

# HELPING GET GM BACK ON TOP

Michael Millikin Brings  
'One Team' Approach to  
Revitalized Automaker



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When General Motors Co. emerged from Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 2009—a trip many believed the world's largest automaker for most of the last century would never take—it installed Michael P. Millikin, JD '73, as general counsel. GM chose the globally tested, then 32-year company veteran when many other top leaders were being recruited from outside the company.

**O**NE OF THREE senior vice presidents at the automaker and responsible for GM's legal affairs worldwide, Michael Millikin guides his team to provide the best possible legal support on all issues arising in any of the 157 countries where the Detroit-based automotive giant has a presence. And these lawyers "fully appreciate what I expect of them—to do all they can to help GM meet its business objectives lawfully and with high integrity," says Millikin.

Millikin, who joined GM in 1977, says he is continually impressed by his team's enthusiasm, entrepreneurial spirit, and determination to help GM reclaim the respect it earned for decades as the industry's undisputed leader. "I've grown with these lawyers, as we have grown globally, and they're as dedicated as I am."

One of those with whom he rose is Frederick Fromm, currently vice president and general counsel for GM's Shanghai-based General Motors International Operations (GMIO).

Fromm joined GM Legal within a month of Millikin in 1977, and the two worked “in the trenches” for decades, at times on the same legal matters. More recently, Fromm has been a direct report to Millikin.

“You know where you stand with Mike. You know what’s expected of you,” Fromm says. “He’s not going to pull any punches. He’s very strong on integrity. And I know if my back is to the wall—if I have to give some really tough legal advice—I can talk with Mike and I will have his full support. I know he’s going to be there for me.”

**MILLIKIN SEEKS TO INSPIRE** by personal example. He speaks with compelling energy and excitement about his work. “I thoroughly enjoy the art of advocacy and argumentation—so long as it is accompanied by the civility that befits an art form—and the huge intellectual challenge involved,” he says.

His uncompromising values emerge in situations like a recent interview with a young woman just out of law school. “I said that first and foremost, no matter what the issue may be, you must act with integrity. Your name is your brand; if you damage

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it, you’ve damaged your career. If you don’t keep your word, for example, that will quickly become known.”

Millikin stressed the importance of learning all the facts of a case and understanding applicable case law to make the right decision with no regrets for failing to dig deep enough.

“Not every issue has one right decision,” he said. “A good lawyer can take both sides of an issue.” (Millikin, himself, enjoyed that intellectual challenge during his clerkship for Judge Vincent J. Brennan of the Michigan Court of Appeals, when the panel asked him to help write both the majority and the dissenting opinions.)

**OF HIS PROFESSIONAL** qualities, Millikin adds, “I enjoy challenges and I’m highly competitive!” Notable among Millikin’s career successes was winning a \$1.1-billion settlement in 1997 for GM in an internationally publicized corporate espionage case—the 20th century’s biggest—that he says was “even larger than it was given credit for.”

Millikin and his team spent four years pursuing the matter, which involved a high-ranking GM executive, José Ignacio López

de Arriortura, who in 1993 absconded to Volkswagen AG with confidential product plans and manufacturing and global purchasing documents.

López’s and VW’s defense featured Robert Strauss, former U.S. ambassador to Russia, and Plato Cacheris, counsel for John Mitchell during Watergate and for CIA spy Aldrich Ames. At the time, Millikin memorably commented, “While I’m unconcerned with flashiness, I’m extraordinarily concerned with effectiveness.”

Over the years, Millikin steadily assumed positions of increased responsibility, becoming, for example, vice president and general counsel of GMIO, then based in Zurich. He was a member of the GMIO and European strategy boards just as GM was beginning its globalization effort. He also joined GM’s supervisory boards in Germany and Korea before rising to his current position.

GM’s legal structure today owes a lot to Millikin’s driving principles of cooperation, communication, and coordination. In the last decade, he oversaw creation of processes governing how the company’s nine virtual practice areas—such as purchasing, marketing, and global product development—would run.

“Because of Mike’s global focus from his work outside the United States, he’s really pushed the global processes and highlighted the importance of operating as one team,” says Fromm, who also clerked in the Michigan Court of Appeals as a young attorney—after Millikin left to join the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Detroit.



Millikin particularly acknowledges the influence on his career of Professors Michael Greenfield and Frank Miller, who in their use of the Socratic method taught him to correctly anticipate the other side’s arguments, and William Jones, from whom he learned about Chinese law. “In my dealings with China, I remembered things he taught me,” Millikin says. Today, GM can point to 13 straight quarters of profitability and is in the midst of the largest number of new vehicle introductions in its history. Millikin feels “enormous satisfaction watching GM come back as it has and will continue to do.”

Also cheering on GM are sons, Christopher and Matthew, AB ’98, JD ’01; 2-year-old grandson, Ethan Michael; and especially, Millikin’s wife, Karen—whose “unwavering confidence in my ability is why I am where I am today.”