FIDUCIARY DUTIES, EXCULPATION, AND INDEMNIFICATION IN TEXAS BUSINESS ORGANIZATIONS

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State Bar of Texas
12th ANNUAL
FIDUCIARY LITIGATION
November 30-December 1, 2017
San Antonio

CHAPTER 12.1

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FIDUCIARY DUTIES, EXCULPATION, AND
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I. INTRODUCTION

Statutory developments beginning in the 1990s have impacted the analysis of fiduciary duties in the business organizations context. The duties of general partners are now defined by statutory provisions that delineate the duties without referring to them as “fiduciary” duties and specifically provide that partners shall not be held to the standard of a trustee. Whether limited partners in a limited partnership have fiduciary duties is not well-settled, but the Business Organizations Code (BOC) clarifies that a limited partner does not owe the duties of a general partner solely by reason of being a limited partner. While the fiduciary duties of directors are still principally defined by common law, various provisions of the corporate statutes are relevant to the application of fiduciary-duty concepts in the corporate context. Because limited liability companies (LLCs) are a relatively recent phenomenon and the Texas LLC statutes do not explicitly set forth or define the duties and liabilities of managerial or governing persons, there is some uncertainty with regard to the duties in this area, but the LLC statutes allude to or imply the existence of duties, and managers in a manager-managed LLC and members in a member-managed LLC should expect to be held to fiduciary duties similar to the duties of corporate directors or general partners. In each type of entity, the governing documents may vary (at least to some extent) the duties and liabilities of managerial or governing persons. The power to define duties, eliminate liability, and provide for indemnification is addressed somewhat differently in the statutes governing the various forms of business entities.

II. CORPORATIONS

A. Fiduciary Duties of Corporate Directors, Officers, and Shareholders

The provisions of the BOC governing for-profit corporations (like the predecessor Texas Business Corporation Act), do not explicitly set forth or define the fiduciary duties of corporate directors; however, case law generally recognizes that directors owe the corporation (but not individual shareholders) a duty of obedience, a duty of care, and a duty of loyalty. See Ritchie v. Rupe, 443 S.W.3d 856, 868 (Tex. 2014); Gearhart Indus., Inc. v. Smith Int’l, Inc., 741 F.2d 707, 719-721 (5th Cir. 1984); FDIC v. Harrington, 844 F.Supp. 300, 306 (N.D. Tex. 1994); Resolution Trust Corp. v. Norris, 830 F.Supp. 351 (S.D. Tex. 1993).

1. Director’s Duty of Obedience

The directors’ duty of obedience forbids ultra vires acts but is rarely implicated given that modern corporation laws define corporate powers expansively and permit broad purpose clauses in the certificate of formation. See Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code §§ 2.001, 2.003, 2.007, 2.008, 2.101, 3.005(a)(3); see also Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 20.002 (defining scope of ultra vires doctrine). In general, courts appear reluctant to hold directors liable for ultra vires acts. As one court has summed up Texas law in this area, “Texas courts have refused to impose personal liability on corporate directors for illegal or ultra vires acts of corporate agents unless the directors either participated in the act or had actual knowledge of the act.” Resolution Trust Corp. v. Norris, 830 F.Supp. 351, 357 (S.D. Tex. 1993).

2. Director’s Duty of Care

Until the 1990s, Texas cases dealing with director liability for breach of the duty of care, as distinct from the duty of loyalty, had been few and far between. The Fifth Circuit analyzed a director's duty of care under Texas law in Gearhart Industries, Inc. v. Smith International, Inc., 741 F.2d 707 (5th Cir. 1984) as follows:

Under the law of most jurisdictions, the duty of care requires a director to be diligent and prudent in managing the corporation's affairs. Ubelaker at 784. The leading case in Texas defining a director's standard of care is McCollum v. Dollar, 213 S.W. 259 (Tex.Com'n App.1919, holding approved). That case held that a director must handle his corporate duties with such care as "an ordinarily prudent man would use under similar circumstances." Id. at 261. The question of director negligence is a question of fact and must be decided on a case-by-case basis. Id. Texas courts hold directors liable for negligent mismanagement of their corporations, but the decisions do not specifically refer to such acts as violations of the duty of care, preferring to speak in general terms of directors as fiduciaries. International Bankers Life Ins. Co. v. Holloway, supra; Tenison v. Patton, supra; Dowdle v. Texas Am. Oil Corp., 503 S.W.2d 647, 651 (Tex.Civ.App.—El Paso 1973, no writ); Fagan v. La Gloria Oil & Gas Co., 494 S.W.2d 624, 628 (Tex.Civ.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1973, no writ); Sutton v. Reagan & Gee, 405 S.W.2d 828, 834 (Tex.Civ.App.—San Antonio 1966, writ ref'd n.r.e.). unquestionably, under Texas law, a director as a fiduciary must exercise his unbiased or honest business judgment in pursuit

In other jurisdictions, a corporate director who acts in good faith and without corrupt motive will not be held liable for mistakes of business judgment that damage corporate interests. Ubelaker at 775; see, e.g., Lasker v. Burks, 404 F. Supp. 1172 (S.D.N.Y.1975). This principle is known as the business judgment rule and it is a defense to accusations of breach of the duty of care. Ubelaker at 775, 790. Few Texas cases discuss the issues of a director's standard of care, negligent mismanagement, and business judgment. An early case, Cates v. Sparkman, 73 Tex. 619, 11 S.W. 846 (1889), set the standard for judicial intervention in cases involving these issues:

[I]f the acts or things are or may be that which the majority of the company have a right to do, or if they have been done irregularly, negligently, or imprudently, or are within the exercise of their discretion and judgment in the development or prosecution of the enterprise in which their interests are involved, these would not constitute such a breach of duty, however unwise or inexpedient such acts might be, as would authorize interference by the courts at the suit of a shareholder.


Thus, despite the “ordinary care” standard announced in early Texas cases, the Fifth Circuit characterized the business judgment rule in Texas as protecting all but fraudulent or ultra vires conduct, which would literally protect even grossly negligent conduct and thus provide more protection than the Delaware business judgment rule. The tension between the standard of care and standard of liability in Texas received little attention in the reported cases until the 1990s when federal banking regulatory agencies began seeking recovery from the directors of failed financial institutions (and their liability insurers) for their alleged mismanagement of the failed institutions. Federal district courts were then faced squarely with the issue of what degree of negligence, if any, would subject the directors to liability under Texas corporate law. These federal district courts generally rejected the argument of the FDIC and RTC that directors are liable under Texas common law for acts of mismanagement that amount to simple negligence, but concluded that the business judgment rule does not protect a breach of the duty of care that amounts to gross negligence or an abdication of responsibilities resulting in a failure to exercise any judgment. See FDIC v. Schreiner, 892 F.Supp. 869 (S.D. Tex. 1995); FDIC v. Daniel, 158 F.R.D. 101 (E.D. Texas. 1994); RTC v. Acton, 822 F.Supp. 307 (N.D. Tex. 1994); FDIC v. Benson, 867 F.Supp. 512 (S.D. Tex. 1994); FDIC v. Harrington, 844 F.Supp. 300 (N.D. Tex. 1994); Resolution Trust Corp. v. Norris, 830 F.Supp. 351 (S.D. Tex. 1993); FDIC v. Brown, 812 F.Supp. 722 (S.D. Tex. 1992); Resolution Trust Corp. v. Bonner, 1993 WL 414679 (S.D. Tex. 1993). At least two courts in Texas have relied upon this line of cases outside the banking context. See In re Life Partners Holdings, Inc. Shareholder Derivative Litigation, 2015 WL 8523103 (W.D. Tex. 2015); Weaver v. Kellog, 216 B.R. 563, 584 (S.D. Tex. 1997).

In Floyd v. Hefner, 2006 WL 2844245 (S.D. Tex. 2006), Judge Harmon followed the Gearhart opinion and rejected the proposition that corporate directors can be held liable for gross negligence under current Texas law. The court concluded that the district court opinions that followed a gross negligence standard appear to be the product of the special treatment that banks receive under Texas law\(^1\) whereas Floyd v. Hefner involved actions taken by directors of an oil and gas exploration company, which the court characterized as “a far more speculative

\(^1\)In 2003, H.B. 1076 amended the Texas Banking Code to provide that bank officers and directors may be held liable only for acts of gross negligence. H.B. 1076 states that the statute was intended merely to clarify existing law regarding the proper standard of care for bank officers and directors.
In 2014, in *Ritchie v. Rupe*, the Texas Supreme Court cited *Gearhart* when describing the common law fiduciary duties of corporate directors as follows:

Directors, or those acting as directors, owe a fiduciary duty to the corporation in their directorial actions, and this duty “includes the dedication of [their] uncorrupted business judgment for the sole benefit of the corporation.” *Int’l Bankers Life Ins. Co. v. Holloway*, 368 S.W.2d 567, 577 (Tex. 1963); *see also* *Gearhart Indus., Inc. v. Smith Intern., Inc.*, 741 F.2d 707, 723-24 (5th Cir. 1984) (describing corporate director’s fiduciary duties of obedience, loyalty, and due care).

443 S.W.3d at 868.

In 2015, the Texas Supreme Court addressed the business judgment rule in the context of a double derivative suit brought by a shareholder of a closely held corporation against officers of the corporation’s wholly owned subsidiary. *Sneed v. Webre*, 465 S.W.3d 169 (Tex. 2015). The court described the business judgment rule as “generally protect[ing] corporate officers and directors, who owe fiduciary duties to the corporation, from liability for acts that are within the honest exercise of their business judgment and discretion,” citing *Cates v. Sparkman*. Id. at 173. The court explained that the special BOC provisions applicable to derivative suits on behalf of closely held corporations alter the role of the business judgment rule in the analysis of a shareholder’s standing to assert a claim on behalf of the corporation such that the board’s decision not to assert the claim cannot deprive a shareholder of standing to pursue the claim derivatively. However, the court confirmed that the business judgment rule still applies to the merits of a claim against the officers and directors of a closely held corporation such that the officers and directors do not have liability for acts within the honest exercise of their business judgment.

The court in *Sneed* reiterated its explanation in *Cates* that “courts will not interfere with the officers or directors in control of the corporation’s affairs based on allegations of mere mismanagement, neglect, or abuse of discretion.” Id. at 186. In order to merit relief, a claim for breach of duty against an officer or director must be “characterized by ultra vires, fraudulent, and injurious practices, abuse of power, and oppression on the part of the company or its controlling agency clearly subversive of the rights of...a shareholder.” *Cates*, 11 S.W. at 849; *see also* *Pace*, 999 S.W.2d at 623. *Pace v. Jordan*, goes on, however, to state that a board may only invoke the protection of the business judgment rule if the directors are informed of all material information reasonably available to them before making a decision. *Pace*, 999 S.W.2d at 624.

The Texas Supreme Court alluded to the Texas business judgment rule in a recent opinion addressing the sufficiency of a shareholder’s demand prior to filing a derivative suit. *In re Schmitz*, 285 S.W.3d 451 (Tex. 2009). In *Schmitz*, the Texas Supreme Court cited *Cates v. Sparkman*, 73 Tex. 619, 11 S.W. 846, 849 (1889) and *Pace v. Jordan*, 999 S.W.2d 615, 623 (Tex.App.–Houston [1st Dist.] 1999, pet. denied) when referring to the business judgment rule. Interestingly, the court did not cite the *Gearhart* case. *Cates v. Sparkman* and *Pace v. Jordan* state that acts of the board of directors that are merely unwise, inexpedient, negligent, or imprudent do not authorize the courts to interfere at the behest of a shareholder. According to these cases, judicial interference with a board decision is warranted only if the board’s conduct or breach of duty is characterized by “ultra vires, fraudulent, and injurious practices, abuse of power and oppression...clearly subversive of the rights of...a shareholder.” *Cates*, 11 S.W. at 849; *see also* *Pace*, 999 S.W.2d at 623. *Pace v. Jordan*, goes on, however, to state that a board may only invoke the protection of the business judgment rule if the directors are informed of all material information reasonably available to them before making a decision. *Pace*, 999 S.W.2d at 624.

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Though the BOC does not specify the standard of care applicable to directors of a for-profit corporation, it contains a number of provisions that are relevant to a director’s potential liability for breach of the duty of care. In recognition that informed decision making by directors cannot feasibly involve personal research or expertise on the part of each director with respect to the myriad business decisions faced, the BOC provides that a director may, in good faith and with ordinary care, rely on information, opinions, reports, or statements prepared or presented by officers or employees of the corporation, by a committee of the board of which the director is not a member, or by legal counsel, accountants, investment bankers, or others with professional or other expertise. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 3.102; see also Tex. Bus. Corp. Act art. 2.41D (expired Jan. 1, 2010). Additionally, as further discussed below, the corporate statutes contain broad indemnification provisions and even permit a corporation’s certificate of formation to eliminate the liability of a director for breach of the duty of care.

3. Director’s Duty of Loyalty

The director’s duty of loyalty “demands that there shall be no conflict between duty and self-interest. The methods for the determination of honesty, good faith and loyal conduct are many and varied, and no hard and fast rule can be formulated. The standard of loyalty is measured by no fixed scale.” Imperial Gp. (Texas), Inc. v. Scholnick, 709 S.W.2d 358, 365 (Tex.App.–Tyler 1986, writ ref’d n.r.e.), quoting Guth v. Loft, 23 Del. 255, 5 A.2d 503, 510 (1939). Common examples of transactions or conduct implicating the duty of loyalty are self-dealing and usurpation of a corporate opportunity. See Int’l Bankers Life Ins. Co. v. Holloway, 368 S.W.2d 567 (Tex. 1963); Gearhart Indus., Inc. v. Smith Int’l, Inc., 741 F.2d 707 (5th Cir. 1984). In In re Life Partners Holdings, Inc. Shareholder Derivative Litigation, 2015 WL 8523103 (W.D. Tex. 2015), Judge Moses addressed the standard of liability under Texas law applicable to a claim against directors for a failure of oversight. The court noted that courts in Texas have indicated that the business judgment rule does not protect directors from liability for failure to exercise oversight or supervision, but the court looked to Delaware law for a framework for determining director liability in the absence of an exact standard of liability for failure of oversight under Texas law. The court concluded that director oversight liability in Texas, as in Delaware, is premised on conscious disregard of oversight responsibility, which entails bad faith and is thus a breach of the duty of loyalty.

The BOC contains provisions outlining procedures under which interested-director transactions will be deemed valid notwithstanding the director’s interest in the transaction or participation in the meeting at which the transaction is approved. See Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 21.418; see also Tex. Bus. Corp. Act art. 2.35-1 (expired Jan. 1, 2010). Generally, these procedures require full disclosure by the interested director and approval by disinterested directors or the shareholders. If one of these procedures is not followed, the transaction will nevertheless withstand challenge if it passes scrutiny for “fairness” to the corporation. Likewise, before a director can safely embark on what would be considered a corporate opportunity, the opportunity must be fully disclosed to and declined by the corporation. See Imperial Group (Texas), Inc. v. Scholnick, 709 S.W.2d 358, 365 (Tex.App.–Tyler 1986, writ ref’d n.r.e.). In 2011, the interested-director provisions of the BOC were amended to make clear that if at least one of the three conditions provided by the statute is met, neither the corporation nor its shareholders have any cause of action against the conflicted director for breach of duty in respect of the contract or transaction because of the director’s relationship or interest or as a result of the director’s taking any of the actions described in Section 21.418(d), i.e., the execution of a consent or participation in a meeting of directors.

4. Officers

As agents of the corporation, officers have duties of obedience, care, and loyalty. See generally Restatement (Third) of Agency §§ 8.01-8.12 (2006) (dealing with an agent’s duties of loyalty and performance); Restatement (Second) of Agency §§ 377-398 (1958) (dealing with an agent’s duties of service, obedience, and loyalty). See also Johnson v. Brewer & Pritchard, P.C., 73 S.W.3d 193, 200 (Tex. 2002) (stating that agency is a special relationship giving rise to a fiduciary duty on the part of the agent to act solely for the benefit of the principal); Principles of Corporate Governance: Analysis and Recommendations § 4.01 cmt. a (1994) (stating that it is relatively well-settled that officers will be held to the same duty-of-care standards as directors and that sound public policy supports holding officers to the same duty of care and business judgment standards as directors); Principles of Corporate Governance: Analysis and Recommendations Part V, introductory note b (1994) (stating that courts have usually treated officers in the same category as directors when imposing and enforcing the duty of fair dealing). The application of these duties may vary somewhat from the application to directors, but often the courts speak of officers and directors in one breath when addressing duties.
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5. Shareholders


In Willis v. Donnelly, 199 S.W.3d 262 (Tex. 2006), the Texas Supreme Court expressly refrained from addressing the question of whether a majority shareholder in a closely held corporation owes a minority shareholder a general fiduciary duty under Texas law. An employee asserted a breach-of-fiduciary-duty claim against the controlling shareholders of two corporations based on the corporations’ failure to issue him stock that was promised to him. Assuming without deciding that the relationship of majority and minority shareholder can give rise to a fiduciary duty, the supreme court held that the record did not support the existence of such a duty because the employee never became a shareholder. Because the employee’s claim was that he was denied shareholder status, his only potential relief was for breach of contract.

In Ritchie v. Rupe, 443 S.W.3d 856 (Tex. 2014), the Texas Supreme Court stated that it had “never recognized a formal fiduciary duty between majority and minority shareholders in a closely-held corporation,” citing Willis v. Donnelly, and the court noted that no party had asked the court to do so. The court went on to say that “[t]he dissent’s contention that this Court should recognize a common-law duty between majority and minority shareholders, rather than between corporate controllers and the corporation, for [misapplication of corporate funds and diversion of corporate opportunities] is contrary to well-established law.”

