

More Tips for Women New to In-house Law

Career Development



In honor of International Women's Day on March 8, it's time to update my 2019 article on advice for women new to corporate law. Of course, just as before, much of this advice applies to in-house counsel of all genders.

1. Develop your work style

You may not develop your work style right away, but you can consciously lay the foundation from the earliest days of your in-house career. Be patient and pay attention to yourself as you work.

Do you have a high-risk tolerance, a low risk tolerance, or are you somewhere in the middle? How do you like to collaborate with your internal clients? For example, do you enjoy being more hands-on or more removed from the nitty gritty business details? Do you want to be part of strategic discussions? If so, you can cultivate a style that makes you a valuable and trusted resource to the C-suite.

Of course, you need to align with your company's approach, including its risk tolerance, but you can still cultivate and exhibit your own style within that overall structure.

2. Be collaborative with the business

Unless you work in a unique company, collaboration with your business counterparts is a must. By partnering with your internal clients, you become better at your job and maximize your value to your organization.

Yes, as in-house counsel, we must be firm with the business at times. For example, we must always stand in the way of any illegal or unethical behavior. Additionally, we must strongly advise against decisions that bring undue risk to the company (like agreeing to unlimited liability in a contract

negotiation).

In the moments we need to be firm with our clients, explaining why often helps. Most of our clients will understand that we are not blocking business to be difficult, rather we are doing our jobs to protect the organization. Clients also appreciate our ability to explain to them that the decision they're contemplating could hurt their reputation in the company.

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However, in my career, I have found it necessary to be firm with the business a minority of the time. I have most often found success working cooperatively with my internal clients, which is a blessing as that very much agrees with my style. I enjoy learning from my colleagues and working with them to accurately capture their business intent and assist them, from a legal perspective, in executing those goals.

3. Learn as much as you can about as much as you can

In my last article for women new to in-house work, I advised you to learn the business as best you can, but the better advice is to learn as much as you can about as much as you can. Be a sponge. Absorb everything from everyone.

Every person you interact with at your company, regardless of title, has potential to impart helpful knowledge, and practically every department in your organization can share useful information for your in-house role. Your business colleagues can explain how a product works or your company's technology infrastructure. Perhaps they can impart historical information about the company. Additionally, you and your legal colleagues can update each other on the latest legal advancements.

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The foregoing are just some examples of the multitude of information you can learn from those around you. To be the best in-house counsel you can be, draw on what you already know in your life thus far, but continue to learn from those around you.

Additionally, keep up with current events and legal trends. Mergers or acquisitions of your organization's customers could affect your business. Court decisions and changes to privacy laws could affect your organization. The list is never ending. You also look informed when a client brings up a current news item if you can speak about it meaningfully, or at least with awareness.

Finally, try to find ways to learn in more formal ways. I'm thankful my career has given me the opportunity to earn a project management certificate, participate in a leadership seminar, attend numerous continuing legal education courses, and more. Say yes to those opportunities when they come your way because they can have a profound impact on your legal practice.

4. Make reasonable requests without guilt or apology

Your author must be honest and admit that she struggles with this one, so I'm writing for myself as

much as anyone else when I advise you not to apologize for being you.

Yes, you need to work hard. Yes, you need to be professional. Yes, your requests should be reasonable. If all of those things are true, don't apologize or feel guilty for making reasonable requests of your employer, and don't apologize for being you.

For example, I have a history of struggling with taking time off. I often felt bad asking for days off, or I felt guilty leaving the team to do all of the work while I was out. I've learned over time that I am not doing anyone any favors by constantly working. Additionally, I often have to remind myself that I deserve time to recharge, and I do not need to apologize for being human.

> Don't apologize for who you are.

The team will cover me, and I will cover them when they are out. It's all truly okay.

Further, don't apologize for who you are. For example, I like to joke, so I sometimes surprise people at work (if they don't know me well yet) by making (appropriate) jokes. I've never apologized for this. I am who I am and injecting humor, professionally, into work often puts my colleagues more at ease and relieves stress for all of us.

If you have a personality quirk, use it to your advantage and don't apologize for who you are. We are not robots and the personality we can bring to our roles as in-house counsel can make us more valuable than other attorneys.

5. Ask for what you deserve

Similar to making reasonable requests, ask for what you deserve. Whether it's more responsibility, pay raises, or a promotion, go for it!

This is another one I struggle with, even as an experienced lawyer. I'm sure some of our male counterparts struggle with this as well, but it seems women are especially challenged in this area. Perhaps it is because women are taught to be agreeable in some circumstances, therefore, it often feels unnatural or unreasonable to us to ask for advancement, but it is reasonable and acceptable. If you're working hard and doing a great job, you have every right to speak up and ask for more.

If you struggle with asking for what you deserve, do whatever you need to do to build yourself up before talking to your boss(es), like:

- Use music that inspires you. In my first in-house role, I rocked out to songs like Sara Bareilles' "Brave" on my way to talk to my boss about a promotion.
- Make use of your support system to give you a pep talk.

- Read something motivating.
- Exercise.
- Engage in a hobby.
- Paint.
- Write.
- Lean on your faith.

Remind yourself that the worst outcome is that you're told no, and the best outcome is you get everything you've earned and more. That sure seems worth the ask, and you may not get anything if you don't ask. Your boss is working with a budget, and she may not allocate as much budget to you if she thinks you're happy where you are.

Find whatever ways work for you to talk yourself into it and, over time, it will get easier and feel more natural to ask for what you deserve.

6. Take care of yourself

In my previous article, I advised you to take time for loved ones and to de-stress. This advice is so important that I've broadened it to strongly encourage you to take care of yourself. This is another one your humble author learned the hard way, so learn from my mistakes and take care.

Do your job well, but allow time for your spirituality, family (including pets, of course), friends, exercise, healthy eating, passions, and hobbies.

I once heard a motivational speaker point out that, if your family's life depended on it, you would probably find time to work out. It's so easy to proclaim that we don't have time to incorporate movement into our lives, but we make time for what matters to us. Make time for yourself. You will be a happier, thus a better and more productive employee for your company and your internal clients.

7. Remain confident and humble

You earned your job for a reason, so be confident. If you're working hard, continually learning, and honing your craft, you're rocking it! Own your role, do your best every day, and be proud of yourself.

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Of course, remain humble. We all know attorneys who think they're better than other human beings simply because they're lawyers. No need for that, especially because it may discourage collaboration. It is possible to be confident and humble, and that combination makes you a great person to work with.

In closing, congratulations on your in-house role! I'm the happiest I've ever been in my current job, so hang in there if you like corporate law because I promise it will pay off.

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In her role as senior legal counsel with Vendavo, Inc., Colombo works cross-functionally with the relevant business teams and stakeholders, providing legal advice on a broad range of topics and guiding the business on legal compliance with a particular focus on drafting, managing, and

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