



The State Bar of California 2010 Harry B. Sondheim Professional Responsibility Award Recipient

Harry B. Sondheim is the inaugural recipient of the State Bar's new California Professional Responsibility Award. On July 24, 2010, the Board of Governors established the award to recognize a member's outstanding long-term contribution to the advancement of attorney professional responsibility standards in California. The Board also found it appropriate to designate the award as the "Harry B. Sondheim California Professional Responsibility Award."

The State Bar's Strategic Plan includes the goal of setting and maintaining high professional standards for California lawyers and, in part, the Bar achieves this goal by exercising its statutory authority to adopt amendments to the California Rules of Professional Conduct. The last three decades has been a critical time for the evolution of professional responsibility and it is impossible to discuss the Bar's important work on the California Rules during these years without mentioning the name Harry Sondheim. Harry is regarded as the master architect of the California Rules. As the original chair of the Bar's Special Commission for the Revision of the Rules in the 1980's, he set the tone of the Rules by fostering the development of clear and concise disciplinary standards that emphasized public protection, but also assured effective lawyer advocacy. While many other states were content with standing on the shoulders of the ABA Model Rules, California explored reforms that later would be imitated by ABA Model Rule jurisdictions. For example, it was under Harry's watch in 1989 that California became the first state to adopt a rule governing the sale and purchase of a law practice.

In 2001, the Board asked Harry to reprise his role as Commission chair to lead the Bar's current project to completely revise the California rules. As was the case in the 1980's, Harry's leadership has been exemplary. Of particular note is the Commission's assistance to the Board in expediting the recent adoption of new Rule 1-650, the Limited Legal Services rule, which clarifies issues of imputed conflicts and facilitates greater pro bono efforts by law firms. As California's law on imputed conflicts and ethical walls differs from the standards found in the ABA Model Rules, this was a challenging task that further underscores Harry's leadership and dedication to improving California's professional standards. In total, Harry's work with both the original Commission and its current iteration represents a 14 year commitment of service to the State Bar.

In addition to working on the Rules, Harry served on committees that draft ethics opinions. At the local bar level, over the course of twenty years, Harry served on several Los Angeles County Bar Association committees including: the Committee on the State Bar; the Evaluation of Professional Standards Committee; and the Ethics Committee. Regarding the State Bar's own ethics opinion committee (a.k.a., "COPRAC," the acronym for Committee on Professional Responsibility and Conduct), Harry served two separate terms, becoming committee chair each time, which is unprecedented in the history of the Bar's ethics committee. In total, his COPRAC work represents an additional 11 year commitment of service to the State Bar.

As his "day job," for over 30 years, Harry worked as a chief deputy in the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office where he was in charge of the largest appellate District Attorney's operation in the country. There, he created the first ever District Attorney Professional Responsibility Unit, in recognition of the fact that legal ethics is a complex field that should be accessible to prosecutors who are charged with seeking the truth.

There are many other examples of Harry's contribution to the advancement of professional responsibility, but the highlights mentioned here alone demonstrate a substantial commitment that is laudable and worthy of the distinction that the Board now confers by choosing him as the inaugural recipient of the new California Professional Responsibility Award.

"In the 7 Plus years I served as LA County DA Harry Sondheim was a paragon of thoughtfulness, and ethical propriety. In many ways he served as the conscience of the office. He has continued to serve the profession—even in retirement—by his long and painstaking effort to improve our Code of Professional Responsibility."

*John Van de Kamp
Former State Attorney
General and Los Angeles District Attorney*

"Harry Sondheim has influenced the development of modern legal ethics in California like no other. For the past 30 years Harry has guided the evolution of the modern rules of professional conduct and helped frame many of its enduring concepts. As the Rules Revision Commission chair Harry masterfully handled the most difficult task in the field of Professional Responsibility and Ethics. This honor is well deserved."

*Stanley W. Lamport, Cox, Castle, Nicholson LLP
Member, Rules Revision Commission
Past Chair, Los Angeles County Bar Association
Professional Responsibility and Ethics Committee*

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