Although shareholders do not generally owe one another fiduciary duties, the relationship between particular shareholders may constitute a confidential relationship giving rise to fiduciary duties when influence has been acquired and confidence has been justifiably reposed. Flanary v. Mills, 150 S.W.3d 785 (Tex.App.–Austin 2004, pet. denied) (stating that “[a] person is justified in placing confidence in the belief that another party will act in his or her best interest only where he or she is accustomed to being guided by the judgment or advice of the other party, and there exists a long association in a business relationship, as well as personal friendship”). The supreme court in Ritchie v. Rupe, 443 S.W.3d 856 (Tex. 2014), acknowledged that an informal fiduciary duty may be owed by a shareholder to another shareholder based on a moral, social, domestic, or purely personal relationship of trust and confidence prior to and independent from the parties’ business relationship. On remand of that case, the Dallas Court of Appeals held that the evidence did not support the jury’s finding of a confidential relationship between the plaintiff minority shareholder and other shareholders of the family-owned corporation at issue in the case. Ritchie v. Rupe, 2016 WL 145581 (Tex.App.–Dallas 2016, pet. denied).

In Allen v. Devon Energy Holdings, L.L.C., 367 S.W.3d 355 (Tex. App.–Houston [1st Dist.] 2012, pet. granted, judgm’t vacated w.r.m.), the court noted that the vast majority of intermediate appellate courts in Texas have declined to recognize a broad formal fiduciary duty by a majority shareholder to a minority shareholder in a closely held corporation, but the court concluded that case law supports the proposition that a controlling shareholder owes a formal fiduciary duty to a minority shareholder in the context of the communication of an offer to purchase the minority shareholder’s shares, including an offer to redeem the shares where the redemption will result in an increase in the controlling shareholder’s ownership of the corporation.

Until 2014, courts of appeals in Texas had recognized the availability of various equitable remedies, including a court-ordered buyout, where a minority shareholder established that the majority shareholder engaged in “oppressive” conduct. “Oppressive” conduct was defined by the courts as:
(1) majority shareholders’ conduct that substantially defeats the minority’s expectations that, objectively viewed, were both reasonable under the circumstances and central to the minority shareholder’s decision to invest; or

(2) burdensome, harsh, or wrongful conduct; a lack of probity and fair dealing in the company’s affairs to the prejudice of some members; or a visible departure from the standards of fair dealing and a violation of fair play on which each shareholder is entitled to rely.

Davis v. Sheerin, 754 S.W.2d 375, 381-82 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1988, writ denied) (awarding minority shareholder equitable buyout at fair value as determined by jury based upon the majority’s refusal to recognize the minority’s ownership in the corporation).


In 2014, the Texas Supreme Court disapproved of the manner in which courts of appeals had been applying the oppression doctrine and significantly limited the reach of the oppression doctrine. In Ritchie v. Rupe, 443 S.W.3d 56 (Tex. 2014), the court: (1) rejected the “reasonable expectations” and “fair dealing” tests for oppression that courts of appeals had been applying in Texas since 1988 and adopted a definition requiring abuse of authority by management with intent to harm an owner in disregard of management’s honest business judgment; (2) held that a rehabilitative receivership is the only remedy for oppression under Section 11.404 of the BOC; and (3) declined to recognize a common-law cause of action for oppression. In the future, minority shareholders will thus seek to assert their grievances as breaches of fiduciary duty to the corporation (in a derivative suit in which the minority shareholder will be relieved of certain requirements in the context of a closely held corporation and may have the prospect of direct recovery under Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 21.563) or as violations of statutory provisions (e.g., shareholder right to examine corporate books and records under Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 21.218) or breach of contractual obligations to the extent applicable.

A few Texas cases have alluded to a fiduciary duty on the part of a majority shareholder running to the corporation. See Hoggett v. Brown, 971 S.W.2d 472, 488 n. 13 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1997, pet. denied); Schautteet v. Chester State Bank, 707 F.Supp. 885, 889 (E.D. Tex. 1988). In a corporation that has modified its management structure to provide for operation and management directly by the shareholders under a shareholders’ agreement, such shareholders have the duties and liabilities that would otherwise be imposed on directors. See Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code §§ 21.106, 21.727; see also Tex. Bus. Corp. Act art. 2.30-1F, art. 12.37C (expired Jan. 1, 2010).

B. Statutory Authorization to Modify Duties and Liabilities of Corporate Directors and Officers in Governing Documents

1. Exculpation

The BOC permits limitation or elimination of the liability of a corporate director in the certificate of formation within certain parameters. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 7.001; see also Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 1302-7.06 (expired Jan. 1, 2010). Specifically, the statute provides that the certificate of formation of a corporation may limit or eliminate the liability of a director for monetary damages to the corporation or shareholders for an act or omission in the person’s capacity as a director subject to certain exceptions. The statute does not permit elimination or limitation of liability for:

1) breach of the director’s duty of loyalty;

2) an act or omission not in good faith that constitutes a breach of duty to the corporation or involves intentional misconduct or a knowing violation of the law;

3) a transaction from which the director received an improper benefit, whether or not the benefit resulted from an act within the scope of the director’s duties; or
4) an act or omission for which liability is expressly provided by a statute.

This provision is sometimes summarized as generally permitting elimination of liability for duty-of-care violations by directors. If the standard of liability for a breach of the duty of care is simple negligence, this provision obviously provides meaningful protection from liability for such negligence. If the standard of liability for a breach of the duty of care is gross negligence or fraud, it is not clear whether a breach of the duty of care could be in “good faith” so as to fall outside the second exception above. The Texas Supreme Court has generally defined gross negligence to involve actual subjective awareness of an extreme degree of risk and conscious indifference to the rights, welfare, and safety of others. See Transp. Ins. Co. v. Moriel, 879 S.W.2d 10 (1994). Moriel was cited in Weaver v. Kellogg, 216 B.R. 563 (S.D. Tex. 1997) for the definition of gross negligence in the context of a director’s duty. In In re Life Partners Holdings, Inc. Shareholder Derivative Litigation, 2015 WL 8523103 (W.D. Tex. 2015), the court stated that the question of whether claims for breach of care can be excused under Section 7.001 of the Business Organizations Code was a matter of first impression under Texas law. The court held that Section 7.001(b) authorizes the same scope of excusal as the comparable statutory provision in Delaware, which Delaware courts have held authorizes excusal for claims for breach of care based on gross negligence. The court observed that Section 7.001 either authorizes excusal for breaches of care or it exculpates nothing at all.

2. Renunciation of Corporate Opportunity

Because Section 7.001 of the Business Organizations Code (which is the successor to Article 7.06 of the Texas Miscellaneous Corporation Laws Act) does not permit elimination of director liability for the breach of a duty of loyalty, corporate-opportunity issues ordinarily must be addressed at the time they arise. If a director makes full disclosure to the corporation regarding the business opportunity when it arises and the corporation declines the opportunity, the director is permitted to proceed; however, until 2003, the corporate statutes in Texas contained no specific statutory provisions indicating that a preemptive waiver in the governing documents would be effective so as to relieve a director from the obligation to first offer a business opportunity to the corporation before personally taking advantage of the opportunity. The Delaware General Corporation Law was amended in 2000 to expressly permit a corporation to renounce, in its certificate of incorporation or by action of the board of directors, any interest or expectancy in specified business opportunities or specified classes or categories of business opportunities presented to the corporation or its officers, directors, or shareholders. Del. Code Ann. tit. 8, § 122(17). The Texas Business Corporation Act (TBCA) was similarly amended in 2003, and Article 2.20(20) of the TBCA was carried forward in the BOC. Thus, the BOC provides that a corporation has the power to renounce, in its certificate of formation or by action of its board of directors, an interest or expectancy of the corporation in, or an interest or expectancy in being offered an opportunity to participate in, specified business opportunities or specified classes or categories of business opportunities that are presented to the corporation or one or more of its officers, directors, or shareholders. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 2.101(21). This provision is included in the general powers provision of the BOC and applies to domestic entities of all types governed by the BOC.

3. Shareholders’ Agreements

Another approach to limiting fiduciary duties in the corporate context is to utilize a shareholders’ agreement under Sections 21.101-21.109 of the BOC. (These provisions are the successor to Article 2.30-1 of the TBCA.) Under these provisions, a corporation that is not publicly traded may be governed by a shareholders’ agreement entered into by all persons who are shareholders at the time of the agreement. BOC Section 21.101(a) lists matters that may be included in a shareholders’ agreement even though they are inconsistent with one or more provisions of the corporate statutes. Included in the list is a catch-all provision that states that such an agreement is effective even though it “otherwise governs the exercise of corporate powers, the management of the business and affairs of the corporation, or the relationship among the shareholders, the directors, and the corporation as if the corporation were a partnership or in a manner that would otherwise be appropriate only among partners and not contrary to public policy.” Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 21.101(a)(11); see also Tex. Bus. Corp. Art. 2.30-1A(9) (expired Jan. 1, 2010). Thus, it appears that fiduciary duties of those in a management role of a corporation governed by such an agreement may be modified or waived in ways not generally permitted by corporate law so long as such provisions would be permissible in the context of a partnership. (There may be a similar argument under Sections 21.714 and 21.719 of the BOC (see also Tex. Bus. Corp. Arts. 12.32, 12.35 (expired Jan. 1, 2010)) for “close corporations” that comply with Subchapter O of BOC Chapter 21. The predecessor to Subchapter O of
the BOC was the Texas Close Corporation Law found in Part 12 of the TBCA.)

4. Indemnification

BOC Chapter 8 outlines circumstances under which indemnification of directors, officers, and others is required, permitted, and prohibited. These indemnification provisions are somewhat lengthy and detailed. The predecessor provision in the TBCA was Article 2.02-1.

The BOC specifies circumstances under which a corporation is required to indemnify a director, permitted to indemnify a director, and prohibited from indemnifying a director. A corporation is required to indemnify a director or officer who is “wholly successful on the merits or otherwise” unless indemnification is limited or prohibited by the certificate of formation. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 8.051, 8.003; see also Tex. Bus. Corp. Act art. 2.02-1H, U (expired Jan. 1, 2010). A corporation is prohibited from indemnifying a director who is found liable to the corporation or for improperly receiving a personal benefit if the liability was based on willful or intentional misconduct in the performance of the director’s duty to the corporation, breach of the director’s duty of loyalty to the corporation, or an act or omission not in good faith constituting a breach of duty to the corporation. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 8.102(b)(3). Cf. Tex. Bus. Corp. Act art. 2.02-1C, E (corporation prohibited from indemnifying director who is found liable to corporation, or for improper receipt of personal benefit, if liability arose out of willful or intentional misconduct in performance of director’s duty to corporation). A corporation is permitted, without the necessity of any enabling provision in the certificate of formation or bylaws, to indemnify a director who is determined to meet certain standards. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 8.101, 8.102; see also Tex. Bus. Corp. Act art. 2.02-1B, E (expired Jan. 1, 2010). These standards require that the director: (1) acted in good faith; (2) reasonably believed the conduct was in the best interest of the corporation (if the conduct was in an official capacity) or that the conduct was not opposed to the corporation’s best interest (in cases of conduct outside the director’s official capacity); and (3) in the case of a criminal proceeding, had no reasonable cause to believe the conduct was unlawful. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 8.101(a); see also Tex. Bus. Corp. Act art. 2.02-1B (expired Jan. 1, 2010). If a director is found liable to the corporation or on the basis of improperly receiving a personal benefit, indemnification, if permissible at all, is limited to reasonable expenses. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 8.102(b); Tex. Bus. Corp. Act art. 2.02-1E (expired Jan. 1, 2010). Indemnification may be limited by the certificate of formation, or it may be mandated by the certificate of formation, bylaws, a resolution of the directors or shareholders, or a contract. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code §§ 8.003, 8.103(c); see also Tex. Bus. Corp. Act art. 2.02-1G, U (expired Jan. 1, 2010). Directors may only be indemnified to the extent consistent with the statute. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 8.004; see also Tex. Bus. Corp. Act art. 2.02-1M (expired Jan. 1, 2010).

Officers are required and permitted to be indemnified to the same extent as directors. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 8.105(b), (c); see also Tex. Bus. Corp. Act art. 2.02-1O (expired Jan. 1, 2010). Officers, employees, agents, and others who are not also directors may be indemnified “to the extent consistent with other law...as provided by (1) [the corporation’s] governing documents; (2) general or specific action of the [board of directors]; (3) resolution of the [corporation’s shareholders]; (4) contract; or (5) common law.” Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 8.105; see also Tex. Bus. Corp. Act art. 2.02-1O, Q (expired Jan. 1, 2010). Insurance or other arrangements providing indemnification for liabilities not otherwise indemnifiable under Chapter 8 are expressly permitted. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 8.151; see also Tex. Bus. Corp. Act art. 2.02-1R (expired Jan. 1, 2010). Shareholder approval is required for self-insurance or another arrangement with a party other than a commercial insurer if the indemnification extends to liabilities the corporation would not otherwise have the power to indemnify.

Chapter 8 of the BOC governs any proposed indemnification by a domestic entity after January 1, 2010, even if the events on which the indemnification is based occurred before the BOC became applicable to the entity. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 402.007. A special transition provision in the BOC regarding indemnification states that “[i]n a case in which indemnification is permitted but not required under Chapter 8, a provision relating to indemnification contained in the governing documents of a domestic entity on the mandatory application date that would otherwise have the effect of limiting the nature or type of indemnification permitted by Chapter 8 may not be construed after the mandatory application date as limiting the indemnification authorized by Chapter 8 unless the provision is intended to limit or restrict permissive indemnification under applicable law.” Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 402.007. This provision will be helpful in interpreting some pre-BOC indemnification provisions, but its application will not always be clear; therefore, a careful review of indemnification provisions in pre-BOC governing documents is advisable.

Although Chapter 8 sets certain limits on the extent to which directors may be protected by the governing
documents, more protective provisions are allowed pursuant to insurance, self-insurance, or other arrangements under Section 8.151. Additionally, indemnification beyond that permitted by Chapter 8 could possibly be achieved through a shareholders’ agreement under Sections 21.101-21.109 of the BOC. See also Tex. Bus. Corp. Act art. 2.30-1 (expired Jan. 1, 2010). As noted above in the discussion of director exculpation, Sections 21.101-21.109 permit a corporation that is not publicly traded to be governed by a shareholders’ agreement entered into by all persons who are shareholders at the time of the agreement. BOC Section 21.101 lists matters that may be included in a shareholders’ agreement even though they are inconsistent with one or more provisions of the corporate statutes. Included in the list is a catch-all provision that states that such an agreement is effective even though it “governs the exercise of corporate powers, the management of the business and affairs of the corporation, or the relationship among the shareholders, the directors, and the corporation as if the corporation were a partnership or in a manner that would otherwise be appropriate only among partners and not contrary to public policy.” Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 21.101(a)(11); see also Tex. Bus. Corp. Act art. 2.30-1A(9) (expired Jan. 1, 2010). Thus, it appears that indemnification beyond the parameters set by BOC Chapter 8 may be achieved under such an agreement if it would be permissible in a partnership and would not offend public policy. There may be a similar argument under Sections 21.714 and 21.719 of the BOC (see also Tex. Bus. Corp. Act arts. 12.32, 12.35 (expired Jan. 1, 2010)) for “close corporations” that comply with Subchapter O of BOC Chapter 21. The predecessor to Subchapter O of the BOC was the Texas Close Corporation Law found in Part 12 of the TBCA.

III. LIMITED LIABILITY COMPANIES

A. Fiduciary Duties of Managers and Managing Members

The provisions of the BOC governing LLCs (like the provisions of the predecessor Texas Limited Liability Company Act (TLLCA)) do not define or expressly impose fiduciary duties on managers or members of an LLC, but various provisions of the statute implicitly recognize that such duties may exist. Indeed, when acting as an agent of the LLC, a manager or managing member owes a duty of care pursuant to basic agency principles. Restatement (Third) of Agency § 8.08; see also Restatement (Second) of Agency § 379. Further, the agent status of a manager in a manager-managed LLC and a member in a member-managed LLC provides a basis under agency law to impose a duty of loyalty. See Restatement (Third) of Agency §§ 8.01-8.06; see also Restatement (Second) of Agency §§ 387-398. In Johnson v. Brewer & Pritchard, P.C., 73 S.W.3d 193 (Tex. 2002), the Texas Supreme Court discussed the fiduciary nature of the agency relationship under Texas common law. Cases are beginning to recognize agency law as well as analogies to corporate or partnership law as a basis to impose fiduciary duties in the LLC context. See ETRG Invs., LLC v. Hardee (In re Hardee), 2013 WL 1084494 (Bankr. E.D. Tex. 2013) (concluding managing member owed LLC formal fiduciary duties based on agency law; managing member owed formal fiduciary duties to LLC based on implication of Texas LLC law that managers and managing members owe fiduciary duties of care, loyalty, and obedience similar to corporate directors; managing member owed no fiduciary duties to other members); Zayler v. Calicutt (In re TSC Sieber Servs., LC), 2012 WL 5046820 (Bankr. E.D. Tex. 2012) (finding individual who took over managerial control of LLC but had no formal office or ownership interest owed LLC a formal fiduciary duty based on agency law and an informal fiduciary duty based on circumstances giving rise to control).

Commentators and practitioners have generally assumed that managers in a manager-managed LLC and members in a member-managed LLC have fiduciary duties along the lines of corporate directors or general partners in a partnership. These duties would generally embrace a duty of obedience, duty of loyalty, and duty of care to the LLC. Duty-of-loyalty concerns underlie statutory provisions addressing interested-manager transactions and renunciation of business opportunities. See Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code §§ 2.101(21), 101.255; see also Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 1528n, art. 2.17 (expired Jan. 1, 2010); Tex. Bus. Corp. Act art. 2.02(20) (expired Jan. 1, 2010) (applicable by virtue of Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 1528n, art. 2.02A (expired Jan. 1, 2010)). Provisions of the BOC permitting governing persons (including managers and managing members of an LLC) to rely on various types of information in discharging a duty implicitly recognize that such persons are charged with a duty of care in their decision making. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 3.102; see also Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 3.105 (reliance by officers on information in discharging a duty). Broad authorization to indemnify, insure, and advance expenses to members, managers, and other persons can be read to reflect some concern with liabilities to the LLC as well as to third parties. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 101.402; see also Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art.1528n, art. 2.20 (expired Jan. 1, 2010). Provisions outlining procedures applicable to derivative proceedings reflect an underlying assumption that members need a

Most of the Texas cases in which fiduciary duties have been an issue involve claims by a member against a fellow member for breach of fiduciary duty rather than claims based on a breach of fiduciary duty to the LLC. Allen v. Devon Energy Holdings, L.L.C.

