

Commanding the Room: An Executive Presence Playbook for In-house Counsel

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Executive presence is often described as intangible — something you either “have” or don’t. But for in-house counsel, presence is less about charisma and more about repeatable behaviors: how you show up in moments of pressure, how you communicate risk, how you read stakeholders, and how you sustain yourself in a demanding role.

That was the central theme of “Commanding the Room: Leadership & Executive Presence for In-House Counsel,” a Dec. 9, 2025, webcast hosted by ACC’s Women In The House Network. Drawing

on experiences from crisis management, global legal leadership, startups, and employment law, the panelists offered practical guidance that in-house lawyers can apply immediately.

The panel featured Christine Binotti, Managing Counsel - Employment Law at Health Care Service Corporation; Liz Logie, Deputy General Counsel at The RealReal, Inc.; Brenna Woodley, Special Counsel at Kelley Drye & Warren LLP; and Rima Shouli, Head of Legal & Corporate Secretary at Reckitt Benckiser, in conversation moderated by Jan Anne Dubin, MBA, CEO and Founder of Jan Anne Dubin Consulting.

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As Dubin noted, executive presence is not something lawyers turn on only in moments of crisis. “Presence becomes leadership when it’s consistent and applied in an evenhanded manner,” she said. “When in-house counsel practice the behaviors that anchor them — preparation, self-awareness, and strategic communication — they build trust long before they walk into a high-stakes room.”

That idea — that executive presence is built *before* pressure hits — runs throughout this playbook. Below are the most actionable lessons, organized as a playbook for in-house counsel.

Executive presence starts with showing up — especially when it’s uncomfortable

For Shouli, executive presence is most visible in moments of crisis. She shared a story from earlier in her career involving a workplace fatality at a manufacturing site, when no C-suite leaders could arrive quickly.

Rather than manage the situation remotely, she boarded the next flight and went to the site herself.

“It was important to show the folks on the ground that there was leadership presence — that we weren’t going to shy away from it,” she explained, noting the chaos of media, police, and grieving family members.

Presence, in this context, wasn’t about having all the answers. It was about visibility, empathy, and control — being “that steady voice in the room when things are going crazy.”

Takeaway: In-house counsel build credibility by being physically and psychologically present in hard moments. When legal shows up, stakeholders feel anchored.

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Translate law into business — and stop reciting statutes

Several panelists emphasized that executive presence falters when lawyers default to legal lectures instead of decision-oriented guidance.

Shouli put it plainly: “Stop reciting the law. Summarize in very simple terms, and start proposing solutions beyond the law. You’re a business partner.”

This theme echoed throughout the discussion. Logie described her role as advising on risk, not blocking innovation. “You never want to be the party of no,” she said. “My role is to advise on risk and then allow the business to make a good decision.”

Binotti reinforced that in-house lawyers must understand — and accept — the limits of their role. “Our role is to advise, but we’re not necessarily making the calls,” she said, warning against taking it personally when advice isn’t followed.

Takeaway: Executive presence grows when legal advice is framed as options, trade-offs, and pathways forward, not definitive pronouncements.

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Read the room — and speak up without waiting for permission

Woodley offered an outside-counsel perspective on what distinguishes effective in-house leaders in sensitive situations.

First, she said, strong in-house counsel are outwardly focused in high stakes moments. They can read the room and balance the needs of various stakeholders, including company executives, human resources partners, business leaders, and the workforce. They stay grounded in these moments because they have invested in themselves: “You take care of yourself so when you reach that moment and need to be outwardly focused, you’re able to do that,” she shared.

Second, they speak up. Women, she noted, often “undersell, ... or wait for permission to speak.” Effective leaders don’t. “They know they’re in that room for a reason,” and they hold onto that even in difficult moments.

Woodley also cautioned against equating fast advice with strategic leadership. In high-pressure situations, “a strategic response is better than a fast one,” and confident in-house counsel pause to evaluate information to provide strong strategic advice.

Takeaway: Presence requires both situational awareness and the confidence to contribute early and thoughtfully.

Don’t become “the department of no” — learn the language of “yes, and”

Binotti highlighted creativity as a core element of executive presence, particularly in employment law, where there is often no playbook.

Reflecting on the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, she described partnering across functions to keep employees safe while maintaining operations. “We had to think outside the box to come up with a creative solution and game plan,” she said.

That mindset carries into everyday interactions. Through an improv-based wellness program she helped design for ACC Chicago, Binotti adopted the improv principle of “yes, and.”

“Instead of saying no, I say, ‘yes, and we need to do this too,’” she explained.

Takeaway: Executive presence is collaborative. “Yes, and” language keeps legal aligned with business momentum while still managing risk.

Build stamina — wellness is performance infrastructure, not a perk

One of the webcast’s most distinctive contributions was its reframing of wellness as a leadership skill, not a personal indulgence.

Binotti shared several unconventional wellness initiatives she developed through ACC Chicago, all tied to professional responsibility and resilience:

- A **guided mindfulness walk at Lincoln Park Zoo**, demonstrating that mindfulness can be integrated into daily life, not confined to meditation rooms.
- An **improv-for-lawyers program**, connecting presence, communication, and stress reduction.
- A **music-and-mindfulness session** using tongue drums to show how sound can regulate stress and focus, individually and in teams.

These practices support what Binotti described earlier as an essential skill for in-house counsel: learning to let go. Taking business decisions personally, she warned, “will just eat you up.”

Dubin underscored why wellness is not ancillary to leadership, but central to it. Citing research on stress and health, she noted that “the impact of stress on our bodies is the equivalent of smoking 17 cigarettes a day.”

For in-house counsel operating in constant ambiguity, that statistic reframes stress from a personal burden to an organizational risk. Chronic, unmanaged stress erodes judgment, patience, and presence — the very qualities executives rely on from their legal leaders in moments that matter most.

Takeaway: Sustainable executive presence depends on resilience. Lawyers who invest in wellness are better able to stay calm, credible, and clear under pressure.

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Credibility is built, not inherited

In response to a question about actionable practices for new in-house counsel, Shouli shared three lessons from her first role at Magna International, where she was the first female lawyer at the Canadian headquarters.

First, she said, don't shy away from what scares you. "I was terrified, but I didn't run away. I kept going back."

Second, learn the business deeply. "You can't properly advise if you don't understand the business," she said, describing how she took internal courses and visited plants to learn how products were made.

Third, build both internal allies and an external peer network. Cross-functional relationships and professional associations help lawyers become "more well-rounded" and less isolated.

Takeaway: Executive presence is earned through curiosity, persistence, and relationships — not titles.

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Listen, prepare, and own your space

The webcast closed with rapid-fire advice that reinforces the playbook:

- Listen for understanding, and stop apologizing, Binotti shared.
- Prepare talking points, and dress in a way that makes you feel comfortable and empowered for high-stakes moments, Woodley encouraged.
- Acknowledge imposter syndrome — and speak anyway, Logie said.

Together, these insights point to a clear conclusion: Executive presence is not about dominance or perfection. It is about clarity, composure, credibility, and care — for the business and for yourself.

For in-house counsel navigating constant ambiguity and pressure, that may be the most practical leadership lesson of all.

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