

Gary Sasso keeps Carlton Fields focused on continuous improvement

Over the last few years, Gary Sasso saw his law firm facing two substantial and markedly unique challenges. The first was universal: a worldwide economic downturn that impacted markets and businesses all over the globe, including his company, Carlton Fields, and its clients. Though the second challenge was limited to his firm, it was equally disconcerting.



“Maybe the most significant challenge to continuing to grow is one that people don’t talk about very much,

but it’s complacency,” says Sasso, president and CEO. “It’s being satisfied with past success. We had been successful before the downturn and during the downturn, and there’s a temptation to be satisfied with that and complacent, but this is not a destination. It’s not about hitting this growth target or that growth target. It’s a journey. It’s about being committed to continual improvement.”

Sasso realized it was the combination of these challenges — the external economy and internal complacency — that had the real potential to hold Carlton Fields back from continued success. He also realized that while the two problems were different in nature, they in fact shared a common solution: growth.

Rather than retrench, Sasso led Carlton Fields to focus on growing throughout the recession. As a result, the firm’s significant growth in 2009 made it an economic success story and one of nation’s fastest-growing companies on the *Inc.* 5000 list that year. In 2010, Carlton

Fields generated \$154 million in revenue. Now, in 2011, Sasso still hasn’t lowered his sights.

“We’re a fairly small piece of the overall economy and we don’t need that much more than our share to be successful,” he says. “So we just stay focused on growth relentlessly.”

Focus on service

Coming into the downturn, Carlton Fields was fortunate to be in a position of strength. Yet one drawback of having financial security is that employees can get into a comfort zone and they don’t feel driven to adapt and be proactive.

So rather than have people focus on the larger goal of growth, Sasso kept his team rallied around the more tangible goals of providing best-in-class service and adding value for clients.

“The economic climate can provide obstacles but also opportunities, because all of our clients are struggling to deal with the downturn and they need help,” Sasso says. “The firm that steps up to the plate to provide that help has an opportunity, and that’s the way we’ve chosen to look at it.

“Our overarching goal is really to provide best-in-class service in every area where we practice and to have the best of all worlds, not to accept false tradeoffs among our clients and shareholders and employees. That’s a guiding light for us and we test our goals against that vision. We do that first and foremost by talking to our clients to make sure that we understand their businesses and their needs.”

To furnish value-added solutions for clients whose businesses were impacted by the economy, Sasso encouraged Carlton Fields’ attorneys and staff to utilize internal meetings and sessions with clients to brainstorm creative ways to handle client issues. Providing these opportunities for employees to be resourceful

and collaborative supports the kind of proactive, idea-driven culture that enables growth.

“When you’re in the midst of such change and evolving economic and legal circumstances, you have to be innovative to tackle new problems and new challenges,” Sasso says.

“We spent a great deal of time talking to our clients, meeting with our clients, asking them about their business, asking them how they were being affected by the downturn and taking the time and trouble to change the services that we provided to meet our client’s evolving needs.”

When you frame goals for your team around improving services and developing client relationships, you ensure there is never a point where people feel like they’ve maxed out opportunities to grow. At Carlton Fields, having best-in-class service is a goal that requires continuous improvement because to meet client needs better than a competitor, the firm has to adapt as those needs are constantly changing.

“When I talk about growth I’m not talking just about growth in revenues or numbers of people or numbers of offices,” Sasso says. “When we talk about growth here, we’re really talking about growing the strength, depth and quality of our firm, which can be reflected in numbers, but it’s not just about numbers. It’s about quality.”

“We looked at what was happening in the economy from our client’s point of view and asked how was this affecting what they needed from us? We launched a full court press to anticipate what our clients’ needs were and we undertook to meet those needs.”

Don’t compromise people

Engaging employees in success is one of the key ways to affect growth. Although Carlton Fields has incentives in place to recognize and reward exceptional performance from team members, Sasso says that nonmonetary motivators such as job security, inclusiveness and transparency are just as important if not more so in keeping people committed to the vision and striving for excellence.

“We’ve tried to motivate employees by being successful as a business and as a result of that we have not had to engage in layoffs of staff or attorneys, which makes us relatively unique among law firms I believe,” Sasso says. “And that’s a big motivator — where we can provide a secure place of employment for our employees.”

“We motivate people by means other than money or economics. We try to engage everybody in the success of the firm. We value everybody here. We reach out to everybody and include them in discussions about how the firm is doing.”

Making sure people feel recognized and valued is vital if you want them to give their best efforts and drive growth. When people don’t feel appreciated, it’s not long before dispirited becomes dissatisfied and they are doing the bare minimum to collect their paychecks.