In an unpublished opinion, the Dallas Court of Appeals concluded that members of an LLC do not necessarily owe other members fiduciary duties. Suntech Processing Sys., L.L.C. v. Sun Commnc’ns, Inc., 2000 WL 1780236 (Tex. App.—Dallas 2000, pet. denied). The court relied on Texas case law rejecting the notion that co-shareholders of a closely held corporation are necessarily in a fiduciary relationship. That the articles of organization imposed upon members a duty of loyalty to the LLC did not mandate any such duty between the members according to the court.

In Pinnacle Data Services, Inc. v. Gillen, 104 S.W.3d 188 (Tex.App.—Texarkana 2003, no pet.), a member of an LLC sued the other two members alleging various causes of action based on the action of the other two members in amending the LLC articles of organization to change the LLC from a member-managed LLC to a manager-managed LLC and excluding the plaintiff member from management. The plaintiff member owned a 50% interest in the LLC. The regulations required the approval of 66 2/3% in interest to amend the articles of organization, while the articles of organization required the approval of 2/3 of the members. The defendant members relied on the provision in the articles of organization, and the court held that the provision in the articles controlled because the TLLCA permitted the regulations to contain any provision not inconsistent with the articles of organization. The court of appeals reversed the trial court’s summary judgment in favor of the defendant members on the breach-of-fiduciary-duty claim, however, stating that the determination that the articles of organization controlled disposed of the breach-of-contract claim, but not the breach-of-fiduciary-duty claims. The court seemed to suggest that the duties of the defendants might be comparable to those of corporate directors and officers, but the court was not clear as to whether the presence of factors supporting an informal fiduciary relationship might be required.
In *Doonan v. Wood*, 224 S.W.3d 271 (Tex.App.–El Paso 2005, no pet.), the court rejected the breach-of-fiduciary-duty claim of an LLC’s minority member and his spouse against an investment company limited partnership that made a loan to the LLC and acquired a membership interest. The court stated that the minority member’s spouse did not establish that she was owed a fiduciary duty, and, assuming a fiduciary duty was owed to the minority member, the various acts alleged, including foreclosure on LLC assets and enforcement of the minority member’s personal guaranty, did not raise any genuine issue of material fact as to breach of fiduciary duty because the actions were taken for legitimate business reasons rather than for the fiduciary to profit by taking advantage of its position.

In *Lundy v. Masson*, 260 S.W.3d 482 (Tex.App.–Houston [14th Dist.] 2008, pet. denied), a corporation asserted breach-of-fiduciary-duty claims against its former president. In the course of the opinion, the court revealed that the corporation was originally formed as an LLC and later converted to a corporation. The jury was instructed that the president owed the company a fiduciary duty, and the jury found that he breached his duty. The trial court entered a judgment for the corporation. On appeal by the former president, the court of appeals found that the evidence was sufficient to establish a breach of fiduciary duty and affirmed.

In *Gadin v. Societe Captrade*, 2009 WL 1704049 (S.D. Tex. 2009), the plaintiff, a 35% member of an LLC, sued the 65% member for breach of fiduciary duty, minority member oppression, and an accounting. The plaintiff alleged that there was an attempt to purchase his membership interest at an under-valued price, that he was forced to resign from the LLC, and that the defendant and its principals took clients, records, and financial information from the LLC. The defendant responded that he used his personal credit, business contacts, and name in order to fund the start-up and business operations of the LLC and that he relied upon the representations by the defendant and its principals that his investment of time and resources would make his stake in the LLC profitable. The court discussed formal and informal fiduciary relationships under Texas law and noted that the TLLCA did not directly address the duties owed by managers and members. The court stated that Texas courts have not yet held that a fiduciary duty exists as a matter of law among members in an LLC and noted that, where fiduciary duties among members have been recognized in other jurisdictions, the duties have been based on state-specific statutes. The court denied the defendant’s motion to dismiss “[b]ecause the existence of a fiduciary duty is a fact-specific inquiry that takes into account the contract governing the relationship as well as the particularities of the relationships between the parties.”

In *Entertainment Merchandising Technology, L.L.C. v. Houchin*, 720 F.Supp.2d 792 (N.D. Tex. 2010), the court, in responding to a claim that an individual owed a fiduciary duty by virtue of his status as officer of the LLC, stated that no Texas court has held that fiduciary duties exist between LLC members as a matter of law, and the court concluded that the statute of limitations barred the breach-of-fiduciary-duty claim in any event.

In *Mullen v. Jones (In re Jones)*, 445 B.R. 677 (Bankr. N.D. Tex. 2011), the court discussed at length the current state of Texas partnership law with respect to fiduciary duties of general partners. In the course of that discussion, the court noted that shareholders of a corporation do not generally owe other shareholders fiduciary duties and further noted that the law also seems to be developing toward the notion that members of a limited liability company do not necessarily owe other members fiduciary duties.

In *Federal Insurance Company v. Rodman*, 2011 WL 5921529 (N.D. Tex. 2011), the court stated that there is no formal fiduciary relationship created as a matter of law between members of an LLC, but the court recognized that an informal fiduciary relationship may arise under particular circumstances where there is a close, personal relationship of trust and confidence and concluded that an LLC member had sufficiently pled the existence of an informal fiduciary relationship with his fellow member based on an alleged long-standing friendship.

In *Cardwell v. Gurley*, 2011 WL 6338813 (E.D. Tex. 2011), aff’d on other grounds, 487 Fed. App’x 183 (5th Cir. 2012), the federal district court recited findings and conclusions of a Texas district court in previous litigation in which the district court concluded that the managing member of an LLC owed the other member direct fiduciary duties of loyalty, care, and disclosure, as well as owing duties to the LLC. The federal district court in this case held that the bankruptcy court did not err in giving preclusive effect to the state court’s findings and conclusions and further held that the fiduciary duty owed by a managing member to his fellow LLC member was similar to the trust-type obligation owed by partners and corporate officers and thus sufficient to support an exception to discharge under Section 523(a)(4) of the Bankruptcy Code.
In *Haut v. Green Café Management, Inc.*, 376 S.W.3d 171 (Tex. App.–Houston [14th Dist.] 2012, no pet.), Haut, a minority owner of a corporation and an LLC, was found liable for breach of fiduciary duty to the companies, and he argued on appeal that he owed no formal or informal fiduciary duty to the companies as a matter of law. The only argument Haut made regarding an informal fiduciary duty was that there was no trial evidence that he had a special relationship of trust and confidence prior to and apart from the agreement made the basis of the suit. Because Haut designated only a partial record for appeal, the court of appeals said that it must presume the omitted evidence was relevant and supported the trial court’s judgment on the jury’s findings. Furthermore, the court stated that Haut’s argument lacked merit even if the partial record did not require the court to presume that the evidence supported the jury’s finding because Haut did not timely object to the trial court’s failure to include in the charge an instruction that a pre-existing relationship of trust and confidence was necessary to find a fiduciary relationship. The court also rejected Haut’s argument that the evidence did not support a finding that Haut breached his fiduciary duty.

In *Zayler v. Calicutt (In re TSC Sieber Services, LC)*, 2012 WL 5046820 (Bankr. E.D. Tex. 2012), the bankruptcy court found that the defendant breached a fiduciary duty to the debtor LLC. The LLC was a family-owned LLC in which the defendant was not formally issued a membership interest or given an office to avoid entangling the family business with unrelated legal problems of the defendant and to protect the family from any negative ramifications that might arise from any known association with the defendant. When the defendant’s sister was injured and could no longer provide day-to-day supervision of the business, the plan to conceal any involvement of the defendant was altered, and the defendant’s father (who served as chairman of the LLC) and sister requested that the defendant take direct managerial control of the business. The defendant had no written employment or consulting agreement but received authorized compensation for his management services. Eventually, the defendant was terminated by his sister after an internal audit revealed he had misappropriated a significant amount of funds from the LLC in her absence. The court found that the defendant owed a formal fiduciary duty to the LLC because he was an agent of the LLC. In addition, the court found that the circumstances giving rise to the managerial control gave rise to an informal fiduciary duty pursuant to which the defendant was required to place the interest of the LLC above his own. Based on the defendant’s repeated breaches of fiduciary duty, the trustee was entitled to actual damages and a constructive trust over a residence obtained by the defendant with funds he unlawfully diverted from the LLC.

In *Vejara v. Levior International, LLC*, 2012 WL 5354681 (Tex. App.–San Antonio 2012, pet. denied), Vejara, appearing pro se on appeal, alleged that the jury erred in finding that she breached a fiduciary duty to her fellow member in an LLC and that the trial court abused its discretion by not reversing the jury’s decision on Levior’s breach-of-fiduciary-duty claim. Vejara argued that she owed no fiduciary duty to Levior because she was only a minority “shareholder” of the LLC. (The court referred to the owners or members of an LLC as “shareholders” throughout its opinion.) The first part of the jury question presupposed the existence of a fiduciary relationship between Vejara and Levior, and Vejara failed to object to the charge or request additional instructions. The appellate court held that Vejara waived her right to raise this complaint on appeal but went on to hold that the record showed the existence of a fiduciary duty on Vejara’s part even if Vejara did not waive her right to complain about the existence of a fiduciary duty. The appellate court agreed that Vejara, as a minority shareholder of the LLC, did not owe a formal fiduciary duty to Levior as a matter of law since Texas does not recognize a broad formal fiduciary relationship between majority and minority shareholders in closely held companies. However, the court pointed out that Texas courts have recognized that the nature of the relationship between shareholders of an LLC may give rise to an informal fiduciary duty between the shareholders. Here, although not a majority shareholder, Vejara exhibited control and had intimate knowledge of the LLC’s business affairs. Vejara created the company, entered leases on behalf of the company, held keys to the company’s vans, and had exclusive access to the company’s inventory held in storage. The appellate court concluded that Vejara’s control and intimate knowledge of the LLC’s affairs and plans gave rise to the existence of an informal fiduciary duty to Levior. The court of appeals concluded there was sufficient evidence to support the jury finding that Vejara breached her fiduciary duty to Levior and that the breach caused Levior injury.

In *ETRG Investments, LLC v. Hardee (In re Hardee)*, 2013 WL 1084494 (Bankr. E.D. Tex. 2013), an LLC and two of its members sought a determination that debts to them arising from activities of the debtor, Hardee, while he was managing member of the LLC were nondischargeable in Hardee’s bankruptcy. The plaintiffs alleged that Hardee’s debts to them were nondischargeable on the basis that the debts were obtained by actual fraud or false representations or as
debts arising from a defalcation by a fiduciary and/or embezzlement. After the trial, the court concluded that a debt to the LLC representing over $250,000 in embezzled funds was nondischargeable as a debt arising from a defalcation by a fiduciary and embezzlement, and a debt to the LLC of approximately $248,000 arising from Hardee’s failure to tender employment taxes owed to the IRS was nondischARGEABLE as a debt arising from a defalcation by a fiduciary. The court concluded, however, that the two members who sought an exception to Hardee’s discharge failed to establish that Hardee was in a formal or informal fiduciary relationship with them as would be required to render the debt to them for the unpaid tax liabilities nondischargeable as arising out of a defalcation by a fiduciary. The bankruptcy court’s opinion consists of findings of fact and conclusions of law after the trial in the adversary proceeding.

The bankruptcy court determined that Hardee embezzled significant sums of money from the LLC and that his breaches of fiduciary duty included entering into an unauthorized lending relationship, not properly managing the LLC’s affairs by diverting funds, and not tendering required tax payments to the IRS on behalf of the LLC. The failure to tender the required tax payments also breached the regulations (i.e., company agreement) of the LLC. The court found that Hardee, as the sole person authorized to transact business and direct the financial activities of the LLC, including the payment of tax obligations, acted as an agent of the LLC and as such had a formal fiduciary relationship. The failure to tender the tax payments was a willful breach of duty and thus a defalcation while acting in a fiduciary capacity. As for Hardee’s relationship to the other plaintiffs, Tomlin and Scott, the court found that these members failed to establish that Hardee had a formal fiduciary relationship with them. The company agreement governing the LLC did not impose or even address any fiduciary duties owed by and among the LLC members. Furthermore, the court found that Tomlin and Scott failed to establish that Hardee had an informal fiduciary relationship with them or a trust relationship that existed prior to the creation of the tax obligations at issue that would create fiduciary duties to the members.

In its conclusions of law, the bankruptcy court addressed the nondischargeability of debts arising from breach of fiduciary duties. The court addressed the concept of a fiduciary under federal bankruptcy law and the requirement that the relationship amount to a “technical” or “express” trust. The court then proceeded to set forth numerous conclusions of law regarding fiduciary duties as they related to this proceeding. The BOC, which governs LLCs, does not directly address or define the duties owed by managers and members but implies that certain duties may be owed and allows the contracting parties to specify the breadth of those duties in the LLC agreement. One type of fiduciary relationship recognized under Texas law is a formal fiduciary relationship that arises as a matter of law and includes relationships between principal and agent. An agent has authority to transact business or manage some affair for another person or entity and owes a duty of care. Texas law also recognizes that a fiduciary relationship exists between corporate officers or directors and the corporation they serve, and one of the duties imposed on corporate management is a duty of care that requires diligence and prudence in the management of the corporation’s affairs. Although LLCs are not corporations in the strictest sense, Texas law implies that the fiduciary status of corporate officers and directors and their corresponding duties of care, loyalty, and obedience apply to managers and/or members governing the activities of an LLC. Thus, imposition of fiduciary duties on the management of an LLC under Texas law is appropriate and warranted, and Hardee acted in a fiduciary capacity as to the LLC. Hardee was charged with insuring that all required payments of employment taxes were made by the LLC to the appropriate taxing authorities, and Hardee’s failure in each instance to make the tax payments on behalf of the LLC constituted a breach of the fiduciary duties he owed the LLC. Therefore, the debt owed by the LLC to the IRS to satisfy its tax obligations for the period in which the defendant was the managing member of the LLC constituted a defalcation by a fiduciary and was excepted from discharge in Hardee’s bankruptcy proceeding.

As for the individual members’ request that any amount they were required to pay to satisfy the accrued IRS tax liabilities should also be a nondischargeable debt, the court noted a significant difference between a manager’s fiduciary relationship to the LLC and the manager’s relationship to fellow members. Case law has recognized that there is no formal fiduciary relationship created as a matter of law between members of an LLC. Thus, Hardee had no formal fiduciary relationship with either Tomlin or Scott. An informal fiduciary relationship is a confidential relationship arising from moral, social, domestic, or personal relationships in which one person trusts in and relies on another. The effect of imposing a fiduciary duty is to require the fiduciary party to place another’s interest above its own, and a fiduciary relationship is thus not one that is created lightly. Hardee had no informal fiduciary relationship with either Tomlin or Scott. Any liability of Hardee to either Tomlin or Scott created by Hardee’s failure to render tax payments on behalf of the LLC was not excepted from discharge as a result of a breach of
fiduciary duties because the debtor owed no fiduciary duties to the members.

In *Kohannim v. Katoli*, 440 S.W.3d 798 (Tex.App.–El Paso 2013, pet. denied), the former spouse of a member who was awarded the member’s 50% interest in a divorce was unable to recover for breach of fiduciary duty against the remaining 50% member because the trial court did not make the requested finding that the remaining member owed the former spouse a fiduciary duty and breached that duty. The court of appeals discussed formal and informal fiduciary relationships and concluded that the trial court deliberately refrained from finding the existence of a fiduciary duty and breach. The trial court made a finding that the 50% member owed the LLC a fiduciary duty and that the member breached that duty. The former spouse also asserted an oppression claim, and the court of appeals affirmed the trial court’s finding that the 50% member engaged in oppression based on the member’s failure to make distributions to the former spouse where the LLC regulations provided for distributions of “available cash,” more than $250,000 in undistributed profit had accumulated in the company’s accounts, and the 50% member paid himself for management services that were not performed. In *Ritchie v. Rupe*, 443 S.W.3d 856 (Tex. 2014), the supreme court disapproved of the definition of oppression relied upon by the court of appeals in this case and held that a court is not authorized to employ remedies other than receivership for oppression.

In *Pacific Addax Co., Inc. v. Lau (In re Lau)*, 2013 WL 5935616 (Bankr. E.D. Tex. 2013), the debtors, John and Deborah Lau, were in the real estate business, and the plaintiffs sought a determination that the Laus’ debts for the plaintiffs’ losses in real estate ventures managed by the Laus were nondischARGEABLE on various grounds, including as debts arising from fraud or defalcation in a fiduciary capacity. The plaintiffs’ claims related to their investments in two real estate ventures, one of which was organized as an LLC. John and Deborah Lau were the sole members of an LLC that owned and sought to develop a tract of land. The plaintiffs purchased interests in the LLC and became members. John Lau exercised complete control over the LLC as the sole managing member. As the managing member of the LLC, John Lau issued capital calls, which were promptly paid by the plaintiffs. When the capital calls were made, John Lau supplied false information to the plaintiffs regarding the LLC, and the capital infusions made by the plaintiffs were diverted by John Lau for his own business purposes and those of another entity owed by the Laus. The plaintiffs received no return on their investments in the LLC. The court concluded that John Lau breached his fiduciary duties to the LLC and its members. The court noted that Chapter 101 of the BOC, like the predecessor TLLCA, does not directly address the duties owed by LLC managers and members but provides that the company agreement of an LLC may expand or restrict duties, including fiduciary duties, and related liabilities that a member, manager, officer or other person has to the company or to a member or manager. The court stated that the statute thus implies that certain duties may be owed without defining them and allows the contracting parties to specify the breadth of those duties in the company agreement. The regulations of the LLC conferred on John Lau as the manager-member the power and authority to act on behalf of the company subject to limitations set forth in the regulations and “the faithful performance of the Managers’ fiduciary obligations to the Company and the Members.” Thus, the court concluded that John Lau stood in a fiduciary relationship to the plaintiffs as members of the LLC. The court stated that recognition of this fiduciary duty was consistent with the degree of control exercised by John Lau as the managing member. The court also concluded that John Lau’s representations and acts in connection with the capital calls were acts of fraud and constituted defalcations. Because John Lau’s debts to the plaintiffs arose from fraud and defalcation in a fiduciary capacity they were excepted from discharge. Additionally, the court concluded that Deborah Lau knowingly participated in her husband’s breach of fiduciary duty and ratified the breach of duty by knowingly accepting the benefits derived from the breach. Thus, Deborah Lau’s liability for these debts was excepted from discharge as well.

