Top 10 Habits of Successful Corporate Counsel: #8 Being a Leader, Great Manager, and Better at Wordle

Law Department Management

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Great leaders are like magnets. There is something about great leaders that draws people to them. You want to be a magnet in your corporation. You want people to be drawn to you seeking advice and counsel even when the legal advice needed might be outside your area of expertise.

In this series of top 10 habits of successful in-house counsel, being a great leader and manager is in the spotlight:

#8. You are a great leader and manager no matter where you are in the organization and even if you have no direct reports.

You are leading every time you provide legal advice. There is often no clear answer with a legal issue. Excellent listening and probing skills must be balanced with excellent judgment around the facts learned. Courage is required to put your advice on the line and help action the next steps for the right outcome for the company. All of this is done with full knowledge that you could be *wrong* and serious consequences will result if you are wrong. Listening, judgment, courage, and action in the

face of uncertainty, failure, and high stakes — this is leadership. To me, that is why most lawyers in a company are of higher seniority than other employees of similar years of experience. They must lead in their role.

Being courageous is a risk but exemplifies leadership. Yuganov Konstantin / *Shutterstock.com*

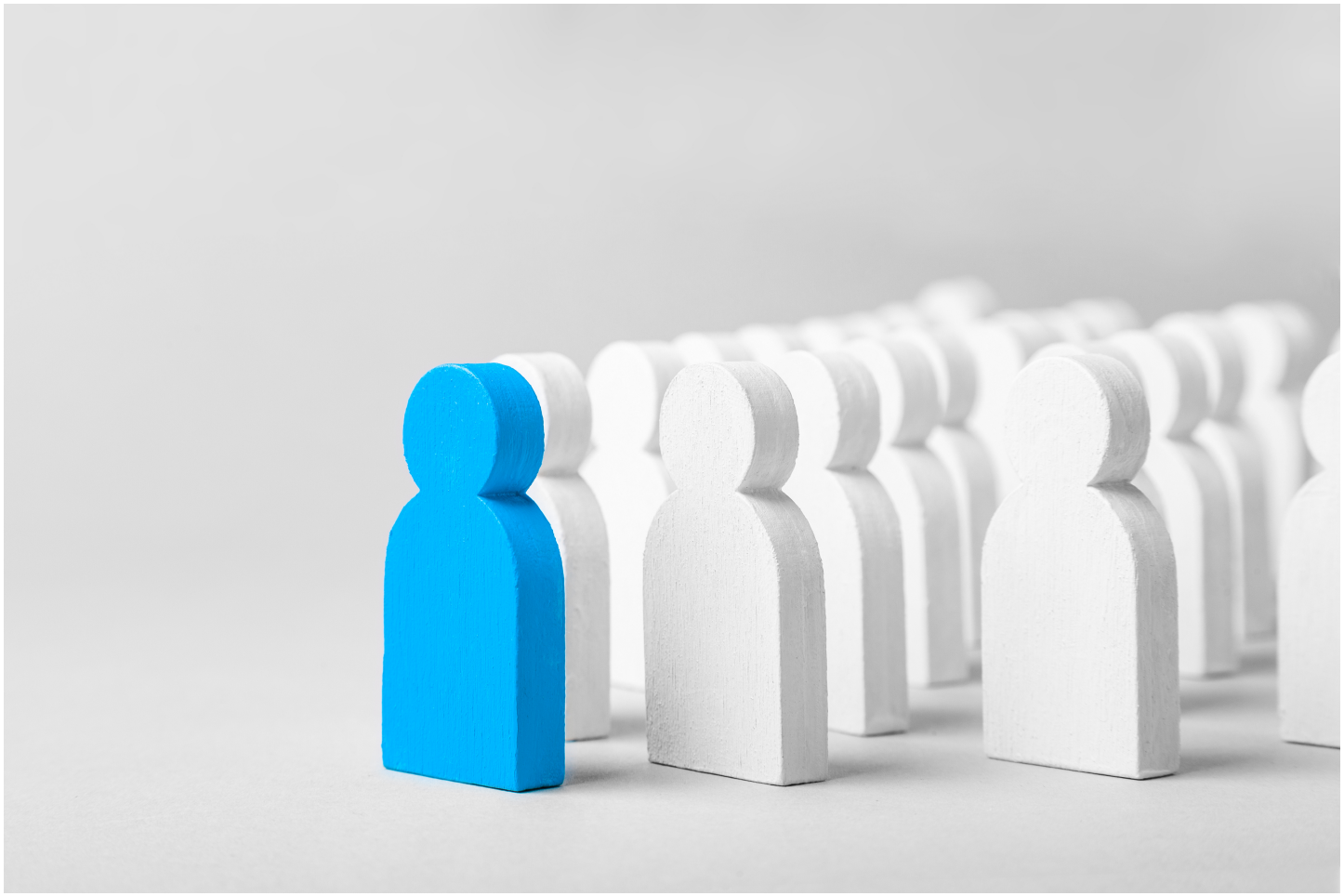
That means you must lead to be truly successful as an in-house counsel no matter where you are in the company. I do not profess to have all the answers of what makes a great leader. But I can share the traits of great in-house counsel leaders who inspire me.

