



## **8 Keys to Become a Valuable and Trusted Resource to the C-suite**

**Career Development**



In-house counsel often find themselves shoulder-to-shoulder with the C-suite when negotiating a deal, discussing litigation, or solving myriad compliance matters that arise daily in the world of corporate law. For those with ambitions to rise to the ranks of senior management, making the

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transition from in-house counsel to executive can seem like an overwhelming task. But it all begins with being a trusted confidant. During my years as in-house counsel, here's how I have worked for and alongside the C-suite to become one of their most valuable resources.

## **1. Be available**

As in-house counsel, we have several competing commitments, both professional and personal. However, far too many lawyers let their egos get in the way of relationship building. The thought process seems to be: "How dare that executive think I can just drop everything when he asks?" While it's true that the "esquire" after our names was earned with a lot of hard work and deserves respect, that mentality needs to be put aside. If an executive needs to meet with or talk with you (even with little or no notice) and you can meet with them, then you should. This open mindset enhances your rapport with those executives. They then know that they can rely on you without creating a power struggle.

## **2. Perform**

The second key to becoming a valuable and trusted resource for the C-suite is as simple as the first: perform. If you give senior management your best, you instantly begin building trust as a valuable member of the team who keeps your promises and delivers quality work. Eventually you'll be the go-to counsel to advise the C-suite on legal matters.

## **3. Mitigate risk**

While it is certainly our job to mitigate risk, we must remember not to get in the way of business — unless we have to. Most of us struggle with this daily in our roles as in-house counsel. However, we can actually help drive business as much as, if not more than, we mitigate risk. Two general rules to keep in mind are: (1) Do not give the C-suite a hard "no" unless their chosen course of action is illegal and/or unethical; (2) advise as to risk and let the business team make a business decision.

Driving the business, however, does not mean agreeing with everything the C-suite says. On the contrary, you should provide the executives with your legal opinion as to risk. The trick is to find the balance between risk and reward. Our job as in-house counsel is not to be the "department of no" or "yes men," but to give the senior management an honest view of the risks. A good leader will respect you for it and come to value and trust your opinions.

## **4. Speak plainly**

When advising as to risk, many lawyers speak a great deal of legalese, since it's practically our default language. However, most executives are busy and just want to get their jobs done. They don't want to hear us teach them Contracts 101 or Civil Litigation. That's why they have you as in-house counsel. You're there to answer their questions and address matters in laymen's terms, not legalese.

## **5. Be flexible**

How many times have you been suddenly called to a C-suite meeting to help with a negotiation of which you have no prior knowledge? As frantic as switching your mindset can be, diving into the new project without qualms builds an immeasurable amount of trust with the executives. They will learn

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that they can rely on you, no matter the project or request. What's more, you gain new skills from these experiences and are, thus, better prepared for the next one.

## **6. Keep learning**

One indispensable skill of in-house counsel, particularly generalists, is recognizing and improving upon what you don't already know. Working with senior management helps to build your knowledge of business operations and the intricacies of your company. What's more, it also indicates to the C-suite your eagerness to have a seat at the table and not simply stay siloed in your legal domain. Executives who are paying attention will appreciate your spirit of collaboration and passion for learning.

## **7. Engage on their level**

Knowing when to engage with the C-suite is critical. In-house counsel shouldn't leave executives in the dark, but we also need to work independently. With that in mind, you may want to consider the exposure of a matter: Is there a large amount of financial (or other) risk? If so, you should probably inform senior management. Is it a project that senior management has trusted in-house counsel to manage? If so, you should update them on any milestones.

If you're struggling with when and how often to debrief the C-suite, ask them what level of engagement they want. Perhaps an executive wants more involvement in a deal for a reason that is not readily apparent. Keeping open and clear communication can prevent a lot of unnecessary strife.

## **8. Be trustworthy**

As lawyers, we're expected to be ethical. But what happens if you run into office politics among the C-suite? In order to remain trustworthy, do not get involved in politics, as it is not your role. However, knowing where to draw the line can be difficult. What if executives gossip about each other to you? What if you hear them interact with each other in a politicking way? Rise above it. Unless it is something you must stop because it is illegal and/or unethical, don't engage and let it go. Just do your job. A good rule of thumb is to remember who your ultimate client is and to think: "What is best for the organization I represent?"

So the next time you're summoned by the C-suite, remember that it is yet another opportunity to build your credibility and prove your value to the senior management team and executives. Within time, your name will be synonymous with dedication and reliability, and you'll be joining the C-suite in their meetings more regularly.

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In her role as senior legal counsel with Vendavo, Inc., Colombo works cross-functionally with the relevant business teams and stakeholders, providing legal advice on a broad range of topics and guiding the business on legal compliance with a particular focus on drafting, managing, and negotiating client and vendor contracts of moderate-to-high complexity from the bid phase through contract execution, including software licensing and SaaS-specific provisions, as well as matters related to contractual liability and risk-shifting provisions, data privacy, intellectual property, and

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products.