In *Brickley v. Scattered Corporation (In re H & M Oil & Gas, LLC)*, 514 B.R. 790 (Bankr. N.D. Tex. 2014), the bankruptcy court addressed the trustee’s claims for breach of fiduciary duty against the former manager of the debtor LLC, an oil and gas company. The court stated that “[a]s its Manager, Greenblatt owed fiduciary duties to H & M, including the duties of care and loyalty.” The court relied on case law in the corporate context in describing the standards of conduct required by these duties. Based on these precedents, the court analyzed whether Greenblatt breached the duties of loyalty and care owed to the debtor LLC as its manager by: (1) failing to timely pay drilling costs; (2) not requesting funds under the debtor-in-possession financing agreement (DIP agreement); and (3) not taking action against the LLC’s post-petition lender related to the lender’s breach of the DIP agreement.

The trustee argued that Greenblatt’s repeated late payments of certain drilling costs and failures to request funds under the DIP agreement to prepay completion
costs did not reflect the actions of a prudent manager in light of the attendant risks. The court disagreed. With respect to Greenblatt’s decision to late-pay drilling costs, the court found no injury to the LLC resulted and that those late payments, even assuming they were imprudent, could not support a finding of breach of fiduciary duty without resulting injury. With respect to Greenblatt’s decision not to prepay certain completion costs, the court concluded that Greenblatt correctly interpreted the consequences of prepaying versus not prepaying the costs at issue under the controlling joint operating agreement, and Greenblatt’s decision was protected by the business judgment rule. The evidence did not show that Greenblatt’s decision lacked a business purpose, was tainted by conflict of interest, or was the result of an obvious and prolonged failure to exercise oversight or supervision; therefore, the court concluded that Greenblatt’s decision not to prepay completion costs based on his interpretation of the joint operating agreement was the result of an informed business judgment and was not a breach of the fiduciary duty of care owed to the LLC.

As to the allegation that Greenblatt breached his fiduciary duty by failing to take action on the LLC’s behalf against the post-petition lender, the court concluded that the lender did not breach the DIP agreement, and thus Greenblatt’s alleged failure to take action against the lender for breach of the agreement could not constitute a breach of fiduciary duty.

Because the court found Greenblatt did not breach his fiduciary duty, the court rejected the trustee’s claim that Greenblatt’s wage claim should be equitably subordinated based on Greenblatt’s alleged breaches of fiduciary duty. The court found no other conduct by Greenblatt that would warrant subordination, and the court stated that the record did not show any injury to the LLC or its creditors or any benefit to Greenblatt from any alleged improprieties even if Greenblatt participated in inequitable conduct.

Greenblatt prevailed on a claim for indemnification under the indemnification provision of the LLC’s regulations (i.e., company agreement). The provision required the LLC to indemnify the manager “against loss, liability or expense, including attorneys’ fees, actually and reasonably incurred, if he or it acted in good faith and in a manner reasonably believed to be in or not opposed to the best interests of the Company as specified in this section, except that no indemnification shall be made in respect of any claim, issue or matter as to which the [manager] shall have been adjudged to be liable for gross negligence, willful misconduct or breach of fiduciary obligation in the performance of his or its duty to the Company....” The trustee argued that Greenblatt did not meet the standard for indemnification, but the court stated that it could not find that Greenblatt’s actions were grossly negligent or constituted willful misconduct in light of the court’s finding that he acted within the scope of his fiduciary duties owed to the LLC and that his actions fell within the scope of the business judgment rule. Because the record showed that Greenblatt acted in good faith and in a manner not opposed to the LLC’s best interests, Greenblatt was entitled to indemnification of his expenses incurred in defending the complaint. The court concluded that the indemnification claim under the LLC regulations should be allowed as a general unsecured claim in the LLC’s Chapter 11 case. (The court also concluded that Greenblatt had a claim for indemnification under the DIP agreement and that the claim should be allowed as an administrative expense of the Chapter 11 case.)

In Bazan v. Munoz, 444 S.W.3d 110 (Tex. App.–San Antonio 2014, no pet.), Munoz went into business with long-time friends, Carlo and Denise Bazan. The Bazans and Munoz made capital contributions to an LLC that purchased a night club, and the parties signed a company agreement under which Munoz and the Bazans each had a 50% interest in the business. Denise was designated the managing member, but she delegated the day-to-day operations to Carlo. Over time, Munoz became concerned about the finances of the business and eventually sued the Bazans for fraud by nondisclosure. Generally, no duty to disclose arises without evidence of a confidential or fiduciary relationship. The court stated that “Texas courts have not recognized a formal fiduciary relationship between majority and minority shareholders in a closely-held corporation, [but] they have recognized that—in the same manner that business partners owe each other and their partners a fiduciary duty—the nature of the relationships between shareholders in a limited liability company sometimes gives rise to an informal fiduciary relationship between them.” The jury found that the parties in this case had an informal fiduciary relationship, and the evidence supported that finding based on a long-standing friendship predating their business relationship and testimony by Carlo and Denise that Munoz went into business with them because of their personal relationship and gave them a great deal of control because of his trust in them. The company agreement did not expressly disavow fiduciary duties, and Denise and Carlo even testified that they owed Munoz a duty of loyalty and were obligated to protect his financial interests in the business as they would protect their own.

In Guevara v. Lackner, 447 S.W.3d 566 (Tex. App.–Corpus Christi-Edinburg 2014, no pet.), Dr. Guevara sued Mark Lackner and Robert Lackner, fellow
members of an LLC in which Dr. Guevara invested, for breach of fiduciary duty. The trial court granted a no-evidence summary judgment on this claim in favor of the Lackners. Based on a provision of the company agreement vesting sole control of the LLC in the Lackners as managers, Dr. Guevara alleged that the Lackners owed fiduciary duties of loyalty, good faith, fair dealing, full disclosure, and to account for all profits and property. Dr. Guevara alleged that the Lackners breached their duties by taking his money as a loan to purchase merchandise, conspiring to keep the profits, and suppressing information related to the transaction. He also alleged that the Lackners failed to use any business judgment in their dealings related to obligations owed by another member to the LLC. Dr. Guevara asserted that he was injured by the loss of funds he provided for the purchase of merchandise for the LLC and funds provided for other expenses of the LLC. The court noted that “Dr. Guevara’s status as a co-shareholder or co-member in a closely held corporation does not automatically create a fiduciary relationship between co-shareholders or co-members.” The court stated that Texas courts have recognized that an informal fiduciary duty may exist between shareholders of a closely held corporation under particular circumstances even though Texas courts have declined to recognize a broad formal fiduciary duty between majority and minority shareholders in closely held corporations. The court of appeals concluded that there was more than a scintilla of evidence of the existence of an informal fiduciary duty between the Lackners and Dr. Guevara, the breach of that duty, and injury to Dr. Guevara. The court pointed to evidence of the Lackners’ control based on the provision of the company agreement that vested sole control of the management, business, and affairs of the LLC in the Lackners as managers. There was also evidence that the Lackners’ role as managers gave them intimate knowledge of the daily affairs of the LLC and that Dr. Guevara did not have extensive knowledge of the operations and was not involved in the day-to-day operations. The summary-judgment evidence showed the Lackners did not disclose certain information to Dr. Guevara and that the Lackners’ made decisions without knowledge of relevant facts. There was also evidence that the funds provided by Dr. Guevara to the LLC were lost. According to the court of appeals, this evidence amounted to more than a scintilla of evidence of the elements of a claim for breach of an informal fiduciary duty.

In Macias v. Gomez, 2014 WL 7011372 (Tex. App.– Corpus Christi-Edinburg 2014, no pet.), the minority members of an LLC obtained a summary judgment against Macias, the majority member, on Macias’s claim against the minority members for breach of fiduciary duty. Macias argued on appeal that he at least raised a fact issue as to whether the minority members owed him a fiduciary duty based on their exercise of active control over the LLC. The court of appeals affirmed the trial court’s summary judgment because Macias argued in the trial court that the minority members owed him a fiduciary duty as a matter of law, comparing the LLC to a partnership in which all partners owe one another a fiduciary duty. The court of appeals concluded that Macias did not fairly apprise the trial court of his “control” argument, and the summary judgment thus could not be reversed on that basis. The court stated in a footnote that it offered no opinion as to whether an LLC’s members who control activities of the LLC owe a fiduciary duty to majority members.

In Bigham v. Southeast Texas Environmental, LLC, 458 S.W.3d 650 (Tex. App.–Houston [14th Dist.] 2015, no pet.), an LLC that was pursuing environmental contamination litigation sued two individuals, Bigham and Hollister, who were to receive a percentage of the proceeds of the litigation pursuant to a power-of-attorney agreement with Bigham. Under the power-of-attorney agreement, Bigham was to manage the litigation. The LLC alleged that Bigham and Hollister breached their fiduciary duties by sabotaging the litigation. The jury found that Bigham and Hollister had a relationship of trust and confidence with the LLC, that they failed to comply with their fiduciary duties, and that the breaches were committed with malice. The jury also found actual and exemplary damages. The court of appeals stated that it was undisputed that Hollister owed fiduciary duties as a member of the LLC. (Hollister’s fiduciary duties were not based on the power of attorney because he was not a signatory to the power of attorney even though he was designated under the power of attorney to receive a percentage of the LLC’s recovery in the environmental contamination litigation. Although the court referred to Hollister’s duties as relating to his status as member, an earlier portion of the opinion indicated that the LLC was manager-managed and referred to a Texas Franchise Tax Public Information Report signed by Hollister and listing Hollister as managing member.) Bigham owed the LLC fiduciary duties solely based on the power of attorney. The court reviewed the evidence and concluded that it was sufficient to support the jury’s finding that Bigham and Hollister did not comply with their fiduciary duties. Based on the evidence, the jury could have concluded that Bigham and Hollister violated their fiduciary duties by threatening to withhold Hollister’s cooperation in the litigation when Hollister, as a member, had a duty to achieve an optimal result at trial, irrespective of whether he received any proceeds under the power of attorney.
In *Siddiqui v. Fancy Bites, LLC*, 504 S.W.3d 349 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2016, pet. filed), two LLC members who asserted claims for breach of fiduciary duty against two other members relied on *Guevara v. Lackner* for “the proposition that ‘Texas courts have...recognized that an informal fiduciary duty *may* exist between the shareholders in a closely held corporation, depending on the circumstances.’” Although the court of appeals acknowledged that some appellate courts have held that an informal fiduciary duty may arise between shareholders in a closely held corporation under certain circumstances in the absence of a pre-transaction relationship, the court stated that it had not adopted such an expansive view and “has consistently determined that informal fiduciary duties do not arise in business transactions...unless the special relationship of trust and confidence existed before the transaction at issue.” Moreover, the members in this case were each co-equal managers and owners of the LLCs with equal rights of control and access to books and records. Any control exercised by two of the members resulted because the other two members chose not to participate fully in the LLC’s affairs. The two members who sought to hold the other two members liable for breach of fiduciary duty did not testify that they had any relationship other than a business relationship with the other two members, and they did not testify that they trusted or relied on the other two members in any particular respect to manage the venture for them. Thus, the court of appeals held that the trial court erred in rendering judgment based on breach of fiduciary duties.

In *Angel v. Tauch* (*In re Chiron Equities, LLC*), 552 B.R. 674 (Bankr. S.D. Tex. 2016), the court concluded that a manager/minority member owed the LLC, but not the other member, fiduciary duties.

In *B Choice Ltd. v. Epicentre Development Association LLC*, 2017 WL 1227313 (S.D. Tex. 2017), report and recommendation adopted, 2017 WL 1160512 (S.D. Tex. 2017), the court concluded that a fact issue existed as to whether the officers and manager of an LLC owed a fiduciary duty to the plaintiff member. The court recognized that no Texas court has held that fiduciary duties exist between members of an LLC as a matter of law but stated that the recognition of a fiduciary duty in the LLC context is typically a question of fact. The court relied on *Allen v. Devon Energy Holdings, LLC*, 367 S.W.3d 355, 392 (Tex. App.—Houston [1st Dist] 2012, pet. granted, judgm't vacated w.r.m.), in which the court of appeals discussed the similarities between an LLC and a partnership. The manager of the LLC at issue in *B Choice Ltd.* was empowered by the operating agreement with “full and exclusive right, power, and authority to manage the affairs of the Company.” The court found that the plaintiff’s minority membership created a situation similar to a limited partnership. Thus, the court refused to grant summary judgment on the breach-of-fiduciary-duty claim against the LLC’s officers and manager.

Bankruptcy courts in some cases have analyzed breach-of-fiduciary-duty claims against LLC members who were also officers of the LLC in terms of the duties of corporate officers without indicating any recognition that an LLC is not actually a corporation. See *Floyd v. Option One Mortg. Corp. (In re Supplement Spot, LLC)*, 409 B.R. 187 (Bankr. S.D. Tex. 2009) (relying on corporate law for the proposition that corporate officers have fiduciary duties to creditors in analyzing fraudulent transfer of LLC funds to pay mortgage debts of LLC officer); *Sherman v. FSC Realty LLC (In re Brentwood Lexitford Partners, L.L.C.)*, 292 B.R. 255 (Bankr. N.D. Tex. 2003) (discussing and relying on duties owed by corporate officers to corporation and creditors in analyzing claims against LLC officers arising from distributions while LLC was insolvent and officers’ resignation from LLC and formation of new LLC to which some business was transferred); *Anderson v. Mega Lift Sys., L.L.C. (In re Mega Sys., L.L.C.)*, 2007 WL 1643182 (Bankr. E.D. Tex. 2007) (citing corporate case law rejecting proposition that duties are owed to corporate creditors when debtor approaches zone of insolvency in addressing breach-of-fiduciary-duty claim against LLC’s president/majority owner).

For cases in other states that have addressed fiduciary duties of managers or members, see Elizabeth S. Miller, *More Than a Decade of LLP and LLC Case Law: A Cumulative Survey of Cases Dealing With Limited Liability Partnerships and Limited Liability Companies*, June 2007, and subsequent case law updates available at [http://www.baylor.edu/law](http://www.baylor.edu/law).

B. Statutory Authorization to Modify Duties and Liabilities of Members and Managers in Governing Documents

1. Exculpation

Prior to 1997, Article 8.12 of the TLLCA followed the corporate approach to exculpation of directors by incorporating by reference Article 7.06 of the Texas Miscellaneous Corporation Laws Act (Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 1302-7.06 (expired Jan. 1, 2010)). The original version of Article 8.12 of the TLLCA indicated that a manager's liability could be eliminated in the articles of organization to the extent permitted for a director under Article 1302-7.06. In 1997, amendments to the statute effected a significant departure from this approach. The reference to Article 1302-7.06 was eliminated from the
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TLLCA, and a new provision, Article 2.20B, was added as follows:

To the extent that at law or in equity, a member, manager, officer, or other person has duties (including fiduciary duties) and liabilities relating thereto to a limited liability company or to another member or manager, such duties and liabilities may be expanded or restricted by provisions of the regulations.

This provision (which is included in the BOC at Section 101.401) was modeled after similar provisions in the Delaware LLC and limited partnership acts and leaves the extent to which duties and liabilities may be limited or eliminated to be determined by the courts as a matter of public policy. There is scant case law addressing this statutory power to limit duties and liabilities in Texas LLCs. The only case to discuss the contractual freedom of members in this regard is Allen v. Devon Energy Holdings, L.L.C. 367 S.W.3d 355 (Tex. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 2012, pet. granted, judgm’t vacated w.r.m.). In that case, the court noted that LLCs are expressly excluded from the statutory restriction on the limitation or elimination of liability of governing persons in Section 7.001 of the BOC, and the court stated that the members of an LLC are “free to expand or eliminate, as between themselves, any and all potential liability” of a manager of the LLC as the members see fit. The court also concluded that an exculpation provision in the articles of organization that largely tracked Section 7.001 of the BOC and referred to the manager’s “duty of loyalty to [the LLC] or its members” could be read to create a fiduciary duty to the members individually. Section 7.001(d) of the BOC was amended in 2013 to clarify that the company agreement may eliminate the liability of a manager or managing member to the LLC and the other members to the same extent that a corporation’s certificate of formation may eliminate a director’s liability under Section 7.001 and to such further extent allowed by Section 101.401. There are no express prohibitions or limitations in Section 101.401 with respect to the limitation or elimination of liability of a manager or managing member to the LLC or the members. It should be noted that a distinction can be drawn between the limitation or elimination of duties and the limitation and elimination of liabilities. If the liability of a governing person is contractually eliminated, but the duty still exists, a breach of the duty could give rise to equitable relief (such as injunctive relief or receivership) even though the person could not be held liable for damages. Redefining or eliminating duties, on the other hand, narrows or eliminates not only potential liability for damages by the party who would otherwise owe the duty, but determines whether there is a breach at all, thus affecting the availability of equitable relief as well.