- **First and foremost, they are authentic.** I know we have heard this all before, but let us reflect upon its importance with this simple question. Would you ever trust and follow a leader who you did not feel was being themselves? Of course not. You should be unafraid to share why you feel a certain way about your advice and how who you are informs that judgment. They will trust you and your advice if they know you and markers of who you are can be seen in your advice.
- **Second, they create an aura around them of caring deeply about both the company and the law.** You should wear on your sleeve that you care equally about the company achieving world class performance with world class integrity. This will be your magnetism in a corporation. It will draw people to you for advice because they know you care fiercely about the company doing well **and** the right thing.
- **Third and finally, they challenge everyone to be better versions of themselves and achieve more than ever thought possible.** Our minds can be powerful limiters on the possible. We tend to consistently underestimate ourselves and set low bars. Great leaders push these limits and unlock our full potential. They believe in us more than we believe in ourselves.

Great in-house lawyers also need to be great managers. I know not everyone gets to lead a team and have direct reports. You should still be seen as a great manager. You need to act like you have

the job you want. There are constant opportunities in companies to act as a good manager even with no direct reports. You can lead a project team. You can lead outside counsel or consultants. You can come up with an idea and ask to lead on its implementation across many groups. You should find ways to show you are a great manager without a team.

A great leader cannot do it all. A great leader is just one person. A great leader has a limited singular perspective on a legal challenge. A great leader and a great manager empowering a team can achieve far more. Many hands make light work, but also make for better work and can tackle bigger challenges. You need to be seen not only as a leader, but also a leader of leaders.



A great leader understands the importance of having efficient team members in order to achieve success. Dragan / *Shutterstock.com*

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I have had great managers. The most important thing they did for me was to change my perspective. We can become so entrenched in how we see ourselves and our career development within a company. My managers helped me “turn the board” and see myself, a legal issue, or my career from a different vantage point. This opened worlds and possibilities that did not exist before. I took work opportunities that I never even contemplated. I tried approaches to legal problems that I would have never tried on my own. I worked to improve myself or develop in areas that I never considered. All of these things were vitally important to my career and yet only happened because a great manager helped me “turn the board,” visualize the challenge differently, and tackle the challenge differently.

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different vantage point.

Let me give you a visual of what I mean by “turn the board” using Wordle. Wordle is a word puzzle game by the New York Times. I love playing with my son and mother (and of course gloating by sharing with them if I guessed it correctly). The game is played by guessing letters in a five-letter word. If you guess the correct letter in the correct spot, you get a green box. If you guess the right letter but in the wrong spot, it lights up yellow. If the letter is not in the word, you get the dreaded grey box. You have six guesses to win the game.

As my son would play, he would often guess the same letter in the same spot when he got an early green box but still had many unknown letters. Why waste these spots when you already know the information and can use those spots to make more guesses about other letters that you do not know? I helped him “turn the board” and try a different approach to the game. In the example below, we only got the correct word “foyer” by using all of our slots in the fifth guess testing other letters.

This example is how great leaders and managers can “turn the board” for someone. They challenge us to rethink our own set of rules of how we think and act. They challenge us to rethink aspects of our work or career that we took for granted. They point out how we can improve even when it hurts to think that we need to improve.

When you “turn the board,” you empower someone. You unleash their greater potential with greater possibilities for them. You make them feel like they can do it all. That is important because you know

someone is a great leader — not when you see it — but when you *feel* it.

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