

Leverage 5 Traits to Strengthen Your Department

Law Department Management

Career Development



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Corporate legal functions face high expectations, which seem to become higher by the day. It is not enough to simply offer top-notch advice and work long hours. Success as an in-house counsel requires much more. Yes, you are a legal counselor. But you must also become an effective business partner to the clients you serve. And what is an effective business partner? We'll touch on the key traits of a lawyer as business partner in this article.

Just a little more context to set the stage for our discussion. Doing more with less has always been a challenge for legal departments and the demands on GCs to improve service and reduce costs is increasing, significantly. A joint EY Law and Harvard Law School Center on the Legal Profession study found that 88 percent of GCs plan to reduce the overall cost of their departments over the next three years, driven mainly by pressure from CEOs and board members. Despite these demands, GCs expect their workloads to increase by 25 percent over the next three years, but predict only a 3 percent increase in new hires.



A modern GC is a crucial source of organizational leadership. Artwork by Alphavector / *Shutterstock.com*

Just doling out legal advice will no longer work. In-house counsel must demonstrate the ability to deliver tangible business value. This can only be accomplished by becoming more service-oriented. Achieving a service-oriented mindset involves a rewrite of the typical in-house job description as well as developing skills and traits more in line with those of successful managers. We focus below on the five key skills and traits necessary to become an effective business partner.

1. Offer stellar customer service.

Great customer service forms the core of an effective business partner. Unfortunately, it is a trait that even some of the most brilliant legal minds lack. Law schools offer little in the way of training, focusing more on a cold, unforgiving logical analysis. The “people” element of solving issues is critical in the corporate context. Securing a client’s trust and developing a productive relationship lays the groundwork for strong interpersonal relationships and, hence, effective legal counseling in the in-house environment.

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A key starting point is how a lawyer perceives themselves within the hierarchy of the corporation. If the lawyer holds the view that their sole function is understanding risk and offering solutions to

reduce or overcome the same, then failure is on the horizon. A successful in-house lawyer solves the “people” challenge by sublimating “pride of function” in favor of a true teamwork mentality that involves an understanding of the business, the role of their colleagues and the key drivers of their — and not the lawyer’s — success.

2. Understand the business and client's requirements.

Effective legal counsel rely strongly on a deep understanding of the organization’s business, the role of the client in the success of the business, and the key drivers the client has at their disposal to achieve that success. By consistently demonstrating the skills we described in this article, asking informed questions, and showing genuine interest in the client as a colleague and individual will enable the in-house lawyer to develop this understanding. Mastering these details will showcase the lawyer as a subject matter expert in the business and the client’s day-to-day role, better engendering trust and productive collaboration.

3. Listen for understanding.

Effective in-house counsel listen well when communicating with the clients to best understand what the client needs and wants. Here, again, it is vital for the in-house lawyer to fully comprehend their place in the corporate hierarchy. Clients drive the business towards success. The legal team performs a support role, albeit one that is often critical to that success. Clients want to be guided through a pressing business issue while being respected and heard.

There is an important, albeit subtle, distinction regarding why lawyers must focus on achieving “'understanding” over “good communication.” Effective communication, in which the lawyer focuses on understanding, is key to being a good lawyer and business partner in an in-house environment. Don’t make the mistake of treating conversations as an information dump. Your client didn’t sign up for an opening statement with a one-person audience.



Don't just listen to reply — listen to understand! Artwork by Alphavector / *Shutterstock.com*

The effective in-house lawyer knows the corporate stakeholders they talk to are not interested in soliloquies and flowery oratory. A good rule of thumb is that if you find yourself speaking more than 10 percent of the time, you are speaking too much!

The old aphorism couldn't be more accurate: To be a great communicator, a lawyer must be an effective listener. Lawyers can stand out as constructive business partners by listening actively. What is this client actually saying? How does it fit in with the lawyer's understanding of the business and the specific goals of that client and their team? Has the client shared all the information the in-house lawyer needs to address their pain points? Can they provide any other important facts, background information or additional context? Asking probing questions around these issues can help in-house attorneys secure the information they need to provide helpful advice.

4. Be accessible and approachable.

All in-house counsel have busy and ever-evolving schedules — just like their clients. Zoom meetings, presentations, conferences, and travel have become regular fixtures on our calendars. The average person perceives lawyers as aloof, condescending, sometimes obstacles to progress and intimidating. There may be some truth to these perceptions, but mostly, we are just busy, and with a hectic work life comes a natural desire to withdraw inward. That, of course, is exactly the opposite of what you should be doing. It is critical to a lawyer's success to be perceived as open and accessible. That can only happen if you actually are!

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To the client, their issues are the most critical. But as a lawyer, you are well positioned to prioritize issues, but only if you understand the business and the needs of all your clients. All inquiries have to be triaged — no exceptions. But almost all clients will understand prioritization if the lawyer takes the time to explain why there will be a delay and make a binding commitment to deliver what the client needs at some agreed future date. Your clients need to trust you to be open, communicative, and forthright. Your focus on interpersonal relationships by being empathetic, positive, and proactive will pay handsome dividends through the course of your career. When colleagues and superiors start light-hearted conversations and ask questions unrelated to the law, the in-house lawyer will know they have achieved approachability.

5. Be responsive.

Clients are under pressure to achieve results and often need immediate help with attendant legal issues. In-house lawyers must be responsive to a client's inquiries. and the best in-house lawyers set and adhere to reasonable turnaround times. Above all, they keep their commitments and don't let distractions get in the way of delivering superior services.

In the end, effective in-house legal counsel and customer service go hand in hand. Synthesizing these qualities will help in-house counsel make a positive impact in their company and reinforce the perception that in-house counsel can be trusted business partners at all levels.

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