Thus far, courts in other jurisdictions have been inclined to give effect to contractual provisions limiting fiduciary duties and specifying permissible conduct of LLC managers and members. In the first LLC case addressing issues of this sort to a significant degree, the Ohio Court of Appeals interpreted and enforced a provision of an operating agreement limiting the scope of a member’s duty not to compete with the LLC. McConnell v. Hunt Sports Enters., 725 N.E.2d 1193 (Ohio App. 1999). In this case, the court stated that LLC members (of what was apparently a member-managed LLC) are in a fiduciary relationship that would generally prohibit competition with the business of the LLC. The court concluded, however, that members may contractually limit or define the scope of the fiduciary duties. Specifically, the court recognized the validity of a provision in the operating agreement of an Ohio LLC that provided as follows:

Members May Compete. Members shall not in any way be prohibited from or restricted in engaging or owning an interest in any other business venture of any nature, including any venture which might be competitive with the business of the Company.

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2The Delaware statutes were amended in 2004 to expressly permit the elimination of fiduciary duties (but not the implied covenant of good faith and fair dealing) in a limited partnership agreement or LLC agreement. See Delaware Limited Liability Company Act § 18-1101. These amendments were a response by the Delaware General Assembly to a Delaware Supreme Court opinion pointing out that the prior Delaware provision did not explicitly authorize elimination of fiduciary duties. See Gotham Partners, L.P. v. Hollywood Realty Partners, L.P., 817 A.2d 160 (Del. 2002) (noting, in response to Chancery Court opinions indicating that the Delaware limited partnership act permitted a limited partnership agreement to eliminate fiduciary duties, that the statute actually stated that fiduciary duties and liabilities could be expanded or restricted, but did not state that they could be eliminated).
Under this provision, the court found that a member was clearly and unambiguously permitted to compete against the LLC to obtain a hockey franchise sought by the LLC. The court rejected an argument that the provision only allowed members to engage in other types of businesses. The court commented that action related to obtaining the franchise or “the method of competing” could constitute a breach of duty if it amounted to “dirty pool,” but noted the trial court’s finding that the competing members had not engaged in willful misconduct, misrepresentation, or concealment.

For cases in other states that have addressed contractual provisions addressing fiduciary duties of managers or members, see Elizabeth S. Miller, More Than a Decade of LLP and LLC Case Law: A Cumulative Survey of Cases Dealing With Limited Liability Partnerships and Limited Liability Companies, June 2007, and subsequent case law updates available at http://law.baylor.edu.

2. Indemnification

Prior to 1997, the TLLCA provided that an LLC was permitted to indemnify members, managers, and others to the same extent a corporation could indemnify directors and others under the TBCA and that an LLC must, to the extent indemnification was required under the TBCA, indemnify members, managers, and others to the same extent. Thus, applying these provisions in the LLC context, indemnification was mandated in some circumstances even if the articles of organization and regulations were silent regarding indemnification. On the other hand, there were certain standards and procedures that could not be varied in the articles of organization or regulations. Article 2.20A of the TLLCA was amended in 1997 to read as follows:

Subject to such standards and restrictions, if any, as are set forth in its articles of organization or in its regulations, a limited liability company shall have the power to indemnify members and managers, officers, and other persons and purchase and maintain liability insurance for such persons.

Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 1528n, art. 2.20A (expired Jan. 1, 2010). Sections 8.002, 101.052, and 101.402 of the BOC generally carry forward this approach. Thus, the current LLC indemnification provisions neither specify any circumstances under which indemnity would be required nor place any limits on the types of liabilities that may be indemnified. It will be left to the courts to determine the bounds equity or public policy will place on the obligation or power to indemnify. Thus, for example, if a company agreement states that a manager or member “shall be indemnified to the maximum extent permitted by law,” it is not clear how far the indemnification obligation extends. Would the LLC be required to indemnify for bad-faith acts or intentional wrongdoing?

IV. GENERAL PARTNERSHIPS (INCLUDING LIMITED LIABILITY PARTNERSHIPS (LLPs)) AND LIMITED PARTNERSHIPS (INCLUDING LIMITED LIABILITY LIMITED PARTNERSHIPS (LLLPs))

A. Fiduciary Duties of Partners in General Partnership (including LLP)

The principle that general partners owe their partners and the partnership fiduciary duties is oft-recited in the case law. Perhaps the most famous case in this area is Justice Cardozo’s opinion in Meinhard v. Salmon, 249 NY 458, 164 N.E. 545 (1928). Texas cases have reiterated the unyielding duty-of-loyalty standard set forth in that case. See Huffington v. Upchurch, 532 S.W.2d 576 (Tex. 1976); Johnson v. Peckham, 132 Tex. 148, 120 S.W.2d 786 (1938); Kunz v. Huddleston, 546 S.W.2d 685 (Tex.App.—El Paso 1977, writ ref’d n.r.e.). On the other hand, the duty of care has received little attention in the case law. In the Texas Revised Partnership Act (TRPA), which became effective January 1, 1994, the legislature defined a partner’s duties of care and loyalty and adopted provisions intended to clarify the extent to which contractual modification of the duties is permissible.

The Texas Uniform Partnership Act (which became effective in Texas in 1962 and expired in 1999) addressed only certain aspects of the fiduciary duties of partners. In fleshing out the fiduciary duties of partners, courts have often spoken in broad, sweeping terms. At times, courts have even referred to partners as “trustees.” The current statutory provisions include a more comprehensive description of partner duties than the Texas Uniform Partnership Act but eschew some of the broader language found in some cases. BOC Sections 152.204-152.207, which carry forward the provisions of Section 4.04 of the TRPA, certainly describe the core of what has traditionally been referred to by the courts as partner fiduciary duties, but the Bar Committee comments to Section 4.04 of the TRPA reflect the Committee’s hope that the statutorily described duties will not be expanded by loose use of “fiduciary” concepts from other contexts or by the broad rhetoric from some prior cases. See Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132b-4.04 (expired Jan. 1, 2010), Comment of Bar Committee – 1993. In fact, the drafters of the TRPA
quite deliberately refrained from using the term “fiduciary,” and the statutes explicitly provide that a partner is not a trustee and is not to be held to such a standard. Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132b-4.04(f) (expired Jan. 1, 2010); Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 152.204(d). On the other hand, the statutes leave courts some flexibility because the duties are not listed or described in exclusive terms. Furthermore, as was the case under the TRPA, the BOC provides that every partner is an “agent” of the partnership. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 152.301; Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132b-3.02(a) (expired Jan. 1, 2010). An agent owes the principal fiduciary duties under Texas common law (see, e.g., Johnson v. Brewer & Pritchard, P.C., 73 S.W.3d 193 (Tex. 2002)), and the principles of law and equity supplement Chapter 152 of the BOC unless otherwise provided by Chapters 151, 152, and 154. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 152.003.

Few cases have explored in any depth whether the duties as they are described under the TRPA and BOC differ significantly from the common-law duties. The Texas Supreme Court addressed Section 4.04 of the TRPA in one case and indicated in passing that the law as it applied in that case was not changed by the TRPA; however, the case was actually governed by the Texas Uniform Partnership Act. See M.R. Champion, Inc. v. Mizell, 904 S.W.2d 617 (Tex. 1995). In Johnson v. Brewer & Pritchard, P.C., 73 S.W.3d 193, 199-200 (Tex. 2002), a case involving the fiduciary duty owed by an agent to a principal, the Texas Supreme Court noted that it had historically held that partners owe one another certain fiduciary duties but that it “need not consider here the impact of the provisions of the Texas Revised Partnership Act on duties partners owe to one another.” In Ingram v. Deere, 288 S.W.3d 886, 892 (Tex. 2009), the court characterized Section 4.04 of the TRPA as “recognizing the unwaivable duties of care and loyalty and the obligation of good faith required of partners under the Texas Revised Partnership Act” and cited case law “recognizing ‘as a matter of common law that [t]he relationship between...partners... is fiduciary in character.’” The court did not analyze the duties of partners, however, because the court held that there was no legally sufficient evidence that the parties in that case were partners.

In Red Sea Gaming, Inc. v. Block Investments (Nevada) Co., 338 S.W.3d 562 (Tex.App.–El Paso 2010, pet. denied), the court of appeals relied upon the non-exclusive nature of the description of the duty of loyalty set forth in the TRPA to conclude that a jury instruction that included a requirement that a partner show it “fully and fairly disclosed all important information” concerning the purchase of the other partner’s partnership interest was consistent with the statutory duties set forth in Section 4.04 of the TRPA. See also Zinda v. McCann St., Ltd., 178 S.W.3d 883 (Tex.App.–Texarkana 2005, pet. denied) (citing case law and Section 4.04 of the TRPA and stating that partners owe one another “fiduciary” duties as a matter of law, including a duty to make full disclosure of all matters affecting the partnership, a duty to account for all partnership property and profits, and a strict duty of good faith and candor). In American Star Energy and Minerals Corp. v. Stowers, 457 S.W.3d 427 (Tex. 2015), the Texas Supreme Court cited Zinda v. McCann Street, Ltd., for the proposition that the duty of care owed by a partner under Section 152.204(a)(2) of the BOC imposes a disclosure obligation in some circumstances. Specifically, the court suggested that “[w]hen a partnership is served with a lawsuit, [the duty of care] may require the partner served to apprise the other partners.” Am. Star Energy, 457 S.W.3d at 434-35 (citing Zinda v. McCann St., Ltd., 178 S.W.3d 883, 890 (Tex. App.–Texarkana 2005, pet. denied) for the proposition that “[p]artners have a duty to one another to make full disclosure of all matters affecting the partnership....”).

As pointed out by Judge Jernigan in a 2011 bankruptcy opinion, federal courts applying Texas law have generally assumed that partners’ duties under the current statutes are consistent with their duties under common law without any analysis of the impact of the TRPA on partners’ common-law duties. Mullen v. Jones (In re Jones), 445 B.R. 677 (Bankr. N.D. Tex. 2011) (further discussed below). In 2004, a Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals case pointed out that the TRPA “significantly amended” partnership law in 1994 to “refine the nature and scope of partners’ duties to each other” and stated that some aspects of the statutory duties may not be “fiduciary” in nature for purposes of certain provisions of the Bankruptcy Code, but the court did not reach any conclusions as to how or if the statutory duties of partners are materially different from the duties imposed on partners at common law. See Gupta v. E. Idaho Tumor Inst., Inc. (In re Gupta), 394 F.3d 347 (5th Cir. 2004).3

3After Gupta was found liable to Eastern Idaho Tumor Institute, Inc. (“Eastern Idaho”) for breach of their joint venture agreement and breach of fiduciary duty, Gupta filed for Chapter 7 bankruptcy. Eastern Idaho argued that Gupta’s liability for breach of fiduciary duty was non-dischargeable under Section 523(a)(4) of the Bankruptcy Code, which renders debts that arise from “fraud or defalcation while acting in a fiduciary capacity” non-dischargeable. The bankruptcy court granted Eastern Idaho summary judgment, and the district court affirmed. The Fifth Circuit noted that it has held a trust
relationship must exist prior to the wrong and with reference to it in order to constitute a “technical trust” within the non-dischargeability provision. The court acknowledged, however, that it has not hesitated to characterize debts as non-dischargeable where they arose from misappropriation by persons serving in a traditional, pre-existing fiduciary capacity as understood by state law principles. Thus, debts of corporate officers to the corporation or a minority shareholder, as well as debts of a managing partner of a limited partnership to the limited partners (LSP Inv. P’ship v. Bennett (In re Bennett), 989 F.2d 779 (5th Cir. 1993)), have been held non-dischargeable. At the time it decided Bennett, the court noted a split among lower court decisions as to whether co-equal partners owe each other “fiduciary” duties for purposes of Section 523(a)(4). The court acknowledged that two circuit courts since Bennett have concluded debts of a partner toward fellow partners or the partnership are non-dischargeable on this ground and no circuit court has held to the contrary. Eastern Idaho attempted to simplify the issue by characterizing Gupta as a managing partner, but the court declined to view Gupta in such a manner because there was no such finding in the state court proceedings and the evidence suggested that the venture was managed jointly. The court stated that Gupta’s precise role, whether as manager or co-equal venturer would be irrelevant if all partners are fiduciaries to each other for purposes of Section 523(a)(4); however, the court stated that Texas law, as articulated under the TRPA, failed to support that broad proposition. The court noted that Texas law was significantly amended by the TRPA in 1994 to “refine the nature and scope of partners’ duties to each other.” The court quoted the provision of the TRPA that states a partner, in that capacity, is not a trustee and is not held to the same standards as a trustee (Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132b-4.04(f)) as well as the State Bar Committee Comment explaining that Section 4.04 “defines partnership duties and implies that they are not to be expanded by loose use of ‘fiduciary’ concepts from other contexts or by the rhetoric of some prior cases.” The court went on to state, however, that it was not saying Texas partners no longer owe special duties to each other. The court noted that Section 4.04 defines duties of loyalty and care, together with obligations to discharge those duties in good faith and in the best interests of the partnership. The court observed that the duty of loyalty expressly includes a duty of accounting to the partnership and holding and using property or money for the partnership’s benefit during its existence and winding up. Under these provisions, the court concluded that certain duties may rise to the level of “fiduciary” for purposes of Section 523(a)(4). The court discussed the Texas Supreme Court’s comments in M.R. Champion, Inc. v. Mizell and concluded that it appeared the duty to account for money owed to the partnership may constitute a pre-existing, express or technical trust for purposes of Section 523(a)(4). Because the jury findings underlying the judgment against Gupta in state court did not tie the damages for breach of fiduciary duty to specific instances of misconduct that might correlate to areas of responsibility that may still be deemed “fiduciary” under Texas partnership law, the court reversed the lower court’s summary judgment in favor of Eastern Idaho. The jury’s finding of Gupta’s fiduciary duty was predicated on “a relationship of trust and confidence,” a standard the Fifth Circuit previously determined was too broad to satisfy the federal standard under Section 523(a)(4). A separate finding of Gupta’s breach of fiduciary duty based on general phrases concerning the duty (e.g., to conduct transactions that were “fair and equitable” to Eastern Idaho), rather than on specific events or actions that might fall within the parameters of the TRPA, was likewise insufficient.

Subsequent to In re Gupta, a number of federal courts, including the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals itself, addressed duties of partners under Texas law without considering whether or to what extent the statutory changes affected the analysis of such duties. In Wilson v. Cantwell, 2007 WL 2285947 (N.D. Tex. 2007), the district court cited Section 152.204 of the BOC for the proposition that partners owe the partnership and other partners the “fiduciary” duties of loyalty and care and that partners must discharge their duties in good faith and in the best interest of the partnership. Bankruptcy courts have cited both case law and Section 4.04 of the TRPA for the proposition that partners owe one another and the partnership “fiduciary” duties that include the duties of loyalty and care. See Wallace v. Perry (In re Perry), 423 B.R. 215 (Bankr. S.D. Tex. 2010); Leal v. Mokhabery (In re Leal), 360 B.R. 231 (Bankr. S.D. Tex. 2007); see also West v. Seiffert (In re Houston Drywall, Inc.), 2008 WL 2754526 (Bankr. S.D. Tex. 2008) (citing Section 152.205 of the BOC along with Texas case law for the proposition that partners owe one another “fiduciary” duties and stating that Texas courts have analogized the duty owed by a general partner to a limited partner to that owed by a trustee to a beneficiary).

In McBeth v. Carpenter, 565 F.3d 171 (5th Cir. 2009), the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals stated that “[u]nder Texas law, managing partners owe trust obligations to the partnership, having a duty of loyalty and due care as well as being under an obligation to discharge their duties in good faith and in the reasonable belief that they are acting in the best interest of the partnership,” citing Section 4.04 of the TRPA. Notwithstanding the court’s observation in Gupta (discussed in the footnote above) that the TRPA significantly amended Texas law “to refine the nature and scope of partners’ duties” and to provide that a partner is not held to a trustee standard, the court quoted from Texas case law analogizing a general partner in a limited partnership to a trustee. See also FNFS, Ltd.
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In re Harwood, 637 F.3d 615 (5th Cir. 2011) (relying upon In re Bennett, a 1993 Fifth Circuit opinion, and McBeth v. Carpenter to conclude that an officer of a corporate general partner who is entrusted with the management of the limited partnership and who exercises control over the limited partnership in a manner analogous to those cases owes a fiduciary duty to the partnership that satisfies Section 523(a)(4) of the Bankruptcy Code).

The most extensive analysis to date of the impact of the statutory developments under Texas partnership law on the common-law fiduciary duties of partners is found in Mullen v. Jones (In re Jones), 445 B.R. 677 (Bankr. N.D. Tex. 2011). In determining whether the debtor owed a non-dischargeable debt to the plaintiff under Section 523(a)(4) of the Bankruptcy Code, the bankruptcy court first examined whether the debtor was acting in a fiduciary capacity vis a vis the plaintiff. After noting that the debtor, as an officer and director of the corporate general partner of a limited partnership, stood in a fiduciary relationship to the corporation and its shareholders under Texas corporate law, the court proceeded to analyze the nature of the relationship of the corporate general partner to the partnership and the limited partners under Texas partnership law. The court noted that a large amount of common law stands for the proposition that a general partner occupies a fiduciary role with respect to the limited partners, but the court recognized that significant amendments to the Texas partnership statutes in 1994 impact the analysis of fiduciary duties in the partnership context. The court summarized the statutory developments, explaining that the Texas Uniform Partnership Act only used the term “fiduciary” when referring to a partner’s duty to account for any benefit and hold as trustee any profits obtained in connection with the partnership without the consent of other partners, but that case law under the Texas Uniform Partnership Act consistently referred to a partner as a fiduciary.

