

Why CLOs — and Their Teams — Should Bring Their Whole Selves to Work

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Joanne Caruso

EVP, Chief Legal and Administrative Officer

Jacobs

Reflecting on her early career at a law firm, Joanne Caruso wishes she could have been more authentic and vulnerable. Most women, however, left their personal lives at home and would rarely talk about their families. Executives now realize the best leaders are ones who “can actually be themselves and be vulnerable at times,” notes Joanne, currently EVP and chief legal and administrative officer at Jacobs, one of the world’s largest engineering and consulting groups.

Encouraging employees to bring their whole selves to work is not only essential for companies when promoting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs, but is also fundamental to ensuring the success and growth of the business. Until recently, diversity was the main goal and inclusion was an afterthought at most organizations.

Inclusion — where everyone feels they belong and can thrive — drives innovation and creativity, which is paramount for all organizations today and must be at the forefront of a leader’s mind. To foster this ethos, Jacobs instituted a program for all leaders that focuses on Inspiration, Inclusion, and Innovation, and every Jacobs executive was encouraged to sponsor a DEI network.

Joanne requested to be the executive sponsor for Prism, the employee network for LGBTQI+ and allies. It was an easy decision, as her entire life she has been an ally to her friends who identify with that group. She saw the struggles they faced, and as a lawyer, she resolved to fight for justice and equality. Leading the network has been “one of the best things [I’ve done] in my entire professional career,” she beams.



Jacobs employees at a Pride parade. In 2019, Jacobs was named one of Best Places to Work for LGTBQ Equality by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation. *(Photo courtesy of Jacobs)*

Prism goes beyond advocating for inclusion and career advancement in the workplace. It also focuses on the safety of other employees who travel to or work in countries that aren't LGBTQI+ friendly. Occasionally, some laws in high-risk nations don't protect members of this community (and even punish them for public displays of affection). So, Prism and Jacobs provide resources for employees to help them navigate the laws and provide guides that have information on safe LGBTQI+ travel.

One such resource is an interactive global risk tool that provides country specific information and, in conjunction with their Global Security and Resilience team, includes LGBTI+ risk and safety information in the travel planning systems for people who travel for work or get posted in different countries. It was another easy decision: Fighting for the safety of her colleagues is a "paramount thing that all lawyers [should] believe in."

Joanne joined Jacobs in 2012 as vice president of global litigation. After two years, Joanne was nominated by her general counsel to attend the 2014 ACC Executive Leadership Institute: A master class for the next generation of general counsel, where she was exposed to and worked side-by-side in workshop style with world-class executive leaders from a variety of industries, deepening her understanding of what the general counsel does.

In her litigation role, she had the opportunity to work with top leaders at Jacobs, including CEO Steven Demetriou. Although Joanne had no HR experience, Demetriou took a chance on her and enlisted her as the SVP of Global Human Resources.

After Jacobs' merger with CH2M in 2017, he created the chief administrative officer role and a year later the chief legal and administrative officer (CLAO) role. He then tapped Joanne for these key promotions, expanding her responsibilities to include oversight of several other key business functions for Jacobs, including legal and compliance, sustainability, enterprise risk management, global security, and other departments.

As CLAO, Joanne is now a "leader of leaders," in that many of the top leaders of the organization report to her. But the working structure is more consensual than hierarchical, as the goal is to "work together and bring the best that we all can bring together," she notes.

ACC's 2021 Executive Leadership Institute: A Master Class on the Next Generation of General Counsel

Her collaborative mentality and relentless emphasis on business success and growing herself as a leader has helped Joanne dispel the traditional lawyer myths at Jacobs. She admits that overly risk-averse lawyers are often seen as "blockers," standing in the way of developing new ideas or finding innovative solutions to real business challenges. That's why in-house counsel must truly partner with the business. Being a CLO means "not only being able to talk about the risks and what the law is, but how we can work with the business to [find solutions]," Joanne explains.

For example, after the executive team realized that the pandemic would last longer than a few weeks, they assembled two task forces: the return-to-workplace group and future-of-work group. Joanne became the executive sponsor of both groups. While there were legal concerns, the effort's scope was broader.

With the primary focus of keeping employees safe, the return to workplace group quickly prepared a playbook to guide leaders around the world as they determined whether offices could be reopened,

when and at what capacity, and if so, the safety and other procedures that need to be followed. A data guidance tool was developed that had real-time information for each office location on virus rates, laws, and office readiness that continues to be used to help decision makers.

The pandemic accelerated the work that was already being done in Jacobs on what the future of work will look like. That team's mission is to rethink, reorganize and redefine how Jacobs technologies, tools, work processes, and physical space will embed flexibility for the workforce, elevate collaboration, support the capabilities to deliver value to clients, and improve global operational readiness.

Leading these teams, together with her empathic leadership style focusing on people, helps Joanne ensure that Jacobs employees can return to work safely — and authentically, as they have a sense of inclusion knowing that they can always bring their full self to work.

Getting to know… Joanne Caruso

Have you picked up any new hobbies over the past year?

No new hobbies — although I found time to spend on prior neglected hobbies. But I did get involved and participate in an intergenerational virtual discussion group with women across the country, did some online counseling on essay writing for college applications, and participated in letter-writing campaigns to encourage voting in the 2020 election.

What advice do you have for in-house counsel who are starting their careers?

Learn as much as you can about the business so you can be a true partner to your business clients. Be open to new opportunities and challenges and always be learning.

What is one takeaway from ACC's ELI that you continue to use in your day-to-day job?

That you need to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. Every day will bring new, different, and unexpected issues and challenges, and although you may not know the answers to everything, if you have the right team in place, and have developed the relationships with those in the business and with outside advisors, you can be the trusted advisor and leader who is needed and continue to thrive and grow.

Learn more about the ACC CLO Club, a global network for the highest-ranking legal officer.

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