from her son, Layng takes job steering company growth, opening doors for women

About two years ago, Karen P. Layng was helping her 20-year-old son, a Northwestern University student, plot a career path as a paleontologist.

That's when he laid down the gauntlet.

"Mom, every day you tell each one of your children that we're supposed to change the world. What are you doing to make it better?" he asked.

Layng, a mother of three, was a shareholder at Vedder, Price P.C., where she had practiced for longer than her son had been alive. She was a long-standing chair of the construction law group and compensation committee and a management committee member.

The first woman at the firm to have a child and become a partner, Layng's law firm life certainly required dedication. And her long list of clients would say she was bettering their fortunes.

Still, she took her son's question to heart.

"He was right. I was asking more of them than I was asking of myself," Layng said.

"I felt I could stay in this law firm for years and enjoy it. I love my corner office. But was I doing as much as I could? The answer clearly was, 'No.' And I was tested by, at that time period, a 20-year-old, and I took the challenge."

That challenge took the form of helping a longtime client and friend position his family business, Scheck Industries in Countryside, for success in its

second 30 years and beyond.

Layng became general counsel and vice president of corporate development in October 2013 at Scheck, a national industrial process piping and mechanical construction contractor that took in \$120 million in revenue last year. It was founded in 1984 by Richard Scheck, whose three sons now serve as board members for the company.

Leading the company's legal department (which consists of her), is just one part of Layng's job. She is also the chief strategic officer.

In that role, she has spearheaded a complete overhaul of Scheck's executive management team and now is focused on streamlining the company's policies and business practices — from lowering its insurance costs to putting in place a new 401(k) plan for its employees.

When she was asked to take the job, Layng told Richard Scheck she wanted to "white-board every aspect of the business." He agreed.

"The family members all decided it was time for a change because they want to leave a company for their families ... that 30 years from now is exceptionally strong," Layng said. "We can bring up our game, and that's what we're doing."

Richard Scheck is now chairman of the board of directors, and the C-suite has been reshuffled in the past year.

Thirteen-year Scheck employee Randy Peach is president and CEO. Kevin P. McDonnell was hired as chief financial officer this month from



Karen P. Layng

Chief Strategic Officer and General Counsel, Scheck Industries

- **Location:** Countryside
- **Size:** \$120 million in 2013 revenue
- **Law department:** One lawyer
- **Age:** 52
- **Law school:** University of Illinois College of Law, 1987
- **Organizations:** Co-vice chair of the American Bar Association Construction Litigation Committee and member of the ABA Construction Forum; past president, former secretary and current member of the 7th Circuit Bar Association; president and board chair, Girl Scouts of Greater Chicago and Northwest Indiana; member, The Economic Club
- **Interests:** Attending University of Chicago chamber orchestra concerts, in which her daughter plays oboe and English horn; watching her sons play hockey; travel; museums; and theater

a similar position at Grenzebach Glier and Associates, a philanthropic management consulting firm. He previously was CFO at Kenny Construction Co.

And Layng, of course, is chief strategic officer.

"We've decided (it) is part of our strategic mission ... to bring in subject-matter experts in every aspect of our company," Layng said.

Bringing in Layng has already paid dividends.

Bob DeChene, Scheck's insurance broker and senior vice president of risk advisory solutions at The Horton Group in Orland Park, said the company has saved \$500,000 in expected costs resulting from outstanding workers' compensation claims that Layng settled in her first year.

He credited Layng for making it a top priority to settle outstanding claims, which he said can become "one of the top costs" for construction companies and contractors.

"She brought much more organization into their insurance program and much more control over their insurance program," DeChene said, "and an immediate dollar savings in negotiating the claims to conclusion."

Layng also views part of her role to advocate for more women to work in the construction industry — something she has long done in the legal world.

Women make up only 9 percent of the industry's workforce, according to the Occupational Safety & Health Administration. She hopes to change that — one way is simply by taking the job.

"Another is I'm telling you and anyone else who will listen: The construction industry is a critical driver for our national health," she said. "Whether it be housing starts, the energy sector. Why don't women want to be at the table helping to make those decisions? We should be. ... Women should build things. I want to build things."

In that regard, she takes after her father.

Layng was born in Garfield Park on Chicago's West Side and raised in Berwyn, where her father worked as a foreman at Howard Foundry, which cast molds for metal products.

When her family moved to Lombard, she got a job waiting tables at a diner. Tip money helped her through college at the University of Illinois, where she received a bachelor's degree in international economics and a law degree.

She began her legal career in

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1987 at a now-defunct firm where she focused on antitrust litigation. She joined Vedder, Price in 1990.

She represented clients including GMAC Commercial Finance, Keebler Co., Ingersoll-Rand Co. and Kenny Construction. A member of the American Arbitration Association's Panel of Arbitrators for commercial and

construction disputes, she resolved more than 50 cases in arbitration or mediation.

Her practice was also transactional — completing the documents that led to large construction projects such as the residential towers near the Museum Campus.

After her son's challenge to do more, she became a purchaser of

legal services. And that has changed her view of law firm billing methods. She said she views legal projects much the same way that Scheck's estimators do — they build a foundation for the work they need, and they project the cost of the time and materials required to build it.

“Legal services and the menu you can have should be analyzed

the same way. I think what's unfortunate is, often times, law firms are inflexible on that,” she said.

“Frankly, my view is if large law firms do not change that model, the practice of law will be very, very different 10 years from now. I think they have to adjust.”

Perhaps they could take a page out of Scheck's book.