



Joining a Board Can Accelerate Your Business Knowledge

Interviews and Profiles

Career Development





Juliette Pryor

Executive vice president, general counsel, and corporate secretary

Albertsons Companies

As an in-house counsel, whenever a conversation starts with “This isn’t a legal question, but I want to get your opinion on it anyway...,” it’s a good thing. “You’ve achieved your goal — being seen as a business partner,” says Juliette Pryor, the executive vice president, general counsel, and corporate secretary of Albertsons, the second-largest grocery in the United States, headquartered in Boise, Idaho.

She is used to conversations starting that way. Having led teams in various roles across industries as diverse as foods, automotive, communications, media, and now grocery retail, she isn’t just seen as a business partner, she is a business partner. Reflective of her strategic advisor role and depth of business knowledge, Pryor recently accepted a position to become a board member at Genuine Parts Company, a Fortune 200 automotive parts company. Serving on another company’s board of directors allows her to leverage past board room experience for the benefit of her present company from the lens of a corporate director.

Business curiosity

Good business partners possess intellectual curiosity. They want to know how the business works. Pryor has always sought to move beyond being seen solely as the company lawyer. One goal she set for herself was to join a for-profit corporate board. As a general counsel also serving as the corporate secretary, she has spent a lot of time interacting with board directors. She wanted to use that experience to bring oversight to another public company and to gain the unique perspective that comes from board service.

For corporate counsel considering such a role, she has some advice. First, make sure you have time for the position. With a full-time GC position, that time must come from somewhere. Make sure your family is on board with your plans because it will be your personal time that you are sacrificing.

Your family’s blessing isn’t the only one you’ll need to make the move: You must have the support of your CEO. It helps if the board position is for a company in a different industry that doesn’t conflict or overlap with your day job, but at the same time offers some complimentary aspects. For example, Genuine Parts and Albertsons are clearly not competitive, but both are retailers and have manufacturing and distribution operations.

After working as the GC of US Foods, Pryor joined Cox Enterprises, a large, privately held conglomerate, which includes Cox Automotive, among other brands. Now that she is in retail working with one of the largest grocers in the United States, she didn’t want that knowledge and experience of the automotive industry to fade away. When the chance to join the board of Genuine Parts Company arose, she knew it was a board opportunity where she could contribute to the board given her prior business experience.

Pryor’s CEO sees it as a way she can further develop leadership experience and bring a unique skill

set and perspective in her CLO role at Albertsons.

Fast-paced learning environment

Pryor was attracted to her current position because it presented the opportunity to expand her knowledge of the food industry by working in the retail sector. She spent 11 years at US Foods, the second largest food distribution company in the United States. For nearly eight of those years, she was EVP, GC, and chief compliance officer. Now she would have the chance to see the industry from the consumer side of things. She just didn't know how quickly it would happen.

Pryor joined Albertsons in the spring of 2020, just as the world was responding to COVID-19. "It was an acceleration of learning everything about our business as we have been in the frontline space as a grocer," she explains. And Albertsons is more than a grocer; it is also a pharmacy. Those two areas brought her into conversations that may have taken longer if it wasn't for the pandemic.

Pryor is proud that her company has helped distribute the vaccine. At the same time early on, there were implementation challenges, such as supply chain issues and the maze of patchwork regulations, not just from state to state but from county to county. "It is not something you learn once and then implement across all 35 states where we operate," she admits, adding that it "has been a unique challenge."

Even before the pandemic, Albertsons knew it needed to integrate digital offerings for its customers, such as the ability to shop online. Pryor focuses on hiring digital-native lawyers to help advise the company in those emerging areas.

Beginnings

Pryor is originally from upstate New York, the daughter of a schoolteacher and a minister. She never had a grand plan to pursue law, but her interest in leadership, problem solving, and public speaking compelled friends and relatives to suggest she take up the profession, in the mold of Perry Mason (TV's fictional master criminal defense attorney).

She attended Fisk University, a historically Black college in Nashville, Tennessee. She earned her law degree from Georgetown University. Even then, she wasn't sure law was the way she wanted to go. Pryor earned a dual degree in law and foreign policy, thinking she would join the foreign service.

An early in-house law experience convinced her that she should pursue that route. She loved how the lawyers were not at the center — they were only one part of the team. She realized that she loved being part of a diverse team, not only from the DEI perspective, but also in terms of subject matter expertise and disciplines, which has remained a constant throughout her career.

So, how do you get there?

In her experience with CEOs and other senior executives, the most successful ones have strong professional networks. "Building that is not something you can do just within your own department, but within the profession as a whole," she shares, "and that's something ACC is really good at providing."

After the past year, it's clear to Pryor that it's imperative to be "my authentic self in every setting." It

helped her build deeper relationships and to think more strategically. It's really the first step to being that great business partner.

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Editor

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