The bankruptcy court then discussed the approach taken in the TRPA, which rejected the notion of a partner as a trustee and specifically set forth the duties of partners in precise terms. The court noted that the Official Comments state that these changes were meant to reign in the loose use of fiduciary concepts. Finally, the court noted that the BOC contains language nearly identical to the TRPA. Despite these changes since the Texas Uniform Partnership Act, the court observed that very little case law has addressed the significance of the changes. The court pointed out that the Fifth Circuit case of In re Gupta came closest to confronting the significance of the changes. As noted above, in that case, the Fifth Circuit did not tackle the meaning or ramifications of the new Texas partnership statute with respect to the notion of “fiduciary capacity” under Section 523(a)(4) but did note that partners still owe “special duties to each other,” some of which “may rise to the level of a ‘fiduciary’ for purposes of § 523(a)(4).” 394 F.3d at 351. A few years later, without mentioning the statutory changes, the Fifth Circuit, in McBeth v. Carpenter, 565 F.3d 171 (5th Cir. 2009), held that all partners in a partnership are fiduciaries. Ultimately, the bankruptcy court in Mullen v. Jones concluded that the changes in Texas statutory partnership law in recent years expunged the concept of a partner as a per se fiduciary but did not eliminate the fiduciary status of a managing general partner because of the control exercised by such a partner. The court reasoned that the new statutory language, which makes clear that a partner is not per se a fiduciary, puts partners and partnerships on a parity with shareholders and corporations in that shareholders do not generally owe fiduciary duties to other shareholders. Based on the roles in which fiduciary duties are owed in the corporate context and longstanding case law regarding the fiduciary duties of a managing partner in the partnership context, the court concluded that control is the key to determining whether a partner is a fiduciary. Thus, the court held that Texas case law holding that there is an express trust satisfying the strict test for “fiduciary capacity” under Section 523(a)(4) is still good law in the context of a managing general partner.

The court in Jones then looked at the two-tiered structure of the limited partnership to determine how it affected the fiduciary duties owed by the debtor. The debtor was president, a director, and 51% shareholder of the corporate general partner. The court relied on two Fifth Circuit cases, LSP Investment Partnership v. Bennett (In re Bennett), 989 F.2d 779 (5th Cir. 1993) and McBeth v. Carpenter, 565 F.3d 171 (5th Cir. 2009), to conclude that the debtor, as manager of the managing general partner, owed fiduciary duties to the partnership and the partners. In Bennett, the Fifth Circuit held that the fiduciary obligations imposed on managing partners of a limited partnership under Texas law were sufficient to meet the Section 523(a)(4) test and that the same level of fiduciary duty should apply to the managing partner of a managing partner. McBeth was not a Section 523(a)(4) case, but the Fifth Circuit again held that a person or entity acting in complete control of a limited partnership stands in the same fiduciary capacity to the limited partners as a trustee stands to the beneficiary of a trust even in a two-tiered partnership structure. Thus, the court concluded that the debtor owed the plaintiff fiduciary duties through at least two avenues: (1) in his capacity as officer and director of the corporate general
partner (since the plaintiff was a shareholder); and (2) in his capacity as the control person/manager of the general partner (since the plaintiff was a limited partner).

The bankruptcy court next analyzed whether the debtor committed a defalcation in a fiduciary capacity, i.e., whether he breached or neglected his fiduciary duties, whether he was at least reckless in doing so, and whether a reasonable person in the debtor’s position reasonably should have known better. The court described the duties of loyalty and care and the obligation of good faith set forth in the TRPA and further noted how cases have described a partner’s duties. The court then concluded that the debtor committed defalcation while acting in his fiduciary capacity by repeatedly spending partnership funds for his own personal use and allowing others involved in the business to do the same. The court stated that lack of fraudulent intent and apparent lack of business savvy did not matter because a reasonable person should have known better. The court stated that spending partnership funds for one’s lavish lifestyle is not administering the partnership’s affairs solely for the benefit of the partnership, nor was the debtor complying with the partnership agreement, abiding by his duty not to misapply funds, acting with utmost good faith, fairness, and honesty, or making full disclosure of matters affecting the partnership.

Finally, the court determined the amount of the “debt” to the plaintiff that had arisen as a result of the debtor’s defalcation. The court measured this debt based on the amount of the misappropriated partnership funds. The court also awarded exemplary damages because Texas courts have held that breach of fiduciary duty is a tort for which exemplary damages may be recoverable and there was clear and convincing evidence that the standard for exemplary damages under the Texas Civil Practice and Remedies Code was met. Under the Texas Civil Practice and Remedies Code, exemplary damages may only be awarded if a claimant proves by clear and convincing evidence that the harm to the claimant resulted from actual fraud, malice, or gross negligence. Although the court concluded there was no actual fraud or malice on the part of the debtor, the court found the evidence did establish gross negligence as defined by the statute.


In *Bruce v. Cauthen*, 515 S.W.3d 495 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2017, pet denied), the court held that a partner failed to preserve for appeal his argument that a partner’s statutory duties are not the equivalent of common-law fiduciary duties.

1. **Duty of Care**

   A partner owes a duty of care to the partnership and the other partners. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 152.204(a); see also Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132b-4.04(a) (expired Jan. 1, 2010). The duty is defined in BOC Section 152.206 (see also Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132b-4.04(c) (expired Jan. 1, 2010)) as a duty to act in the conduct and winding up of the partnership business with the care of an ordinarily prudent person under similar circumstances. An error in judgment does not by itself constitute a breach of the duty of care. Further, a partner is presumed to satisfy this duty if the partner acts on an informed basis, in good faith, and in a manner the partner reasonably believes to be in the best interest of the partnership. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code §§ 152.206, 152.204(b); Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132b-4.04(c), (d) (expired Jan. 1, 2010). These provisions obviously draw on the corporate business judgment rule in articulating the duty of care. Nevertheless, it is unclear in the final analysis if the standard is simple or gross negligence. The sparse case law in this area (pre-dating the TRPA)
indicates that a partner will not be held liable for mere negligent mismanagement. See Ferguson v. Williams, 670 S.W.2d 327 (Tex.App.—Austin 1984, writ ref’d n.r.e.). It is unlikely the drafters intended to up the ante in this regard. On the other hand, the TRPA stopped short of expressly specifying gross negligence as the standard (which is the standard specified in the Revised Uniform Partnership Act).

In a case governed by the TRPA, a bankruptcy court rejected a partner’s claim for damages based on mismanagement of the other partner, stating that business ventures and partnerships involve risks, and that there is no legal remedy available to a businessman who is disappointed by the partnership’s actual revenues or profits absent a contractual guarantee or tortious conduct. According to the court, poor management performance, absent a showing of wrongful conduct, is not actionable. Leal v. Mokhabery (In re Leal), 360 B.R. 231, 239 (Bankr. S.D. Tex. 2007). Although the court noted earlier in the opinion that the TRPA governed the case and cited provisions in Section 4.04, the court did not discuss the relationship between the duty of care as described in Section 4.04 and its conclusions regarding the mismanagement claim. The court also rejected a claim for damages based on the other partner’s poor recordkeeping, although the court later appeared to allude to the partner’s poor recordkeeping as a breach of fiduciary duty.

Relying on the TRPA, a Texas bankruptcy court concluded a partner breached his duty of care in the winding up of a partnership by failing to honor an indemnification clause in an agreement with the other partners. Wallace v. Perry (In re Perry), 423 B.R. 215, 285-86 (Bankr. S.D. Tex. 2010). In the course of its discussion of the duty of care, the court stated that “the business judgment rule does not apply to partnership decisions made by partners in a partnership.” 423 B.R. at 288. This assertion is patently at odds with the language of Section 4.04(c) of the TRPA (recodified in Section 152.206(b) and (c) of the BOC) and the Bar Committee Comment. See Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132b-4.04(c) (expired Jan. 1, 2010), Comment of Bar Committee—1993 (“This subsection, along with subsection (d), incorporates the so-called ‘business judgment rule,’ ....”). The more pertinent questions are what effect the business judgment rule has on the standard of liability of a partner and the circumstances under which it applies. Indeed, assuming the business judgment rule applies to a general partner, the court held in the alternative that the business judgment rule was not a valid defense because the partner was not disinterested in relation to his failure to indemnify the other partners.

In American Star Energy and Minerals Corp. v. Stowers, 457 S.W.3d 427 (Tex. 2015), the Texas Supreme Court cited Zinda v. McCann Street, Ltd., for the proposition that the duty of care owed by a partner under Section 152.204(a)(2) of the BOC imposes a disclosure obligation in some circumstances. Specifically, the court suggested that “[w]hen a partnership is served with a lawsuit, [the duty of care] may require the partner served to apprise the other partners.” Am. Star Energy, 457 S.W.3d at 434-35 (citing Zinda v. McCann St., Ltd., 178 S.W.3d 883, 890 (Tex. App.—Texarkana 2005, pet. denied) for the proposition that “‘[p]artners have a duty to one another to make full disclosure of all matters affecting the partnership....’”).

Under the BOC, provisions based on Article 2.41D of the TBCA are applicable not only to directors of a corporation, but to governing persons of other types of entities as well. Under these provisions, a partner may, in good faith and with ordinary care, rely on information, opinions, reports, or statements of specified persons when the partner is discharging a duty such as the duty of care. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 3.102.

2. Duty of Loyalty

Unlike the duty of care, a partner’s duty of loyalty was the subject of a good deal of case law prior to the passage of the TRPA. In the BOC, like the predecessor TRPA, a partner’s duty of loyalty is described as including:

1) accounting to the partnership and holding for it any property, profit, or benefit derived by the partner in the conduct and winding up of the partnership business or from use of partnership property;

2) refraining from dealing with the partnership on behalf of a party having an interest adverse to the partnership; and

3) refraining from competing with the partnership or dealing with the partnership in a manner adverse to the partnership.

Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 152.205; see also Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132b-4.04(b) (expired Jan. 1, 2010). These provisions embrace the typical areas traditionally encompassed by the duty of loyalty, e.g., self-dealing and conflicts of interest, usurpation of partnership opportunity, and competition. To temper some of the broader expressions of partner duties in the case law, however, the statute specifically states that a partner...
does not breach a duty merely because his conduct furthers his own interest and that a partner is not a trustee and should not be held to a trustee standard. See Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code §§ 152.204(c), (d); see also Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132b-4.04(e), (f) (expired Jan. 1, 2010). A court has some room to find that conduct not specifically embraced in the three categories listed nevertheless implicates the duty of loyalty in a given case since the statute states that the duty of loyalty “includes” the matters set forth above.

A bankruptcy court cited both case law and Section 4.04 of the TRPA for the proposition that partners owe one another and the partnership “fiduciary” duties. See Leal v. Mokhabery (In re Leal), 360 B.R. 231 (Bankr. S.D. Tex. 2007). The court stated that the duties include the aspects of a partner’s duty of loyalty specified in Section 4.04 of the TRPA, as well as an obligation not to usurp opportunities for personal gain, a strict duty of good faith and candor, and an obligation of the utmost good faith, fairness, and honesty in their dealings with each other in matters pertaining to the partnership. 360 B.R. at 235-36. The court noted at one point in its opinion that a partner who withdraws ceases to owe the fiduciary duties of a partner (e.g., the duty not to compete under Section 4.04 of the TRPA only applies to a partner); however, a withdrawn partner owes the duties owed by a former agent following termination of the agency relationship. 360 B.R. at 241. (As noted above, a partner is by statute an “agent” of the partnership, and an agent owes a fiduciary duty to the principal under Texas common law. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 152.301; Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132b-3.02(a) (expired Jan. 1, 2010); Johnson v. Brewer & Pritchard, P.C., 73 S.W.3d 193 (Tex. 2002). The principles of law and equity supplement the partnership statutes unless otherwise provided by the statutes. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 152.003.)

In McBeth v. Carpenter, 565 F.3d 171 (5th Cir. 2009), the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals stated that “[u]nder Texas law, managing partners owe trust obligations to the partnership, having a duty of loyalty and due care as well as being under an obligation to discharge their duties in good faith and in the reasonable belief that they are acting in the best interest of the partnership,” citing Section 4.04 of the TRPA. See also FNPS, Ltd. v. Harwood (In re Harwood), 637 F.3d 615 (5th Cir. 2011); Zinda v. McCann St., Ltd., 178 S.W.3d 883 (Tex. App.–Texarkana 2005, pet. denied); Wilson v. Cantwell, 2007 WL 2285947 (N.D. Tex. 2007). A bankruptcy court cited Section 152.205 of the BOC along with Texas case law for the proposition that partners owe one another “fiduciary” duties and stated that Texas courts have analogized the duty owed by a general partner to a limited partner to that owed by a trustee to a beneficiary. See West v. Seiffert (In re Houston Drywall, Inc.), 2008 WL 2754526 (Bankr. S.D. Tex. 2008). Numerous other courts have explicitly or implicitly characterized the statutory duty of loyalty under the TRPA or BOC as a fiduciary duty consistent with the common-law duty of loyalty owed by a partner. See, e.g., Lopez v. Hernandez (In re Hernandez), 565 B.R. 367 (Bankr. W.D. Tex. 2017); Nguyen v. Hoang, 507 S.W.3d 360 (Tex. App.–Houston [1st Dist.] 2016, no pet.); Westergren v. Jennings, 441 S.W.3d 670 (Tex. App.–Houston [1st Dist.] 2014, no pet.); SEC v. Helms, 2015 WL 1040443 (W.D. Tex. 2015); Drexel Highlander Ltd. P’ship v. Edelman (In re Edelman), 2014 WL 1796217 (Bankr. N.D. Tex. 2014), aff’d, 2015 WL 5714728 (N.D. Tex. 2015).

In a somewhat unusual application of the duty of loyalty, a court held that a partner dealt with the partnership in an adverse manner and thus breached his duty of loyalty under Section 4.04(b) of the TRPA when the partner cancelled partnership meetings that were necessary to determine the entity’s direction and chose instead to go to the movies. Wallace v. Perry (In re Perry), 423 B.R. 215, 285-86 (Bankr. S.D. Tex. 2010). In Mullen v Jones (In re Jones), 445 B.R. 677 (Bankr. N.D. Tex. 2011), the bankruptcy court concluded that the changes in Texas statutory partnership law in recent years expunged the concept of a partner as a per se fiduciary but did not eliminate the fiduciary status of a managing general partner because of the control exercised by such a partner. The court reasoned that the new statutory language makes clear that a partner is not per se a fiduciary and puts partners and partnerships on a parity with shareholders and corporations inasmuch as shareholders do not generally owe fiduciary duties to other shareholders. Based on the roles in which fiduciary duties are owed in the corporate context and longstanding case law regarding the fiduciary duties of a managing partner in the partnership context, the court concluded that control is the key to determining whether a partner is a fiduciary.

3. Duties Owed to Transferees of Deceased Partners

In 2003, Section 4.04(a) of the TRPA was amended to provide that partners owe the duties of loyalty and care to “transferees of deceased partners under Section 5.04(b)” in addition to the other partners and the partnership. See also Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 152.204(a). This amendment was requested by Representative Will Hartnett. Prior to this amendment, some courts had held that partners owe no fiduciary duties to assignees or transferees. See Griffin v. Box, 910 F.2d 255, 261 (5th Cir.1990) (applying Texas law
and stating that general partners did not owe a fiduciary duty to transferees of partnership interests who had not been admitted as substituted partners); Adams v. United States, 2001 WL 1029522 (N.D. Tex. 2001) (stating that remaining partners did not owe a fiduciary duty to assignees of the deceased partner under Texas law); but see Bader v. Cox, 701 S.W.2d 677, 685 (Tex.App.–Dallas 1985, writ ref’d n.r.e.) (stating that surviving partners owed fiduciary duties to the representative of a deceased partner under the Texas Uniform Partnership Act).

As a default rule, the BOC (like the predecessor TRPA) provides that the partnership interest of a deceased partner is automatically redeemed by the partnership for its fair value as of the date of death of the partner; thus, the statutory default provisions do not give rise to transferees of a deceased partner. See Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 152.601; see also Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132b- 7.01(a) (expired Jan. 1, 2010). Rather, the deceased partner’s personal representative, surviving spouse, heirs, and devisees are regarded as creditors until paid. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 152.406(a)(2)(A). If, however, a partnership agreement negates the automatic redemption provision under the statutes, the personal representative, surviving spouse, heirs, and devisees of a deceased partner will be regarded as transferees of the deceased partner’s partnership interest to the extent they succeed to the deceased partner’s partnership interest, and BOC Section 152.204(a) would apply. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 152.406(a)(2)(B).

4. Obligation of Good Faith

The BOC imposes on a partner the obligation to discharge any duty and exercise any rights or powers in conducting or winding up partnership business in good faith and in a manner the partner reasonably believes to be in the best interest of the partnership. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 152.204(b); see also Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132b- 4.04(d) (expired Jan. 1, 2010). Though courts may be tempted to elevate this language into an independent duty, this obligation is not stated as a separate duty, but merely as a standard for discharging a partner’s statutory or contractual duties. See Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132b-4.04, Bar Committee Comment–1993.

5. Duty to Provide or Disclose Information

The BOC requires that partners be furnished complete and accurate information on request. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 152.213(a); see also Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132b-4.03(c) (expired Jan. 1, 2010). Furthermore, the partnership must provide access to its books and records to partners and their agents and attorneys for inspection and copying. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 152.212(a)(c); see also Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132b-4.03(b) (eff. Jan. 1, 2010). The Texas Uniform Partnership Act did not address whether or when a partner has a duty to disclose information absent a request, and the current statutes are silent on this point as well. Case law has traditionally imposed upon partners a duty of disclosure in certain circumstances, such as when a partner is purchasing the partnership interest of a fellow partner. See, e.g., Schlumberger Tech. Corp. v. Swanson, 959 S.W.2d 171, 175 (Tex.1997); Johnson v. Peckam, 132 Tex. 148, 120 S.W.2d 786, 788 (1938); Harris v. Archer, 134 S.W.3d 411, 431 (Tex.App.–Amarillo 2004, pet. denied); Johnson v. Buck, 540 S.W.2d 393, 399 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi 1976, writ ref’d n.r.e.).

