Columns

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Think big: Cincinnati office soars amid transition

When **R. Philip Sarnecki, CLU**, came to Cincinnati as managing partner almost three years ago, he was excited by the opportunity – but daunted by what lay before him. **Ronald W. Beshear, CLU**, had just retired as a managing partner and was now in the office as a financial representative, leaving behind a role in a city where he had helped build Northwestern Mutual's strong reputation and success. Yet Sarnecki, coming off of eight years as a managing director, saw the opportunity for more – in particular, he knew he needed to build more management units.

At first, he had no leadership team whatsoever, including managing directors, field directors, college unit directors and recruiters. “For the first six or eight months, I was interviewing college interns,” Sarnecki said, acknowledging that any new role brings challenges while making a transition. But RPS Financial Group in Cincinnati seems to be thriving and living up to the solid reputation built before it, as well as accomplishing new success, such as leading the company in sales in May, a month which also happened to be Northwestern Mutual's best month ever in insurance sales.

With the leadership team being put in place, Sarnecki feels like they are just starting to hit their stride. “I feel like we are just getting there, because we have some of the infrastructure built,” Sarnecki said. “And not just on the leadership management side, but on the other stuff, such as getting the right people in the right places.” The office now has two managing directors who will be spinning out district network offices, one upcoming in-house managing director, two recruiters, a college unit director who is becoming a field director and eight new members joining LEAD (Leadership through Education, Achievement and Development).

Sarnecki said building the leadership team was something which was important to him because of the office where he was developed – the Wright Financial Group, Inc. in Champaign, Ill., where **John W. Wright I, CLU**, is managing partner. “I came here from John Wright's office and he did such a phenomenal job of making leadership attractive,” he said. “That's the environment I wanted to create, where your top people want to get into leadership.” In addition, about a year after the transition, his two field directors from his old district office, **Ryan J. Kramer, CLU**, and **Paul R. Meyer**, as well as his Chief Financial Officer **Jill White**, moved to Cincinnati to join his office.

Providing total package

Financial security – using the full realm of insurance and investment products and services as options to meet clients' needs – is something RPS Financial Group takes to heart. “Before I got here, Ron and **Pat Kern**, president of his group operation, had built one of the largest SEBS (Strategic Employee Benefit Services) offices in the company; and we do a nice job in NMIS (Northwestern Mutual Investment Services, Inc.). **Kyle M. McLaughlin, CLU, ChFC**, our lead NMIS specialist, does a super job leading that area,” Sarnecki said. “Ron had done a nice job of leading and integrating them, and those areas are definitely something I continued to push when I got here.”

One of the components that became an important part of the office business was the monthly specialist lunch. Each of the four NMIS specialists, five SEBS specialists, and specialists from disability, long-term care, life insurance, executive benefits and the managing directors gather once a month to talk business. “We've had some very nice cases come out of those meetings because people are communicating with each other,” Sarnecki said. “Obviously, it's something we stress in training. If you look at our statistics, we are higher than the average office in the percentage of joint work cases. I think this culture fosters that. New representatives come in and get the full scope of our products and services because of all the joint work they are doing.”

Sarnecki and several in his office realize the impact that providing both insurance and investments can not only have on their clients, but on their career as well. “Part of the goal is to recruit the right kind of people who see the opportunity,” Sarnecki said. “For instance, **David A. Shuley, CLU**, is a Forum-achieving representative. Three years ago he was doing almost no NMIS production when he decided he wanted to start that part of his practice. He went out and earned his CFP® and his Series 7, and hired an attorney to handle the investment side of his business. Now his NMIS practice is growing. We have had great examples from the leaders in our office.”

‘It takes emotional courage'

Sarnecki, a product of the college intern program, started as a 19-year-old college sophomore and had a lot of success in the program. Because of his experience, he is a huge proponent of the college intern program. Now they are building the office's college intern program with a full-time campus recruiter, and Top 20 Financial Representative **Jeffrey W. Rich, CLU**, said it is making a difference.

“There is a lot more young blood around,” Rich said. “And Philip has been working the selection process. It is a real pleasure to watch the quality of the recruits that are coming in.” In fact, Rich's own son, **Morgan**, is currently in financial representative training and eager to join the office.

Not only do they focus on college interns, but career changers as well. Based on his eight years as managing director and almost three as managing partner, Sarnecki is aware of his career retention rate of almost 40 percent.

“It takes emotional courage to be in this career,” Sarnecki said, “and it takes a high work ethic. If you have a great screening and selection process, it will lead to higher retention and production numbers.”

Thinking big mentality

The office led the company in sales in May, a feat that they have been trying to accomplish for a long time. “One of the things that I have been trying to do since I got here, and I've talked about it and incorporated it into a lot that we do…is to get the office to think bigger,” Sarnecki said.

A large corporate-owned life insurance case with Rich and **Ben Beshear**, field director, catapulted the office into the lead, along the way qualifying Rich and Beshear for the Top 20 in premium credit in the 2006-2007 Awards Year.

“We had not had a Top 20 representative since 1976 in Cincinnati and now 31 years later, we have two, including the youngest representative in the Top 20,” Sarnecki said, adding the case had originally developed from one of their specialist lunches. They also had eight Forum members this past year, up from two the year before Sarnecki arrived.

“When our representatives walk on stage, it helps people to continue to think bigger,” Sarnecki said. “It weeds out those comments like ‘we can't do that because we're in a smaller market' because you see the people doing it. It helped change the paradigm of what we could do here – what we define as big.”

For Rich, achieving Top 20 recognition was a milestone in his own career. “My wife **Joyce** reminded me at Annual Meeting, ‘Remember when you used to look up at those people on stage and wonder if you would get there?'” Rich recalled. “It is a difficult career being out there every day – grinding it out. But, it is worth it.”

And the future is wide open. “Yes, our market is only so big,” acknowledged Sarnecki. “But how big can we get? There are limitations, but you can't think like that.” His goal is to have 100 financial representatives doing $10 million in premium in 2010.

“We have a very strong culture here,” Sarnecki said. One that, even amid transition, will continue to support each other and the community. “That's why we are here,” Sarnecki continued. “We're here for the policyowners, No. 1. We're here to build great careers for our families. When I recruit, I talk about a lifestyle – and that's more than making money, it is about being involved in and giving back to the community.” In fact, the office has had two recent Community Service Award winners in **Carol Boeckley** and **Jay Kersey**.

Looking ahead, Sarnecki now sees a glimmer of the office that he envisioned for the future when he transitioned to Cincinnati. “We are going to continue to add leaders and grow this office,” Sarnecki said. “It is amazing to think how much has changed in the time I have been here. Certainly, we're not there yet, but we're getting closer.”

And his office shares in the vision. “Philip represents the new model of a managing partner – one who is not just focused on the core production, but so much more,” Rich said. “Here is somebody who is running an organization, sets high expectations and has delineated goals on how we are going to get there.”