



Attorneys of the Year: Celeste Culberth and Leslie Lienemann

By: [Nancy Crotti](#) February 20, 2017

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St. Paul employment attorneys Leslie Lienemann and Celeste Culberth overcame numerous hurdles to win a \$3.5 million settlement for former banker Steven Habberstad.

Habberstad sued six current and former relatives, claiming that they forced him out of the family business because he is gay.

“This was an employment case and a shareholder dispute in one,” said longtime employment lawyer Sheila Engelmeier of Engelmeier & Umanah, Minneapolis. “There aren’t that many people that have expertise in both areas.”

Habberstad and his family owned parts of Farmers and Merchants State Bank of Blooming Prairie, Citizens State Bank of Hayfield, and their holding company, Country Bankers, Inc. Lienemann, Culberth and Iowa attorney Mark Sherinian won a verdict that proved sexual orientation discrimination and retaliation.

“In both the breach of fiduciary duty claim and in the Minnesota Human Rights Act claim, we have to show bad motive, either discriminatory motive or ill will,” Lienemann explained. “We had a number of different defendants acting in concert, and each time you add another person, you add another burden on the plaintiff’s side.”

The attorneys used email and circumstantial evidence to prove that the defendants changed draft minutes of board meetings over time to hide their plans to fire Steven Habberstad, Culberth said. They also won 21 years of front pay of \$100,000 plus interest per year for Habberstad.

“Getting front pay for 21 years is not just unusual, it’s unheard of,” Lienemann said.