



Your Launch Pad: The Promotion Gap — Why Great Lawyers Don't Always Become Great Legal Leaders

Career Development



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How intentional career planning helps you develop the skills required for your next in-house role.

One of the biggest ironies in our profession is that lawyers spend their careers helping organizations think strategically about risk, growth, and long-term planning, yet many rarely apply that same discipline to their own careers.

Too often, we are not proactive in planning our careers. We focus on doing excellent legal work, assume that strong performance will naturally lead to promotion, and wait for the next opportunity to appear. While technical excellence is essential, it is rarely what distinguishes someone who moves into more senior in-house leadership roles.

The skills that make you an outstanding lawyer are not the same skills that will make you an outstanding legal leader.

Career progression in-house isn't simply about accumulating more legal experience. Every step up the ladder requires developing a different set of leadership capabilities. As your responsibilities grow,

so too does the expectation that you will lead yourself with greater intention, lead others through influence and collaboration, and ultimately help lead the business with sound judgment and strategic insight.

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Having worked with legal departments of all sizes and coached lawyers throughout their in-house careers, I've seen this pattern play out repeatedly. The lawyers who advance most successfully aren't necessarily the strongest technical lawyers.

They're the ones who recognize that every promotion requires a new set of leadership capabilities and invest early in developing them.

If you aspire to move into a more senior in-house role, here are five areas worth focusing on.

1. Create a career plan before you need one

Lawyers are remarkably good at planning for their clients and organizations, yet many spend very little time planning their own careers. One of the first leadership skills we need to develop is learning to lead ourselves. Take the time to step back and ask yourself what you want your next career chapter to look like ... Rather than trying to map out exactly where you want to be in ten years, think about your career as a series of chapters. Some chapters will be short, others longer, but each one will require you to develop a different set of skills.

Focus on the chapter you are in now and the one that comes next. Ask yourself what capabilities, experiences, and exposure you need to move into that next chapter successfully. Career growth becomes far more manageable when you break it down this way, and it allows you to be more intentional about building the skills that will actually move you forward.

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2. Identify the leadership skills your next role requires

Every promotion in an in-house legal department comes with a different expectation of leadership.

The mistake many lawyers make is assuming they simply need to become better technical lawyers.

Instead, build your own leadership competency matrix for the role you want. List the experiences, behaviors, and leadership capabilities expected of someone in that position.

An associate general counsel, for example, is expected to lead cross-functional initiatives, influence executive stakeholders, communicate effectively with senior leaders, and help shape business strategy. These capabilities are developed intentionally over time, not overnight.

Once you understand the expectations of your next role, you can begin creating opportunities to develop those skills before anyone asks you to demonstrate them.

Build your own leadership competency matrix for the role you want.

3. Seek opportunities beyond legal work

Some of the most valuable experiences for future legal leaders happen outside their day-to-day legal responsibilities.

Volunteer to lead a cross-functional project. Participate in an operational initiative. Take ownership of improving a process that affects multiple departments. Long before you have people reporting to you, you'll be expected to build trust, influence decisions, and align people around shared objectives.



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These experiences expose you to different parts of the business while demonstrating your ability to influence people who do not report to you. Just as importantly, they change how others see you. If your colleagues only experience you as the lawyer who reviews contracts and identifies risk, they'll naturally view you through that lens. By stepping into cross-functional work, demonstrating commercial curiosity, and helping teams achieve business outcomes, you begin to build a reputation as someone who understands the broader context and contributes as a business leader, not simply a legal advisor. That shift in perception is often what opens the door to more senior leadership opportunities.

4. Build your business acumen

Senior legal leaders are expected to understand far more than the law. They understand how the business creates value, what drives decision-making, and where the company is trying to go.

Spend time with colleagues in finance, operations, sales, product, or HR. Ask questions about how revenue is generated, what the company's biggest strategic priorities are this year, what challenges keep your executive team awake at night, and how success is measured. Read quarterly results, attend town halls with a different lens, and take every opportunity to understand the commercial realities behind the legal work you're supporting.

