Driving Legal Leadership Through Disruption: Volkswagen Canada’s Rusty Juma on Risk, Trust, and Transformation

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For chief legal officers, Rusty Juma’s career offers a timely reminder: Legal leadership is no longer just about managing risk. It is about helping the business move through disruption with judgment, speed, and credibility.

Rustam “Rusty” Juma

General Counsel, Corporate Secretary & Privacy Officer
Volkswagen Group Canada, Inc.

That is especially true in automotive, where electrification, data, privacy, cybersecurity, consumer protection, dealer relations, supply chains, and industrial policy are converging at once. For Juma, General Counsel, Corporate Secretary & Privacy Officer of Volkswagen Group Canada, Inc., the work is rarely “just” legal. It is legal, commercial, operational, reputational, and sometimes political — all at the same time.

His path to that role was not linear. Juma began in private practice, working in Calgary and Toronto, before moving in-house at Deloitte. He later became the first General Counsel and Corporate Secretary at Eckler, Canada’s largest privately owned actuarial consulting firm, where he built the legal function from the ground up and learned what it means for Legal to sit close to the business.

That experience helped prepare him for Volkswagen Group Canada, where he now advises the board and senior leadership during a period of significant change for the automotive sector. It also brought together several themes that have defined his career: governance, enterprise risk, business transformation, and, as he readily acknowledges, a lifelong interest in cars.

For CLOs and aspiring general counsel, Juma’s leadership philosophy comes through clearly:

- **Trust is the foundation of legal influence.** The business must believe Legal understands the commercial objective and is working toward a practical outcome.
- **Speed requires clarity.** In a fast-moving business, the best legal advice is often not a long memo, but a concise conversation that frames the risk, the guardrails, and the recommended path.
- **Global strategy must meet local reality.** For a German-headquartered company operating in Canada, legal leadership means connecting global standards with Canadian regulatory, linguistic, commercial, and market expectations.
- **The next-generation CLO must be more than a lawyer.** Juma sees the role evolving into a combination of strategist, communicator, culture carrier, technology-aware advisor, and enterprise risk leader.

In the conversation that follows, Juma reflects on his career journey, the evolution of legal leadership, the realities of advising in a transforming global industry, and why the CLO of the future must be prepared to lead through ambiguity.

Q&A with Volkswagen Canada's Rusty Juma

ACC:

What were the key turning points in your career that led you to the general counsel role at Volkswagen Canada?

Juma:

My path to Volkswagen was not linear, and certainly unpredictable. I started in private practice, moved in-house at Deloitte, then became the first General Counsel and Corporate Secretary at Eckler, which gave me the chance to build a legal function from the ground up and sit close to the business. Winning the Canadian General Counsel Award and completing the Rotman/CCCA business leadership program also gave me confidence that I could take on a larger platform. Volkswagen was a dream opportunity because it brought together several things I care about: governance, risk, transformation, and, candidly, a lifelong interest in cars. It also put me in an industry undergoing real disruption, which is where in-house lawyers can have the greatest impact.

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>
> Rusty Juma

ACC:

How has your understanding of legal leadership changed since becoming a chief legal officer?

Juma:

I used to think legal leadership was mainly about judgment, technical excellence, and responsiveness. Those things still matter, but as a CLO you quickly realize the role is much broader. You are leading people, helping shape culture, advising the board and executive team, and translating risk into business choices. The best legal leaders are not just the people who say whether something is legally permissible. They help the organization understand whether it is wise, sustainable, and aligned with its values.

ACC:

What does it take for a legal team to be seen by the business as a strategic partner rather than just a risk checkpoint?

Juma:

It starts with trust. The business has to believe that Legal understands the commercial objective and is trying to help get to a good outcome, not simply identify reasons why something cannot be done. That means being practical, available, and clear. It also means investing time to understand the business model, the pressures leaders are facing, and how revenue is generated. When Legal brings solutions, options, and judgment — not just legal analysis — the business starts to see the team as a partner.

ACC:

When the business is moving quickly, how do you help leaders make smart decisions without slowing them down?

Juma:

My goal is to give leaders a clear view of the risk, the consequences, and the practical options in a timely manner. In a fast-moving business, a long memo is not helpful. Sometimes the best legal advice is a short conversation that frames the issue clearly: here is what we know, here is what we do not know, here are the guardrails, and here is the recommended path. The key is not to remove risk entirely — that is rarely possible — but to make sure the risk is understood, intentional, and managed.

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>
> Rusty Juma

ACC:

What have you learned about leading through moments of crisis or significant business pressure?

