

Career Path: What Makes You Really Stand Out

Career Development



How should we think about the extraordinary circumstances we in-house counsel find ourselves in, what are our personal convictions worth, and what is it that makes us unique?

This continues our exploration of lessons to be learned from judging and being judged (Career Path: What I Learned from Judging and Being Judged), including giving and receiving feedback more generally. Last week we discussed why hard work alone is no indicator of performance, and to whom you should compare yourself to achieve happiness and career success. (See Career Path: Hard Work Doesn't Make You a Hero.)

What extraordinary circumstances say about us

So first, a hard truth: Just being in difficult times doesn't make you special. Although you may have been the person leading your company's COVID-19 response, or EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) implementation, guess what? Every company was facing the same extraordinary times.

But let's say your extraordinary circumstance is less common: a hostile takeover attempt or major acquisition, a bet-the-company litigation, or a serious regulatory inquiry. This type of event never happens to many companies, or perhaps once in a few decades. So, it is genuinely extraordinary to you and your company. But it is not extraordinary for all in-house counsel. Right now, lots of companies are facing each of these issues.

I am sure your work was outstanding under the circumstances. But don't expect me to grade you higher *just because you responded to a crisis*. Remember, your comparison group is everyone else who was responding to the same or similar crises, not all the people on the sidelines.

Now the good news. A crisis presents excellent opportunities for you to stand out, even among all the people dealing with similar crises. How many contingencies did you manage to adequately plan for? How quickly did you identify the issue? How well did you convince skeptical colleagues that the company needed to act? And, ultimately, how well did you navigate your company through the shoals and to safer waters?

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In sum, extraordinary circumstances of themselves say little about you. Even what may be unique in your company's history is mundane across the in-house landscape. What makes you shine is how you respond to your circumstances.

What caring deeply about an issue is worth

The best in-house counsel are great people. They have broad interests and passionate convictions. They want to do more than help their companies succeed; they want to help their companies make the world a better place. And there are rich opportunities in today's environment for us to do so. There are pressing climate change concerns, an extensive list of UN Sustainable Development Goals, and newfound commitments to diversity and inclusion.

I am delighted that you care deeply about these issues. I am tickled pink that you are on your company's diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) committee. But, unless you turn your caring into concrete action, however, it's not worth much to me. Remember our discussion earlier about the difference between effort and impact? The environmental, social, and governance (ESG) space is filled with a great deal of noise and little concrete results.

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Don't misunderstand me. Passion is the engine that drives progress. Without your conviction and that of others like you, we are lost. But your passion is the cover charge to this particular event. It gets you in the door. The people who stand out are the ones who focus their passion and demonstrate persistence in the face of resistance. It's hard enough to drive results without prioritizing attention and effort. So, pick a topic and stay with it until you see positive results. Then stick with it some more.

What makes us unique

Now that I've poured cold water on what your living through hard times and your passion tell us about your performance, let me spend a moment talking about the mundane challenges all in-house counsel face. We spend most of our time developing efficient contracting systems, implementing compliance programs, and training our non-lawyer colleagues. Of course we know that the best lawyers partner with the business in achieving business goals in a sustainable way.

If these challenges and opportunities are near universal, what makes us stand out? One good place to look is our **impact on those around us**. Do you consistently help others thrive? Are people happier after spending time with you? Will people say about you, “She helps make the world a better place”? When you find yourself answering yes to these questions, you are probably making your best contribution. An inspiring leader has an impact far greater than any amount of individual work can hope to accomplish.

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I’ve now shared with you the key lessons I learned from judging and being judged, and in giving and receiving feedback. I know some of the messages can seem a bit hard. But I hope by now you trust me enough to consider the truth of the matter in each case.

I also hope you trust yourselves enough to take only those lessons that apply to you and not take me so seriously on the lessons that don’t. After all, you aren’t like anyone else and that’s one more thing that makes you special.

Be well.

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Bellerjeau shares thoughts on how to live a good life at Klugne. You can also follow him on LinkedIn.