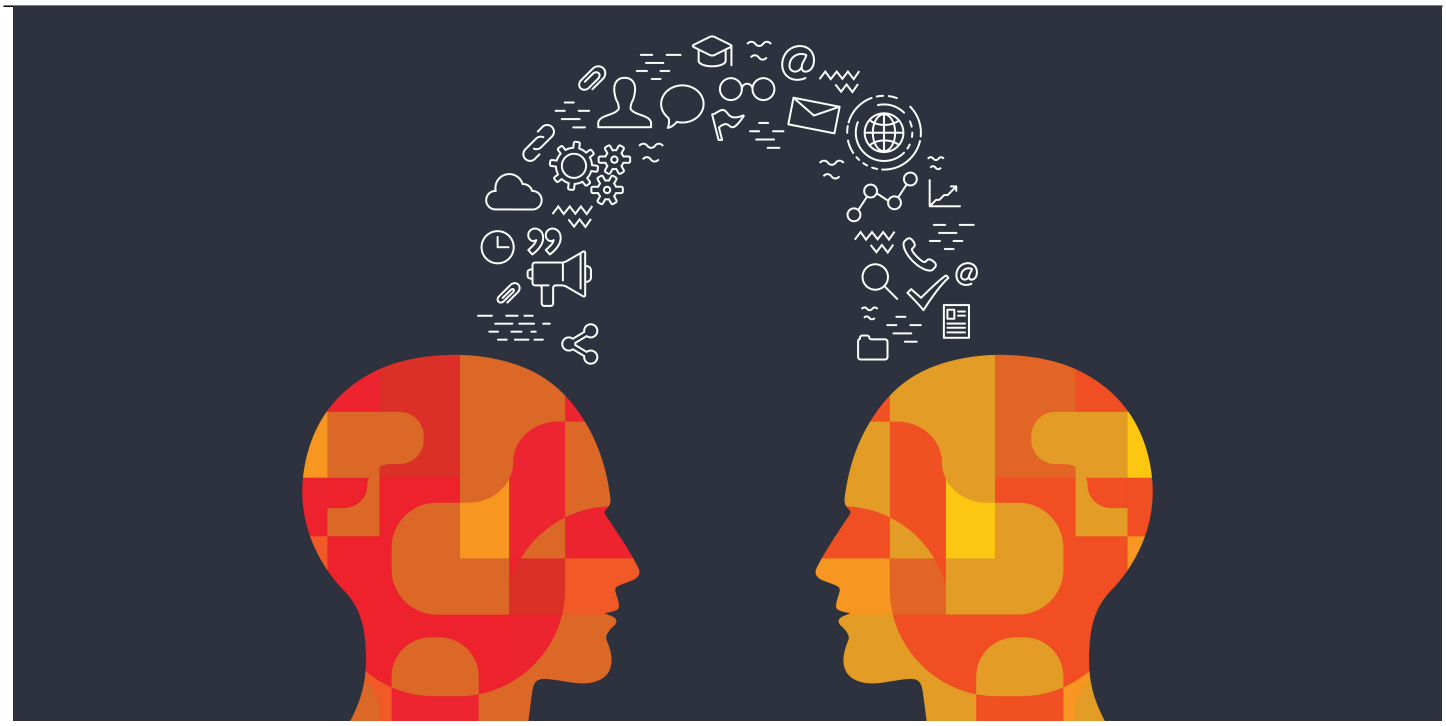


Career Path: The GC’s Biggest Weakness

Career Development



Banner artwork by magic pictures / *Shutterstock.com*

I wish I had figured this one out while I was still serving as general counsel.

Looking back, it seems so obvious to me. But it wasn't at the time. And that's why I can say with confidence this is a weakness many general counsel share.

I hope by raising this issue and discussing it openly, I encourage currently serving general counsel to help themselves become even stronger in their roles.

So now you're wondering, "What's the big issue, James?" It's this:

General counsel have no obvious mentors within their companies

General counsel are in lonely roles. There is no one inside the company who understands all the issues that the GC faces. And worse, the GC has little incentive to seek help from within.

The GC cannot discuss many senior management and board-related topics with other legal team members, even senior ones. Confidentiality forbids. And until a person has held the responsibility themselves, they simply don't feel the weight of it the same way.



Without a reliable and experienced mentor, GC's are mainly left to tackle most responsibilities on their own. Red Vector / *Shutterstock.com*

There is no one inside the company who understands all the issues that the GC faces.

Some senior executives can no doubt relate. The chief financial officer or head of human resources have similar responsibilities they bear alone. But just as we won't understand the scope of the CFO's role and the intricacies of their concerns, so they do not understand ours.

Our boss is probably in the best position to understand our challenges. But do we really want to air uncertainties, stress, and frustration to our boss? We do not. So, we keep those thoughts to ourselves.