Juma:

Crisis moments test both judgment and relationships. What I have learned is that people need calm, clarity, and structure. The legal team has to help separate noise from what truly matters, establish decision-making discipline, and make sure the organization is preserving trust with employees, customers, regulators, dealers, and other stakeholders. In those moments, you cannot be theoretical. You need to be steady, practical, and prepared to make decisions with incomplete information.

ACC:

Looking back, what is one of the most interesting, challenging, or unexpected matters you have handled in your career?

Juma:

One of the most interesting parts of my career has been moving into automotive at a time when the sector is being transformed by electrification, digitalization, privacy, consumer protection, language laws, dealer relations, and changing expectations from regulators and consumers. The work is fascinating because it is never just a legal issue. It is usually legal, commercial, operational, reputational, and sometimes political all at once. That complexity is what makes the role challenging, but also incredibly rewarding.

ACC:

What is distinctive about serving as general counsel for a German-headquartered company operating in the Canadian market?

Juma:

What is distinctive is the combination of global scale and local accountability. Volkswagen is a deeply established global organization with strong processes, engineering discipline, and a long-term view. But in Canada, we still have to operate in a very specific legal, regulatory, linguistic, and commercial environment. The role is to help connect those worlds: to make sure global strategy is understood locally, and that Canadian legal and market realities are understood globally.

ACC:

How do you navigate differences in legal culture, business culture, and regulatory expectations between Canada, Germany, and the broader global organization?

Juma:

I try to approach cross-border work with curiosity and humility. Different jurisdictions can have very different expectations around decision-making, documentation, consultation, risk tolerance, and timing. Canada also has its own regulatory complexity, including federal and provincial rules, Quebec-specific requirements, privacy developments, competition law, consumer protection, and dealer-related considerations. The key is to avoid assuming that one approach automatically translates everywhere. You need to explain the local context clearly, build relationships with global colleagues, and find solutions that respect both global standards and Canadian realities.

ACC:

The auto industry is undergoing enormous change. What are the biggest strategic issues facing the sector right now?

Juma:

The sector is dealing with several major issues at once: electrification, new entrants, affordability, supply chain resilience, battery production, software and data, cybersecurity, privacy, dealer network evolution, and changing consumer expectations. There is also a broader industrial policy question about where vehicles, batteries, and critical components will be built. For legal leaders, the challenge is that these issues are interconnected. You cannot look at product, regulation, technology, government policy, and consumer demand in isolation.

ACC:

How do you think about the legal, commercial, and policy challenges around the transition to electric vehicles?

Juma:

The EV transition is not just a product transition. It is a legal, commercial, infrastructure, affordability, and policy transition all happening at once. From a legal perspective, you are looking at vehicle safety, consumer protection, advertising, incentives, charging, battery supply chains, privacy, data, and environmental regulation. From a commercial perspective, the question is how to make the transition work for consumers, dealers, manufacturers, and governments. The opportunity is significant, but the transition has to be practical and credible for real people in real communities.

ACC:

What role should government incentives and infrastructure investment play in accelerating EV adoption, and where do you see the biggest gaps?

Juma:

Incentives and infrastructure are both important because they address two of the biggest barriers to adoption: affordability and confidence. Purchase incentives can help narrow the upfront cost gap, particularly for families who are interested in an EV but still price-sensitive. Infrastructure investment is equally important because people need to feel confident that charging will be available where they live, work, shop, and travel. The biggest gaps are consistency, predictability, and coverage — especially outside major urban centers and for people who do not have easy access to home charging.

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ACC:

As the industry changes, what capabilities will the next generation of chief legal officers need most?

Juma:

The next generation of CLOs will need strong legal judgment, but that will only be the starting point. They will need business literacy, technology fluency, comfort with data and AI, crisis management skills, regulatory awareness, and the ability to lead through ambiguity. They will also need emotional intelligence. In a complex organization, influence matters as much as authority. The CLO of the future has to be a lawyer, strategist, communicator, culture carrier, and enterprise risk leader.

ACC:

To close, we met through ACC's Chief Legal Officer Roundtables in Toronto, which are designed to create candid, peer-to-peer dialogue among senior legal leaders. What value have you and your team gotten from ACC, why have you stayed involved, and what makes these CLO roundtables useful for someone in your role?

Juma:

ACC has been valuable because it creates space for candid conversations with people who understand the realities of the CLO role. There are issues you can discuss with your team, your CEO, your board, or external counsel, but there is something different about speaking with peers who are facing similar pressures in different organizations. The roundtables are useful because they are practical, confidential, and grounded in real experience. They help you test your thinking, learn from others, and build a community of legal leaders who can support each other through complex moments. It is also a great way to make new connections and develop relationships with like-minded peers.

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