In American Star Energy and Minerals Corp. v. Stowers, 457 S.W.3d 427 (Tex. 2015), the Texas Supreme Court suggested that there are circumstances in which a partner owes another partner a duty to disclose information. Specifically, the court suggested that “[w]hen a partnership is served with a lawsuit, [the duty of care] may require the partner served to apprise the other partners.” Am. Star Energy, 457 S.W.3d at 434-35 (citing Zinda v. McCann St., Ltd., 178 S.W.3d 883, 890 (Tex. App.—Texarkana 2005, pet. denied) for the proposition that “‘[p]artners have a duty to one another to make full disclosure of all matters affecting the partnership....’”).

In Red Sea Gaming, Inc. v. Block Investments (Nevada) Co., 338 S.W.3d 562 (Tex.App.–El Paso 2010, pet. denied), the court of appeals relied upon the non-exclusive nature of the description of the duty of loyalty set forth in the TRPA to conclude that a jury instruction that included a requirement that a partner show it “fully and fairly disclosed all important information” concerning the purchase of the other partner’s partnership interest was consistent with the statutory duties set forth in Section 4.04 of the TRPA. See also McBeth v. Carpenter, 565 F.3d 171 (5th Cir. 2009) (citing case law and the TRPA in discussing the duties of partners and concluding that the defendant partners had an affirmative duty to disclose material information to the plaintiff limited partners); Lopez v. Hernandez (In re Hernandez), 565 B.R. 367 (Bankr. W.D. Tex. 2017) (stating that partners in Texas owe duties of loyalty and care, that partners must discharge those duties in good faith, and that the duty of loyalty includes a duty to account to the partnership for property and profits pursuant to Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code §§ 152.204, 152.205, and relying on case law for the proposition that partners owe one another a general duty of full disclosure with regard to matters affecting a partner’s interests); Zinda
Fiduciary Duties, Exculpation, and Indemnification in Texas Business Organizations

B. Fiduciary Duties of Partners in Limited Partnership (including LLLP)

1. General Partners

Case law has held general partners in a limited partnership to fiduciary standards. See Hughes v. St. David’s Support Corp., 944 S.W.2d 423 (Tex.App.–Austin 1997, writ denied) (“[I]n a limited partnership, the general partner stands in the same fiduciary capacity to the limited partners as a trustee stands to a trust.”); McLendon v. McLendon, 862 S.W.2d 662 (Tex.App.–Dallas 1993, writ denied) (“In a limited partnership, the general partner acting in complete control stands in the fiduciary capacity to the limited partners as a trustee stands to the beneficiaries of a trust.”); Crenshaw v. Swenson, 611 S.W.2d 886 (Tex.Civ.App.–Austin 1980, writ ref’d n.r.e.)(same); Watson v. Ltd. Partners of WCKT, 570 S.W.2d 179 (Tex.Civ.App.–Austin 1978, writ ref’d n.r.e.)(same).

Though courts have been inclined to refer to a general partner of a limited partnership as a “trustee,” a general partner is no longer automatically analogous to a trustee. The general partnership statutes negate the trustee standard, and a general partner in a limited partnership has the liabilities of a partner in a general partnership to the other partners and the partnership unless the limited partnership statutes or the partnership agreement provide otherwise. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 153.152(a)(2); see also Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 153.003(a) (providing that the provisions of Chapter 152 of the BOC govern limited partnerships in a case not provided for by Chapter 153). These provisions “linking” the law governing general partnerships to limited partnership law are consistent with provisions contained in the predecessor Texas Revised Limited Partnership Act (TRLPA). See Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132a-1, § 4.03(b) (expired Jan. 1, 2010); Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132a-1, § 13.03 (expired Jan. 1, 2010).

Thus, a general partner in a limited partnership has the duties of care and loyalty and obligation of good faith set forth in Chapter 152 of the BOC (discussed above) but should no longer automatically be described as a “trustee.”

Notwithstanding the explicit statutory rejection of the trustee standard, some courts continue to analogize partners to trustees. For example, in McBeth v. Carpenter, 565 F.3d 171, 177 (5th Cir. 2009), the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals stated that “[u]nder Texas law, managing partners owe trust obligations to the partnership, having a duty of loyalty and due care as well as being under an obligation to discharge their duties in good faith and in the reasonable belief that they are acting in the best interest of the partnership,” citing Section 4.04 of the TRPA. The court quoted from Texas case law analogizing a general partner in a limited partnership to a trustee. See also FNFS, Ltd. v. Harwood (In re Harwood), 637 F.3d 615 (5th Cir. 2011) (stating individual who was director/officer of corporate general partner stood in same fiduciary capacity to limited partners as trustee to beneficiaries of trust); S.E.C. v. Helms, 2015 WL 1040443 (W.D. Tex. 2015) (citing Sections 153.152(a) and 152.204 of the BOC for the proposition that the general partner of a limited partnership owes fiduciary duties to the partnership and the limited partners and citing case law for the proposition that a general partner acting in complete control stands in the same fiduciary capacity to the limited partners as a trustee stands to the beneficiaries of the trust); Pacific Addax Co., Inc. v. Lau (In re Lau), 2013 WL 5935616 (Bankr. E.D. Tex. 2013) (citing Texas case law for the proposition that a general partner of a limited partnership “owes trust obligations to the partnership” and “stands in the same fiduciary capacity to the limited partners as a trustee stands to the beneficiaries of a trust”); West v. Seiffert (In re Houston Drywall, Inc.), 2008 WL 2754526 (Bankr. S.D. Tex. 2008) (citing Section 152.205 of the BOC and case law for the proposition that partners owe one another fiduciary duties and stating that Texas courts have analogized a general partner’s duty to a limited partner to that owed by a trustee to a beneficiary).

Not only the general partner, but those in control of the general partner have been held to fiduciary standards. See, e.g., FNFS, Ltd. v. Harwood (In re Harwood), 637 F.3d 615 (5th Cir. 2011); LPS Inv. P’ship v. Bennett (In re Bennett), 989 F.2d 779 (5th Cir. 1993); Edelman v. Dreixel Highlanders Ltd. P’ship, 2015 WL 5714728 (N.D. Tex. 2015); Light v. Whittington (In re Whittington), 530 B.R. 360 (Bankr. W.D. Tex. 2014); Mullen v. Jones (In re Jones), 445 B.R. 677 (Bankr. N.D. Tex. 2011); Pacific Addax Co., Inc. v. Lau (In re Lau), 2013 WL 5935616 (Bankr. E.D. Tex. 2013); CBIF Ltd. P’ship v. TGI Friday’s Inc., 2017 WL 1455407 (Tex. App.–Dallas 2017, pet. filed). “While the use of multi-tiered organizational structures may have formerly provided an absolute shield to individuals seeking protection from liability to subsidiary entities, strict adherence to that standard has eroded as the expanding use of entities, rather than individuals, as general partners has forced the courts to engage in a closer examination of the
responsibilities imposed upon, and the protections granted to, those individuals whose actions and/or omissions directly determine the conduct of any entity serving as a general partner of a limited partnership. FNFS, Ltd. v. Harwood (In re Harwood), 404 B.R. 366, 394-95 (Bankr. E.D. Tex. 2009), aff’d, 427 B.R. 392 (E.D. Tex. 2010), aff’d, 637 F.3d 615 (5th Cir. 2011).

In FNFS, Ltd. v. Harwood (In re Harwood), 637 F.3d 615 (5th Cir. 2011), the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed the district court’s judgment affirming the bankruptcy court’s judgment that the debtor’s debts arising from loans obtained from a limited partnership managed by the debtor in his capacity as officer and director of the general partner were nondischargeable under Section 523(a)(4). The court of appeals agreed with the lower courts that Harwood, who was president, a director, and a 50% shareholder of the corporate general partner of a limited partnership, owed a fiduciary duty to the partnership and that he engaged in a defalcation in that capacity in connection with loans he obtained from the limited partnership. The court relied upon In re Bennett and McBeth v. Carpenter to conclude that an officer of a corporate general partner who is entrusted with the management of the limited partnership and who exercises control over the limited partnership in a manner analogous to those cases owes a fiduciary duty to the partnership that satisfies Section 523(a)(4). The court emphasized that it is not only the control that the officer actually exerts over the partnership, but also the trust and confidence placed in the hands of the controlling officer, that leads to a finding of a fiduciary relationship for purposes of Section 523(a)(4). Thus, the court examined the evidence regarding the control entrusted to and exercised by Harwood to ascertain whether he owed a fiduciary duty to both tiers of the organization.

Harwood did not dispute that he owed a fiduciary duty to the corporate general partner as an officer and director of the corporation but contended he owed no duty to the partnership since he was not a partner and did not exercise a level of control over its affairs to justify recognition of fiduciary obligations to the partnership. The court rejected Harwood’s attempt to distinguish the cases relied upon by the court. Harwood relied on the fact that he was not the sole shareholder and sole director of the corporate general partner, whereas In re Bennett involved an individual who was managing partner of a limited partnership that was general partner of the limited partnership, and McBeth v. Carpenter involved the president and sole owner of the general partner of the limited partnership. The court focused on Harwood’s control, and the court agreed with the bankruptcy and district courts that the board’s entrustment in Harwood of the management of the partnership’s affairs combined with the practically complete control that Harwood actually exercised over the partnership’s management compelled the conclusion that Harwood stood in the same fiduciary capacity to the limited partners as a trustee to beneficiaries of a trust. Thus, Harwood acted in a fiduciary capacity within the meaning of Section 523(a)(4).

As discussed above, the bankruptcy court in Mullen v. Jones (In re Jones), 445 B.R. 677 (Bankr. N.D. Tex. 2011), concluded that the changes in Texas statutory partnership law in recent years expunged the concept of a partner as a per se fiduciary but did not eliminate the fiduciary status of a managing general partner because of the control exercised by such a partner. The court reasoned that the new statutory language makes clear that a partner is not per se a fiduciary and puts partners and partnerships on a parity with shareholders and corporations in that shareholders do not generally owe fiduciary duties to other shareholders. Based on the roles in which fiduciary duties are owed in the corporate context and longstanding case law regarding the fiduciary duties of a managing partner in the partnership context, the court concluded that control is the key to determining whether a partner is a fiduciary. The court then looked at the two-tiered structure of the limited partnership to determine how it affected the fiduciary duties owed by the debtor, who was president, a director, and 51% shareholder of the corporate general partner. The court relied on In re Bennett and McBeth v. Carpenter to conclude that the debtor, as manager of the managing general partner, owed fiduciary duties to the partnership and the partners. The court concluded that the debtor owed the plaintiff fiduciary duties through at least two avenues: (1) in his capacity as officer and director of the corporate general partner (since the plaintiff was a shareholder); and (2) in his capacity as the control person/manager of the general partner (since the plaintiff was a limited partner).

Texas courts have recognized a tort cause of action for knowing participation in another person’s breach of fiduciary duty, and this cause of action has been asserted against affiliates and third parties for knowingly participating in the breach of fiduciary duty owed by a general partner or other affiliate of a partnership. See, e.g., CBIF Ltd. P’ship v. TGI Friday’s Inc., 2017 WL 1455407 (Tex. App.–Dallas 2017, pet. filed) (holding individual manager of entity general partner of limited partnership venturer in joint venture liable for participating in breaches of fiduciary duty owed by venturer; holding individual liable for participating in breaches of fiduciary duty owed by related entities who exercised control over limited partnership); Graham v.
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Mortg. Corp. v. Hall, 307 S.W.3d 472 (Tex. App.–Dallas 2010, no pet.) (concluding limited partner established a probable right of recovery against the partnership’s lender for participating in breaches of duty owed by the general partner to the limited partners based on the general partner’s use of partnership property to secure payment of loans to affiliates of the general partner).

The impact of the 2003 amendment to TRPA Section 4.04(a), carried forward in BOC Section 152.204(a), which provides that the duties of loyalty and care are owed to transferees of deceased partners, should be considered in the context of limited partnerships. One can expect that the personal representative, surviving spouse, heirs, and devisees of a deceased limited partner whose interest is not bought out will assert that the general partner owes them fiduciary duties under BOC Section 152.204(a) by virtue of the linkage of the general partnership statutes to the limited partnership statutes.

Title 1 of the BOC contains some provisions based on corporate law that are not found in the predecessor TRLPA. Under the BOC, provisions based on Article 2.41D of the TBCA are applicable not only to directors of a corporation, but to governing persons of other types of entities as well. Under these provisions, a general partner in a limited partnership may, in good faith and with ordinary care, rely on information, opinions, reports, or statements of specified persons when the partner is discharging a duty such as the duty of care. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 3.102. Furthermore, the BOC provides that a limited partnership may renounce, in its certificate of formation or by action of its general partners, an interest or expectancy in specified business opportunities or a specified class of business opportunities. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 2.101(21).

2. Limited Partners

There has been some uncertainty with regard to whether limited partners owe fiduciary duties to the partnership or other partners. While the duties enumerated in Section 4.04 of the TRPA might literally have been read to apply to limited partners (by virtue of the linkage of the TRPA to the TRLPA under TRLPA Section 13.03), such an approach was not a logical application of the statutes. Some provisions of the TRPA clearly only applied to general partners even though the TRLPA was silent in such regard and the TRPA acted as a gap filler. Ordinarily, limited partners should not owe fiduciary duties as limited partners because they are merely passive investors. There is case law in other jurisdictions holding that limited partners do not, based solely on their status as limited partners, have fiduciary duties, and three appellate courts in Texas have so held. See Villa W. Assocs. v. Kay, 146 F.3d 798 (10th Cir. 1998); Herzog v. Leighton Holdings, Ltd. (In re Kids Creek Partners), 212 B.R. 898 (N.D. Ill. 1997); Strebel v. Wimberly, 371 S.W.3d 267 (Tex.App.–Houston [1st Dist.] 2012, pet. denied); AON Props. v. Riveraine Corp., 1999 WL 12739 (Tex.App.–Houston [14th Dist.] 1999, no pet.)(not designated for publication); Crawford v. Ancira, 1997 WL 214835 (Tex.App.–San Antonio 1997, no pet.)(not designated for publication). The unpublished opinions by Texas Courts of Appeals lack precedential weight because the decisions were issued prior to 2003, but the recent decision of the First District Court of Appeals in Strebel v. Wimberly at last provided precedent in Texas for the proposition that limited partners do not, solely based on their status as limited partners, owe other limited partners fiduciary duties under Texas law, refuting and distinguishing the Zinda and McBeth cases (discussed below) to the extent that they suggest otherwise.

In Zinda v. McCann Street, Ltd., 178 S.W.3d 883 (Tex.App.–Texarkana 2005, pet. denied), the court of appeals concluded that three limited partners owed fiduciary duties to the other limited partner based on the general proposition that a partnership is a fiduciary relationship and that partners owe one another certain fiduciary duties. The court relied upon statements from case law dealing with general partners and cited Section 4.04 of the TRPA without providing any explanation for applying these principles to limited partners. Ultimately, the court found the evidence sufficient to support the jury’s finding that the defendants satisfied their fiduciary duty to the plaintiff, concluding that the defendant limited partners had treated the plaintiff fairly.

In McBeth v. Carpenter, 565 F.3d 171, 177-78 (5th Cir. 2009), the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals analyzed whether a general partner and certain limited partners owed a fiduciary duty to other limited partners. The court stated that “[u]nder Texas law, managing partners owe trust obligations to the partnership, having a duty of loyalty and due care as well as being under an obligation to discharge their duties in good faith and in the reasonable belief that they are acting in the best interest of the partnership,” citing Section 4.04 of the TRPA. The court also quoted Texas case law analogizing a general partner in a limited partnership to a trustee. With respect to limited partners, the court stated that Texas law recognizes fiduciary obligations between limited partners and applies the same partnership principles that govern the relationship between a general partner and limited partners. In addition to relying on decisions by courts of appeals in Texas that have failed to distinguish between general and limited partners’ duties (Zinda v. McCann St., Ltd., 178 S.W.3d 883, 890 (Tex.App.–Texarkana 2005, pet. denied) and Dunnagan
contains no provisions on duties of limited partners. The Act because the Texas Revised Limited Partnership Act loyalty and care under the Texas Revised Partnership court addressed the argument of a limited partner that his court's analysis if it had been applicable. (discussed below) would have made any difference in the whether or to what extent Section 153.003(c) of the BOC was acting, was a basis to impose fiduciary duties on the and the fact that it was often unclear on whose behalf he was acting, was a basis to impose fiduciary duties on the limited partners in this case. The court did not address whether or to what extent Section 153.003(c) of the BOC (discussed below) would have made any difference in the court's analysis if it had been applicable.

In McBeth v. Carpenter, the evidence showed that Carpenter was in a position of control over the partnership by virtue of his control of the LLC general partner, and the court thus concluded that Carpenter owed the plaintiffs a fiduciary duty. Likewise, the court concluded that the limited partner defendants owed the plaintiffs a fiduciary duty as co-limited partners in the partnership and as entities controlled by Carpenter. The court noted in a footnote that it was not bound by unpublished cases cited by the defendant limited partners for the proposition that limited partners do not owe one another fiduciary duties. Further, the court stated that, even accepting the argument that limited partners do not ordinarily owe one another fiduciary duties, Carpenter's position of control over the limited partner defendants, and the fact that it was often unclear on whose behalf he was acting, was a basis to impose fiduciary duties on the limited partners. The court did not address whether or to what extent Section 153.003(c) of the BOC (discussed below) would have made any difference in the court's analysis if it had been applicable.