The more you understand the business context, the more your advice shifts from identifying legal risks to helping the business achieve its objectives. Developing business acumen is ultimately about learning to support the business, not simply advise it.

Your legal expertise will always matter, but your ability to lead yourself, lead others, and ultimately help lead the business is what will determine how far your career can grow.

5. Seek feedback on your leadership, not just your legal work

Ask your general counsel and other leaders where they believe you need to grow in order to progress your career. Seek feedback on your ability to collaborate, communicate, and influence stakeholders. Those are often the capabilities that determine whether someone is viewed as ready for the next level.

Career progression in-house is about becoming someone who can lead teams, influence decisions, navigate complexity, and help the business achieve its objectives.

Looking back at the many legal departments I've worked with over the years, one thing has become

clear. The lawyers who rise most successfully don't develop these capabilities by accident. They invest in them deliberately, often years before the promotion arrives. Your legal expertise will always matter, but your ability to lead yourself, lead others, and ultimately help lead the business is what will determine how far your career can grow.

Your career deserves the same thoughtful planning you bring to your clients and your organization. The sooner you begin developing the leadership skills that distinguish exceptional in-house counsel, the better positioned you will be when the next opportunity arrives.



Terrie Nelson, Associate Director, Corporate Counsel, Thermo Fisher Scientific & ACC Mentor, Laurice Royale

Member Spotlight: Terrie Nelson

Q: What led you to join ACC Mentor Match, and what did you hope to

gain?

Terrie Nelson: When I joined ACC Mentor Match, I had been practicing in-house for a few years and was beginning to think more intentionally about the kind of attorney I wanted to become long term. I knew I wanted broader exposure than the work I was doing at the time, and I was looking for a space where I could have candid conversations with someone experienced outside of my organization. What appealed to me most about the program was the opportunity to build an actual relationship with someone who genuinely wanted to mentor and invest in others, not just make another professional connection.

Q: What is one insight from your conversations that changed how you think or act?

Nelson: One of the biggest things I took away from my conversations with Laurice was the importance of building a career that reflects who you are as a whole person. We talked about professional goals, but we also talked about creativity, interests outside of law, and taking care of yourself while building a demanding career. That perspective changed the way I think about success. I no longer view the personal and professional sides of my life as completely separate things.

Q: How has this mentoring relationship shaped how you approach your role or career decisions?

Nelson: The mentorship helped me approach my career with more confidence and more patience. Hearing about the trajectory of Laurice's career reminded me that meaningful careers are built over time and shaped by many different experiences. Since beginning the mentorship relationship, I transitioned into a role with broader exposure, and I think our conversations helped me approach that transition more strategically and with greater confidence in my long-term goals.

Q: What did you learn from your mentor that surprised you?

Nelson: What surprised me most was how holistic her mentorship was. Our conversations were not limited to titles, promotions, or technical legal skills. She was equally interested in who I was outside of work and what genuinely motivated me. That made the relationship feel much more authentic and allowed for more honest conversations about growth and direction.

Q: What advice would you give to future mentees?

Nelson: Approach mentorship with openness and curiosity rather than treating it like a networking exercise. The most valuable part of the experience for me was building a genuine relationship with someone willing to share both wisdom and perspective. Also, be willing to engage beyond surface-level career questions. Some of the most meaningful conversations are the ones that help you better understand yourself, not just your resume.

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[Paula Pépin](#)



Career Coach

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Paula Pépin is a former General Counsel and recognized business leader with more than 20 years of experience leading Legal and HR functions in global, high-growth organizations. After stepping down from her GC role in 2020, Pépin founded GC Collective to support General Counsel evolve from legal experts into strategic business executives — equipped to lead high-performing teams and navigate complex business environments with confidence.

