

Michael Jackson



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Managing Partner at Cox Yeats

MICHAEL JACKSON's strong adherence to the core values of integrity and client service, as well as a good sense of humour, have served him well in his professional career. He was appointed as managing partner of Durban law firm Cox Yeats in 2011.

In January 1998, Jackson joined Cox Yeats as a candidate attorney. He commented that starting there was really tough. Jackson was articled to Graham Cox, who checked every document that he produced. Jackson said, "Graham Cox told me that I needed to learn the basics of writing and suggested that I read a book or two." This advice came as quite a shock especially after having studied at university for seven years. "This somewhat Victorian introduction to law and work taught me that in law you are never an expert. You must always remain humble and you must take nothing for granted," added Jackson.

His early career, he says, was based on a lot of hard work and some luck. In addition, Jackson said that he was fortunate to work with some good people. "I was privileged to work closely with Graham Cox (who at that time was undoubtedly the best lawyer in Durban) and with Jeremy Yeats. In many respects they were complete opposites. Graham economic with words and decisive; Jeremy amiable, who pondered and weighed the various options in committee."

A highlight of his career was making partner in 2000, after only one year out of articles. From the outset, Jackson said that he was exposed to large clients and important matters. A big opportunity arose when Jeremy Yeats fell ill, and Jackson took over the work that he handled for Richards Bay Minerals and Tongaat Hulett on land, the environment and minerals. It was through this exposure that he then specialised in natural resource law, which was something that he had not

considered at university, where he had focused on tax, finance and corporate law.

Jackson says that he is quite old fashioned in his approach to his career as he believes that "You should make a place work, if it is an environment that works". His 30 year employment history at Cox Yeats is in great contrast to the modern trend of job hopping, which is also a challenge for employee retention. Jackson says that it is important to have a culture that builds people from a young age and grows their careers so that they stay with the firm. However, this does require a reciprocal relationship of trust and organisational commitment.

Leading a law firm and dealing with a range of diverse personalities requires much responsibility, especially with 28 partners making a total of 45 professionals. As such Jackson favours a participative management style and is as inclusive as possible in allowing everyone to air their voices to reach consensus. He commented that it has been very fulfilling to develop a team of professionals around him and work collectively, as opposed to individually.

The Cox Yeats' way values independence and participation. However, he added, "We have found that focussing on our core values and measuring all decisions in reaction to these values has given us much relevance. Our model in recent years of living true to these values has been very successful."

An important part of these values is offering outstanding client service and being quite bold. "We regard ourselves as the best KZN law firm and have an increasing amount of international reach, which in the future we would like to grow," concluded Jackson.

Jackson is married to Helen who is also a lawyer and has two children. In his free time, he enjoys rowing three times a week on Durban Harbour, the office exercise class and hobbling around the neighbourhood. Apart from international travel, a favourite breakaway spot is a cottage on the Transkei wild coast, which has been in the family for nearly 80 years.