



Your Launch Pad: From Lawyer to Leader — How In-house Counsel Become Strategic Business Partners

Career Development

Interviews and Profiles



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Going in-house is a mindset shift more profound than many attorneys expect.

In private practice, you're trained to identify issues, provide legal analysis, and advise on risk. Still, even in the most collaborative client relationships, there's distance. Because only the client has the full business context ... and only the client absorbs the business outcome of the legal advice you've given.

Working in-house, that distance disappears.

You're no longer advising the business; you're part of it. You share in the wins, the misses, and the consequences of the decisions you help shape. You support revenue pipelines, hiring timelines, customer relationships, and execution speed.

Your role as in-house counsel is to protect the business *and* help it perform.

That changes what's required of you.

Businesses often must move through risk in real time. Legal advice that is technically correct but operationally impractical falls flat, slowing momentum and keeping you tactical.

To operate as a true strategic partner, here are the practices that make the difference:

1. Use your legal training to solve business problems

Legal training sharpens your thinking. Use it as the tool that supports strong business outcomes, not the work product itself.

Strategic in-house counsel don't stop at the law. They ask questions to learn the nuanced "why" behind the request, knowing that the legal question itself is rarely the core issue.

Applying your legal training to the business problem allows you to own the legal answer *and* fully support the business outcome.

2. Be the desk of "how," not the desk of "no"

A reflexive "no" may reduce risk, but it creates friction, slows momentum, and often sends the business looking for workarounds without you.

Strategic counsel approach decisions on a spectrum, not in absolutes.

Instead of defaulting to "no," walk stakeholders through options: what's low risk, moderate, or high, and where each choice leads.

Understand the opportunity: the upside, the objective, the criticality, and the opportunity cost for not going forward.

From there, co-design a path that balances legal protection with business impact. Sometimes that means structuring around risk. Sometimes it means consciously accepting it with eyes wide open.

Not: "We can't do that."

But: "Here are the options, the risk profile of each, and my recommendation on how we could do this responsibly."

A true partner helps the business take the *right* risks to move forward.



Mentor Match Program

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3. Understand the cost of delay

From an operating seat, one business lesson becomes clear: delay is not neutral.

Every extra day to close a deal or approve a path forward has a cost: lost revenue, missed opportunities, or operational drag. The most effective strategic counsel balance thoughtfulness with decisiveness and bring the same discipline to legal responsiveness that the business expects elsewhere. They set clear expectations for turnaround times and build systems that allow the business to move at pace. This signals that you understand urgency and are committed to enabling progress.

4. Learn the business and speak its language

You can't advise strategically without understanding how the business works.

Know how your company makes money. Learn the sales cycle, customer expectations, operational constraints, and the metrics leadership uses to inform decisions. Shadow leaders and teams to live their day-to-day realities.

Then, translate legal risk into business impact:

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- What's at stake financially?
 - How likely is the risk to materialize?
 - What's the impact on operations, clients, or reputation?
 - What are practical options to mitigate the risk? What do they cost?

When you understand the business, you can frame risk in more meaningful, credible, and relevant terms.

5. Lead from your seat

Strategic legal leadership isn't just about being present in the meeting room; it's about shaping what happens in it.

That kind of influence is only built over time.

You earn it by understanding your stakeholders' goals and pressures, engaging with them early and with empathy.

When that foundation of trust is in place, you can ask better questions, challenge assumptions, and offer perspectives beyond the law. You become a lawyer *and* a leader in the business.

Moving in-house asks more of you.

Those who rise into strategic partners lean into that responsibility. They stay close to the business, communicate in practical terms, and help teams and decisions move forward. Showing up this way consistently builds trust, along with your influence and reputation as someone the business depends on.



Lee Rone, VP of Legal & General Counsel,

[IntelAgree](#)

As the business grows, so do you.

Member Spotlight: Lee Rone

Q: What led you to join ACC Mentor Match, and what did you hope to gain?

Lee Rone: I wanted to give back to the in-house community by helping younger and mid-career lawyers.

Q: What is one insight from your conversations that changed how you think or act?

Rone: One mentee showed me a detailed career plan she had drafted (five pages!) and I was impressed with the thought and detail. It motivated me to do the same thing – using her template.

Q: How has this mentoring relationship shaped how you approach your role or career decisions?

Rone: The mentoring relationship has helped me understand both things I did “right” early and mid-career as well as things I could have done better. Pushed me to focus more on work life balance, how to measure my success myself, and setting realistic goals for the last stage of my career. It also gave me motivation to start preparing now for life after in-house legal career – maybe adjust professor?

Q: What did you learn from the other person that surprised you?

Rone: How keenly focused my mentees were with planning for job changes in advance.

Q: What advice would you give to future mentors?

Rone: Be open to sharing what you did right and wrong and lessons you learned. Talking about what went right is not bragging. Talking about what went wrong is not admitting failure. In fact, the better you get at “failing fast” and “failing upwards” the better your career potential.

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[Jessica DeBianchi Rivera](#)



Founder & Principal

Perivita Partners, LLC

Jessica DeBianchi Rivera is the founder of Perivita Partners®, a coaching firm for lawyers and law firms looking to close the gap between practicing law and practicing leadership. She is also the General Counsel and Chief of Staff at Foundant Technologies, a growing company on a mission to amplify giving and social good through its purpose-built technology. She earned her bachelors, MBA, and JD from the University of Florida, and is a Board Certified executive coach. Rivera is a former ACC South Florida President, and an active member of the ACC community.