In Strebel v. Wimberly, 371 S.W.3d 267 (Tex.App.–Houston [1st Dist.] 2012, pet. denied), the court addressed the argument of a limited partner that his fellow limited partner owed him fiduciary duties of loyalty and care under the Texas Revised Partnership Act because the Texas Revised Limited Partnership Act contains no provisions on duties of limited partners. The court discussed the Zinda and McBeth cases as well as the unpublished Crawford and AON Properties cases in Texas and reconciled the cases as follows:

[We hold] that status as a limited partner alone does not give rise to a fiduciary duty to other limited partners. That is not to say, however, that a party who is a limited partner does not owe fiduciary duties to other limited partners when that party, wearing a different hat, exerts operating control over the affairs of the limited partnership. For example, when a limited partner also serves as an officer of the limited partnership, as in McBeth, that partner may owe fiduciary duties based on his agency relationship to the partnership and the other limited partners, without regard to the limited partner role. The existence and scope of that duty will be defined not by the law governing limited partners, but rather by the relevant laws and contracts governing the role under which the party is exercising authority.

Strebel, 371 S.W.3d at 281.

The BOC contains provisions clarifying that a limited partner is not subject to the duties of a general partner based solely on the limited partner's status as a limited partner. BOC Section 153.003(b) provides that “[t]he powers and duties of a limited partner shall not be governed by a provision of Chapter 152 that would be inconsistent with the nature and role of a limited partner as contemplated by this chapter,” and BOC Section 153.003(c) provides that “a limited partner shall not have any obligation or duty of a general partner solely by reason of being a limited partner.” These new provisions were necessitated by the structure of the BOC. Chapter 1 defines “partner” as including both general and limited partners. A literal application of this definition, along with the general linkage provision of Section 153.003(a) (providing that the provisions of Chapter 152 of the BOC govern limited partnerships in a case not provided for by Chapter 153), would cause all of the provisions in Chapter 152 governing general partnerships to apply to limited partners as well as general partners where Chapter 153 was silent on an issue. The language in Section 153.003(b) was added to make clear that provisions of Chapter 152 that would be inconsistent with the nature of a limited partner (e.g., provisions conferring agent status and apparent authority on each partner) do not apply to limited partners. The language in Section 153.003(c) specifically makes it clear that limited partners do not have the duties of a
general partner (e.g., duties of loyalty and care) solely by reason of being a limited partner.

There is case law in some jurisdictions suggesting that limited partners should be subject to fiduciary duties to the extent they actually have control in management matters, e.g., because of control of the general partner. See RJ Associates, Inc. v. Health Payors’ Org. Ltd. P’ship, 1990 WL 550350 (Del. Ch. 1999) (containing dictum suggesting that, unless a partnership agreement provides to the contrary, any limited partner owes fiduciary duties to the partnership); KE Prop. Mgmt. v. 275 Madison Mgmt., 1993 WL 285900 (Del. Ch. 1993); Red River Wings, Inc. v. Hoot, Inc., 751 N.W.2d 206 (N.D. 2008) (holding that majority limited partners who controlled or acted in concert with the general partner could be held personally liable to the minority limited partners for breach of fiduciary duties) and cases cited therein. In CBIF Ltd. P’ship v. TGI Friday’s Inc., 2017 WL 1455407 (Tex. App.—Dallas 2017, pet. filed), the court stated that a limited partner owes a fiduciary duty to the partnership and the other partners if the limited partner exercises control over the operation of the business, and the jury’s unchallenged findings of dominance and control by a limited partner provided the basis for recognizing a fiduciary duty on the part of the limited partner. The court went on to affirm the liability of an individual’s knowing participation in the limited partner’s fiduciary duty based on the individual’s knowledge of the fiduciary relationships and actual awareness of the breach. As noted above, there is also case law in Texas recognizing a fiduciary duty on the part of those who control the general partner. See FNFS, Ltd. v. Harwood (In re Harwood), 637 F.3d 615 (5th Cir. 2011); LPS Inv. P’ship v. Bennett (In re Bennett), 989 F.2d 779 (5th Cir. 1993); Mullen v. Jones (In re Jones), 445 B.R. 677 (Bankr. N.D. Tex. 2011); cf. Strebel v. Wimberly, 371 S.W.3d 267 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 2012, pet. denied) (recognizing that limited partner may owe fiduciary duties to other limited partners by virtue of exerting control over limited partnership in other capacities).

C. Statutory Authorization to Modify Duties and Liabilities of Partners

1. Modification of Duties and Liabilities Under General Partnership Statutes

The partnership agreement cannot eliminate the duties of care and loyalty or the obligation of good faith in a general partnership; however, the statutes do permit the partnership agreement to modify the duties of care and loyalty and the obligation of good faith, subject to a “not manifestly unreasonable” standard. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 152.002(b)(2), (3), (4); see also Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132b-1.03(b)(2), (3), (4) (expired Jan. 1, 2010).

With respect to the partners’ duty of care, the BOC provides that the partnership agreement may not eliminate the duty of care but may determine the standards by which the performance of the obligation is to be measured if the standards are “not manifestly unreasonable.” Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 152.002(b)(3); see also Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132b-1.03(a)(3) (expired Jan. 1, 2010). How far, then, can the partnership agreement go? If the statutory standard is simple negligence (see discussion of the duty of care under II.A above), will a gross negligence standard in the partnership agreement pass muster as “not manifestly unreasonable?” One would think that it should. See Jerry L. Starkey, TBDL, L.P. v. Graves, 448 S.W.3d 88 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2014, no pet.)

With respect to the partners’ duty of loyalty, the BOC provides that the partnership agreement may not eliminate the duty of loyalty but may identify specific types or categories of activities that do not violate the duty of loyalty if “not manifestly unreasonable.” Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 152.002(b)(2); see also Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132b-1.03(a)(2) (expired Jan. 1, 2010). One obvious issue here, in addition to the meaning of “manifestly unreasonable,” is how “specific” these provisions must be in identifying types or categories of activities. The answer may depend upon the circumstances, such as the sophistication of the parties, scope of activities of the partnership, etc. Provisions in partnership agreements permitting partners to engage in competition and to take advantage of business opportunities are fairly commonplace. Under the BOC, a domestic entity may “renounce, in its certificate of formation or by action of its governing authority, an interest or expectancy of the entity in being offered an opportunity to participate in, specified business opportunities or a specified class or category of business opportunities presented to the entity or one or more of its managerial officials or owners.” Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 2.101(21). This provision applies to a general partnership governed by the BOC, but it is not clear whether it adds anything significant to the provisions of Section 152.002(b)(2) since a general partnership does not file a certificate of formation.

Finally, the BOC provides that the obligation of good faith may not be eliminated by the partnership agreement, but the agreement may determine the standards by which the performance is to be measured if the standards are “not manifestly unreasonable.” Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 152.002(b)(4); see also Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132b-1.03(a)(4) (expired Jan. 1, 2010). Again
the parameters of this provision are not readily apparent and probably will depend, at least in part, on the circumstances of any particular case.

It should be noted that the BOC contains no express limitations on the extent to which the partnership agreement may eliminate a partner’s liability to the partnership and the other partners. In fact, in 2013, the legislature highlighted the expansive contractual freedom provided partners in this regard by amending Chapter 7 of the BOC to clarify that the partnership agreement may eliminate the liability of a partner to the partnership and the other partners to the same extent that a corporation’s certificate of formation may eliminate a director’s liability under section 7.001 and to such further extent allowed by Chapter 152 of the BOC. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 7.001(d)(1). Although Chapter 152 states that the duties of care and loyalty may not be completely eliminated, Chapter 152 does not address elimination of liability of partners vis a vis one another and the partnership. A distinction can be drawn between the elimination of duties and the elimination or indemnification of liabilities. If the liability of a general partner is contractually eliminated or indemnified, but the duty still exists, a breach of the duty could give rise to equitable relief (such as injunctive relief or receivership) even though the general partner could not be held liable for damages or would be held harmless by the partnership. Redefining or eliminating duties, on the other hand, narrows or eliminates only potential liability for damages by the partner who would otherwise owe the duty, but determines whether there is a breach at all, thus affecting the availability of equitable relief as well. While there are strong arguments for enforcing broad indemnification and exculpation provisions in view of the statutory scheme, a court might balk at enforcing contractual elimination of all remedies, including equitable remedies.

4In one case decided prior to the passage of the TRPA, a court dealt with a mismanagement claim against a general partner in a limited partnership where the partnership agreement stated that the general partner would not be liable absent willful malfeasance or fraud. Grider v. Boston Co., Inc., 773 S.W.2d 338 (Tex.App.—Dallas 1989, writ denied). The court assumed the clause was enforceable to protect the general partner against the mismanagement claim. The court stated that, when the parties bargain on equal terms, a fiduciary may contract for the limitation of liability. Public policy would preclude, according to the court, limitation of liability for (1) self-dealing, (2) bad faith, (3) intentional adverse acts, and (4) reckless indifference with respect to the interest of the beneficiary. Id. at 343.

2. Modification of Duties and Liabilities Under Limited Partnership Statutes

Chapter 153 of the BOC does not address the extent to which the duties and liabilities of general partners in a limited partnership may be altered by agreement of the partners except to state as follows:

Except as provided by this chapter, the other limited partnership provisions, or a partnership agreement, a general partner of a limited partnership...(2) has the liabilities of a partner in a partnership without limited partners to the partnership and to the other partners.

Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 153.152(a)(2) (emphasis added); see also Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132a-1, § 4.03(a) (expired Jan. 1, 2010). This language indicates that the partnership agreement may modify the liabilities of a general partner. It is not clear whether it is an authorization without express limits or is linked to the provisions in BOC Section 152.002 that prohibit elimination of duties and set a “manifestly unreasonable” floor for contractual variation.

Chapter 7 of the BOC was amended in 2013 to clarify that the partnership agreement may eliminate the liability of a general partner to the partnership and the other partners to the same extent that a corporation’s certificate of formation may eliminate a director’s liability under section 7.001 and to such further extent allowed by Chapters 152 and 153 of the BOC. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 7.001(d)(2). There are no express prohibitions or limitations in Chapter 152 or 153 with respect to the limitation or elimination of liability (as opposed to duties) of a general partner to the partnership or the partners. As noted above, a distinction can be drawn between the limitation or elimination of duties and the limitation and elimination of liabilities. If the liability of a general partner is contractually eliminated, but the duty still exists, a breach of the duty could give rise to equitable relief (such as injunctive relief or receivership) even though the general partner could not be held liable for damages. Redefining or eliminating duties, on the other hand, narrows or eliminates only potential liability for damages by the partner who would otherwise owe the duty, but determines whether there is a breach at all, thus affecting the availability of equitable relief as well.

In Jerry L. Starkey, TBDL, L.P. v. Graves, 448 S.W.3d 88 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2014, no pet.), the court of appeals stated that Section 152.002(b) of the BOC does not permit the partnership agreement to disclaim the statutory duties of care and loyalty entirely,
but the court stated that the limited partnership agreement did not disclaim all statutory duties and liability. Under the limited partnership agreement, the general partner was not liable in damages or otherwise for an act or omission unless such act or omission was performed or omitted fraudulently or constituted gross negligence or willful misconduct.

In Strebel v. Wimberly, 371 S.W.3d 267 (Tex.App.–Houston [1st Dist.] 2012, pet. denied), the court of appeals gave effect to a waiver of fiduciary duties in a limited partnership agreement (governed by the Texas Revised Limited Partnership Act) that provided: “The General Partner shall not have duties (including fiduciary duties) except as expressly set forth in this agreement.” The agreement did not specify any fiduciary duties. The general partner of the limited partnership was an LLC, and Wimberly argued that Strebel, the managing member of the LLC, took actions that breached a fiduciary duty to Wimberly as a limited partner. The court concluded that the actions of which Wimberly complained were all taken by Strebel in his capacity as managing member of the general partner and could not form the basis of a breach-of-fiduciary-duty claim because the fiduciary duties of the general partner had been expressly disclaimed in the limited partnership agreement. The court stated that general partners in a limited partnership owe fiduciary duties to the limited partners but noted that “the supreme court has emphasized the importance of honoring parties’ contractual terms defining the scope of their obligations and agreements, including limiting fiduciary duties that might otherwise exist.” The court stated that “[t]his is especially true in arms-length business transactions in which the parties are sophisticated businessmen represented by counsel, as the parties were here.”

3. Indemnification Under General Partnership Statutes

The BOC provides, as a default rule, for repayment of a partner who reasonably incurs a liability in the proper conduct of the business or for the preservation of its business or property. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 152.203(d); see also Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132b-4.01(c) (expired Jan. 1, 2010). The BOC also provides that a domestic entity, which would include a general partnership, has the power to “indemnify and maintain liability insurance for such person”). The indemnification provisions of Chapter 8 of the BOC do not apply to a general partnership other than to specify that the partnership agreement of a general partnership may adopt provisions of Chapter 8 or include “other provisions” for indemnification, “which will be enforceable.” Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 8.002. There are no specified limits on a general partnership’s power to indemnify, and the partnership agreement governs the relations of the partners except to the extent the statute specifically restricts the partners’ ability to define their relationship under BOC Section 152.002(b). Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 152.002(a); see also Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132b-1.03(a) (expired Jan. 1, 2010).

4. Indemnification Under Limited Partnership Statutes

In the BOC, one set of indemnification provisions governs both corporations and limited partnerships. See Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code §§ 8.001-8.152. The TRLPA contained indemnification provisions patterned largely after the TBCA provisions. See Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132a-1, §§ 11.01-11.21 (expired Jan. 1, 2010). A limited partnership is required to indemnify a general partner who is “wholly successful on the merits or otherwise” unless indemnification is limited or prohibited by a written partnership agreement. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code §§ 8.051-8.003; see also Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132a-1, §§ 11.08, 11.21 (expired Jan. 1, 2010). The limited partnership is prohibited from indemnifying the general partner if the general partner was found liable to the limited partnership or for improperly receiving a personal benefit if the liability was based on the general partner’s willful or intentional misconduct in the performance of a duty to the limited partnership, breach of the partner’s duty of loyalty to the limited partnership, or an act or omission not in good faith constituting a breach of duty to the limited partnership. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 8.102(b)(3); cf. Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132a-1, §§ 11.03, 11.05 (prohibiting indemnification of general partner found liable to limited partners or partnership, or for improperly receiving personal benefit, if liability arose out of willful or intentional misconduct in performance of duty to limited partnership). Under the TRLPA, a limited partnership was permitted, if provided in a written partnership agreement, to indemnify a general partner who was determined to meet certain standards. Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132a-1, §§ 11.02, 11.05 (expired Jan. 1, 2010). The BOC provides for such permissive indemnification without the necessity of any provisions in the partnership agreement. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code §§ 8.102, 8.103. The standards for permissive indemnification require that the general partner acted in good faith, reasonably believed the conduct was in the best interest of the partnership (if
the conduct was in an official capacity) or that the conduct was not opposed to the partnership’s best interest (in cases of conduct outside the general partner’s official capacity), and, in the case of a criminal proceeding, had no reasonable cause to believe the conduct was unlawful. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 8.101; see also Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132a-1, § 11.02 (expired Jan. 1, 2010). If a general partner is found liable to the limited partnership or on the basis of improperly receiving a personal benefit, permissible indemnification is limited to reasonable expenses. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 8.102(b); see also Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132a-1, § 11.05 (expired Jan. 1, 2010). A general partner may only be indemnified to the extent consistent with the statutes. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 8.004; see also Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132a-1, § 11.13 (expired Jan. 1, 2010).


Chapter 8 of the BOC governs any proposed indemnification by a domestic entity after January 1, 2010, even if the events on which the indemnification is based occurred before the BOC became applicable to the entity. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 402.007. A special transition provision in the BOC regarding indemnification states that “[i]n a case in which indemnification is permitted but not required under Chapter 8, a provision relating to indemnification contained in the governing documents of a domestic entity on the mandatory application date that would otherwise have the effect of limiting the nature or type of indemnification permitted by Chapter 8 may not be construed after the mandatory application date as limiting the indemnification authorized by Chapter 8 unless the provision is intended to limit or restrict permissive indemnification under applicable law.” Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 402.007. This provision will be helpful in interpreting some pre-BOC indemnification provisions, but its application will not always be clear; therefore, a careful review of indemnification provisions in pre-BOC governing documents is advisable.

V. ADVANCEMENT

The issue of advancement of expenses in connection with a proceeding should also be considered in connection with indemnification and exculpation. Chapter 8 of the BOC contains provisions authorizing advancement of expenses in the corporate and limited partnership contexts pursuant to specific procedures. Chapter 8 permits advancement of expenses to a governing person upon a written affirmation by the governing person that the person has met the standard necessary for indemnification and a written undertaking to repay the amount paid or reimbursed if it is finally determined that the person has not met the standard or that indemnification is prohibited. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 8.104(a); see also Tex. Bus. Corp. Act art. 2.02-1K (expired Jan. 1, 2010); Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132a-1, § 11.11 (expired Jan. 1, 2010). The written undertaking need not be secured and may be accepted by the entity without regard to the person’s ability to make repayment. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 8.104(c); see also Tex. Bus. Corp. Act art. 2.02-1L (expired Jan. 1, 2010); Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art. 6132a-1, § 11.12 (expired Jan. 1, 2010).


Chapter 8 does not apply to an LLC or general partnership unless the governing documents of such an entity adopt the provisions of Chapter 8. Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code § 8.002. In the LLC context, the BOC authorizes advancement of expenses without specifying procedures. See Tex. Bus. Orgs. Code §§ 101.402(a)(2) (stating that LLC may “pay in advance or reimburse expenses incurred by a person”); cf. Tex. Rev. Civ. Stat. art.1528n, art. 2.20(A) (expired Jan. 1, 2010) (referring to LLC’s power to indemnify and provide insurance, but not explicitly mentioning advancement). The BOC does not specifically address advancement by a general partnership other than to authorize the partnership

VI. CONCLUSION

Fiduciary-duty issues in the context of business organizations are not controlled by case law alone. The statutes governing the various types of business organizations contain provisions relating to fiduciary duties and liabilities arising from such duties, and the governing documents of a particular entity may contain provisions affecting the fiduciary duties and liabilities of those involved in the business. Whether the different approaches to fiduciary duties, liabilities, and indemnification under the various Texas business entity statutes amount to a significant difference between the entities might be debated; however, subtle differences may certainly prove significant in particular cases.