Interestingly, although the reverse is not the case, our boss can get sympathy from us. Every CEO who has felt the urge to vent their frustration at the latest board outrage will find the GC to be most understanding.

Generic sympathy is nice, but not substantively helpful

We can and do have ways to find a sympathetic ear.

General counsel probably have friends, maybe even people who mentored us along the way, with whom we feel comfortable airing our frustrations. And periodically letting off steam can be helpful.

Such people can give us generic advice about generic situations. They can also give us advice about managing our emotions and our expectations. We should be grateful for every assistance we get.

But the relief is temporary, and anyway is a far cry from providing substantive aid. As in, “I’m facing a really tough decision. Let me tell you what I think and why I’m leaning this way. What are your impressions? What would you do if you were in my shoes?”



Venting your frustrations to others can be helpful in the moment, but a sympathetic ear will not lead to a solution. mentalmind / *Shutterstock.com*

The solution is to talk to someone who knows exactly what you’re feeling

> You want as a coach a general counsel who knows from first-hand experience exactly what it feels like to make the decisions you're making.

Now some of you may be thinking, “That’s why I go to ACC meetings. The CLO Club puts me next to other GCs for precisely this reason.”

I used to think that as well. Don’t misunderstand me. ACC and the CLO Club are great. But those interactions are fleeting and infrequent, and everyone you meet is just as frantically busy as you are. In a day or two, they go back to their job, you go back to yours, and that was that.

No, what you want is someone who has not only walked a mile in your shoes but has time to focus on

your issues. And you want them when you need them, and as much as you need them.

Yes, I'm referring to an executive coach. But not just any coach. You want as a coach a general counsel who knows from first-hand experience exactly what it feels like to make the decisions you're making.



As a GC, seek out a coach to assist with professional development and help with tough decision making. rii Motov / *Shutterstock.com*

Talking with someone who can provide substantive advice as well as emotional support is immensely powerful. Now instead of having to make critical decisions completely alone, you have a sounding board to help you work through the process.

It's obviously so helpful. Why don't more general counsel use GC coaches? Why didn't I do it?

I can think of three reasons. You may have others, in which case please leave a comment.

1. It never occurs to us to seek out such a coach;
2. We don't know they exist or where to find them; and

3. We’re embarrassed to ask for help.

For smart people, general counsel can be remarkably stubborn



Stubborn GC's often tend to strive for independence with their tasks rather than seeking help when necessary. Overearth / *Shutterstock.com*

Let’s face it. No one makes it to the general counsel’s office without healthy doses of independence, masochism, and competence.

You get used to doing things yourself (independence). Sometimes that means great effort and sacrifice because the situation demands it (masochism). And you wouldn’t keep advancing if you weren’t very good at it (competence).

Unfortunately, all three factors mean it rarely occurs to a general counsel that seeking tailored help is even an option.

Executive coaches who specialize in general counsel are rare

Executive coaches are plentiful. And you’ll even find some who focus on lawyers. Chances are, as general counsel you’ve recommended coaching more than once in connection with someone’s development.

But coaches who focus on helping general counsel are rare. And those that were themselves general counsel even more so.

In case you didn’t know it, ACC itself has a coaching resource for in-house counsel. See the Career Coaching page. Even if you’re looking on behalf of a team member, it’s good to know experienced legal coaches exist.

To conclude, there’s a final reason GCs might not seek out coaching even upon acknowledging it could be hugely beneficial to them.

In case you didn't know it, ACC itself has a coaching resource for in-house counsel.

General counsel don’t like to show weakness

Remember the independent, competent, but masochistic GC? There we go again. This reflects itself in our sometimes refusing to take simple steps to improve our lives.

I believe we can break out of this mindset. Ask yourself what you’d recommend to a colleague who wants to develop. Would you look down on them for taking advantage of the best resources on offer?

Of course not. If anything, you’d consider a person foolish for letting their pride or indifference hold back their career.

Don’t handicap your chance of being the best general counsel you can.

Be well.

Question, comment? Contact Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau.

Join ACC

Disclaimer: The information in any resource in this website should not be construed as legal advice or as a legal opinion on specific facts, and should not be considered representing the views of its authors, its authors’ employers, its sponsors, and/or ACC. These resources are not intended as a definitive statement on the subject addressed. Rather, they are intended to serve as a tool providing practical guidance and references for the busy in-house practitioner and other readers.

James Bellerjeau



Lecturer

University of Zurich

James Bellerjeau is a lecturer in the LLM program of the University of Zürich and for the Europa Institut of the University of Zürich.

Bellerjeau served for two decades as group general counsel for Mettler-Toledo International Inc., an S&P 500 company with its worldwide headquarters in Greifensee, Switzerland. He then led Mettler-Toledo's global Sustainability program for several years through June 2021.

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