To fight complacency at Carlton Fields, Sasso shows his team that security and growth can go hand in hand by letting them know that even though growth is the goal, they are the priority. He refuses to make tradeoffs for growth — financial or otherwise — that come at the expense of the firm’s employees. That’s one reason why, by each category on the whole, Carlton Fields’ shareholders, associates, special staff and all employees have been able to maintain or improve their compensation through the years, even through the economic downturn.

“We reject false tradeoffs among clients, shareholders and employees,” Sasso says. “There are some who argue that you can only promote the interests of your clients, your shareholders or your employees, but not all at the same time, and we reject that. We have to be attentive to the needs of all of them and then we’ll be able to serve each of them.”

“I think you have to try to ask and understand what are your goals for each. What is a home run in each area? And then work hard to find ways to advance in each area without compromising another. Sometimes accepting a tradeoff results from just not thinking hard enough about how to balance all of them, giving up too soon. But I think if you work hard enough and probe deeply enough, there isn’t necessarily a tradeoff. All of the things can be working together.”

Invest in growth

No matter what challenges your business is facing, Sasso says growth should always be part of the criteria for CEOs when making financial or strategic decisions. Continuous improvement needs to be an ongoing investment. When leaders dwell too much on short-term problems and lose focus on continuous improvement, it can have stifling consequences on a company's profitability and long-term success.

"I think that it's a mistake to lose your focus and overreact to negative events and retrench," Sasso says.

"You can't grow by cutting. Notwithstanding that, you do have to achieve operational efficiency. Sometimes controlling or cutting costs is necessary, but you can overreact. We've invested during the downturn to position ourselves to come out of it in a strong position. I think it's important to stay focused on growth and not to panic and to continue to mind the fundamentals of your business.

"If you do nothing you are taking a risk. If you do something you are taking a risk. So you have to kind of get it out of your mind that you can function without taking risks. Then once you understand that, whatever the issue, you look at the options, you gather the facts, you analyze the options and you bring people together who have knowledge and value to contribute to making a decision. You make your best judgment and you move forward. And then you know whatever risks you've taken, you've taken with good information, with good analysis, with good input."

As the economy sees signs of recovery, Sasso continues to take risks and invest in opportunities to position Carlton Fields' for continuous improvement. In his view, even a misstep forward is an advantage over companies who are taking no steps forward at all.

"If you stay focused on the goal on the horizon, once in a while you are going to hit a bump or hit an obstacle, and we sometimes can call it a failure, but it's just more information," he says. "It may mean that that particular tactic or strategy is not working at that moment, so you sit back and say, 'Well, what can we do to get over this bump?' And the next attempt may even be better and more effective and smarter. So a failure can simply be an opportunity to do something better the next time.

"There's no such thing as getting to a goal and stopping. I think that's a mistake. If you are committed to continual growth and continual improvement then you have to keep taking risks to continue to grow."

Today, Sasso sets his sights on growing Carlton Fields in size and strength, but also in the quality and value it provides clients. By emphasizing continuous improvement in all areas, Sasso keeps complacency in check and his team focused on where the firm can get better, stronger and more efficient. And in today's business environment, the opportunities are unlimited for companies who set their sights the highest.

"I love the challenge of having to navigate through the economic climate that we've been facing," Sasso says. "I'm excited about the opportunities we face. There's a temptation to focus on the obstacles being presented by the current economy, but I see so much opportunity for our firm and for this profession. I think we're really just getting started on what we can achieve as a law firm."

The Sasso File

Gary Sasso
President and CEO
Carlton Fields

Born: Miami, Fla.

Education: Bachelor's in economics, Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania; J.D., University of Pennsylvania Law School — graduating at the head of his class. While in law school, Gary was editor-in-chief of the University of Pennsylvania Law Review. He spent his first year after graduation as a clerk for Judge Spottswood Robinson III on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit and his second year as a clerk for U.S. Supreme Court Justice Byron White.

Who are the leaders you look to for advice and questions?

I have the opportunity to work with many fine business leaders in the Tampa Bay area, and I often bounce ideas off of my colleagues at the Tampa Bay partnership and United Way. We have a client advisory board,

which consists of CEOs and general counsel and we brainstorm with them too.

What do you like most about your job?

What I like most is the time I spend with high-quality people in our community, among our clients and inside our firm.

What is the best business advice you've received?

I think it's probably something that I came across in my first year as a CEO, when I was trying to grapple with the idea of taking risk and what kind of risk and how much risk. I read what I could get my hands on about the job, talked to as many people as I could about the job and one piece of advice that I received is at the end of your first year, if you look back and you haven't made a number of mistakes, you're not doing your job well, because you're not taking enough risks.

HOW TO REACH: Carlton Fields, (813) 223-7000 or www.carltonfields.com

