

14 Ways to Prepare for Your First General Counsel Role

Career Development



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Cheat Sheet

- **Broaden your expertise**. Seek experience in various fields to understand all facets of your company.
- **Know the business**. Attend business meetings to understand the company's operations, goals, and revenue generation strategies.
- **Hone leadership skills**. Gain boardroom experience, earn the trust of business partners, and manage your team effectively.
- **Adopt an ownership attitude**. Be a brand ambassador, manage risk, maintain visibility

within your company, and be responsive.

For many in-house lawyers, the ultimate career goal is to become a general counsel or chief legal officer. Attorneys who report to their company's general counsel often remain vigilant in an ongoing search that their boss may be preparing for retirement, thus opening a path for someone else in the department to be considered for the coveted role.

Fortunately for these in-house lawyers, the recent focus on succession planning has led some companies to decide in advance how to fill future vacancies in senior leadership positions. If you find yourself the recipient of the welcome news that you are being groomed to succeed your general counsel, you may be wondering what you can do to prepare for the transition. Below are some tips and recommendations from successful GCs and CLOs that you may find helpful in your preparation.

1. Become a generalist.

Broad-based experience is key for most general counsel roles. To gain experience in new fields of law, seek out projects that will give you exposure to new arenas. Don't shy away from taking on things you haven't done before, and if there's a new field of law developing, offer to become your company's expert on it.

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Don't pass up opportunities because you don't have experience in the area. Keep expanding the type of work you are doing until you've touched every part of the company.

To be successful as a chief legal officer or general counsel, you must understand how your company operates and makes money. You may find it helpful to attend as many business meetings as possible, even if legal issues are not being discussed. When you attend these business meetings, you have an opportunity to learn business plans, goals, visions, and challenges.

2. Learn the business.

You also have an opportunity to gain in-depth knowledge about the businesses' products, services, and revenue generation. If you don't understand all the lingo used in the meetings, or don't know how to read the financial reports that are discussed, don't be afraid to ask questions. Educate yourself on the finance and the industry/company lingo.



Turn financial charts into narratives that tell your company's story. Artwork by Minerva Studio / *Shutterstock.com*

3. Gain boardroom experience.

This is the biggest gap for many new general counsel (though it's probably also the "easiest" part of the GC job to figure out). If you are reporting to a general counsel at a large company, consider asking for responsibility over a board committee, or two. If that's not possible, consider joining nonprofits' boards to gain some experience in a boardroom.

Senior managers want to view their chief legal officer as a business partner, not as a roadblock. Earning the trust of your peers is crucial to ensuring that they come to you with important matters, so make sure they know that you are aligned with their business goals. You may also find it helpful if everyone at the company has respect for you, and respect is often mutual, so be sure to be respectful to everyone at all levels within the organization.

4. Earn the trust of your business partners.

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Also, be comfortable admitting when you don’t know the answer to a question, but always offer to find out the answer. It’s better to be upfront about not knowing something than to guess at an answer and retract your response later. Once you develop a reputation for admitting when you don’t know something, you likely will have more credibility when you do provide responses to questions asked of you.

5. Become comfortable managing people.

If you are promoted internally, you may find that, overnight, your former peers will become your direct reports. Some of them may also be your friends, and they may have been hoping to receive the promotion that you earned instead of them, which may lead to some resentment. You will need to figure out a way to get comfortable managing your former peers/colleagues/friends, and that requires a lot of confidence.



Brace for waves as a new captain among former mates. Artwork by easmesBot / *Shutterstock.com*

Remind yourself that the company selected you for the role because it believed you are best suited for the job. While there's bound to be some awkwardness in this situation, sometimes it's best to confront it head on by creating a dialogue and allowing your employees a chance to air any grievances. These conversations can be a good chance to learn what your employees perceive as your weaknesses and their strengths, and perhaps that will help you decide how to delegate work. Also, accept that your relationship with your former peers will necessarily change once you become responsible for managing their work.

Surround yourself with people you trust to advise you on various areas of law. Once you are the head of a legal department, you won't have time to be in the weeds on all of your company's legal matters, so make sure you know which members of your team you can trust to make recommendations about which matters can be handled internally, which should be outsourced, and which are significant enough to be outsourced to a top-tier firm with top-tier billing rates.

6. Develop a network of resources.

Also, building a network of other in-house counsel will be invaluable when you need advice and referrals for outside counsel. When you are in a position to be able to help CLOs at other organizations, doing so is helpful because those you help will be inclined to return the favor when they are in a position to be able to help you.

7. Learn to accept risk.

For-profit companies are in business to make money. Risk is always required to make money. Most lawyers are trained to be risk averse, but remember that without risk there is often a limited upside potential.

The ACC Resource Library's Risk Tolerance Checklist is a good place to start.

Learn the risk-tolerance level of your CEO and other corporate executives and advise them accordingly. Also, learn to accept that sometimes your time is more valuable than the elimination of a small risk, so learn to prioritize your work so that you focus on matters that have a high probability and a high magnitude of risk.

When communicating with non-lawyers, you will be expected to get to the point quickly. Many attorneys started their legal careers as law firm associates, a role which often involves writing long memos with complicated legal analysis. Let go of your law firm associate mentality and focus instead on providing short answers to questions. Focus on writing one-sentence emails. One-word answers will likely be welcomed by many business managers.

8. Respond to questions with simple, concise answers.

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9. Avoid saying “no.”

To become a successful GC, it’s helpful to learn multiple ways to avoid saying “no” to a business partner with an idea or proposal. As long as the proposal is not manifestly illegal, it’s great to be able to steer the conversation towards the likely outcomes or possible legal consequences of the proposal, or towards a discussion of whether or not the business can absorb the risk.

Take advantage of every opportunity to make yourself visible to your business managers. Conduct trainings, use yourself as a speaker/participant in training videos, and make sure to spend time every week walking the hallways of your office. The more you are seen and heard by the business units, the more they will get used to seeing you and working with you.

10. Become highly visible within your organization.

Looking to learn more and roll your sleeves to dig into the issues with best-in-class instructors? Consider registering for the ACC Executive Leadership Institute, July 30 - Aug 2, 2024 in Chicago.



Demonstrate the art of leadership through presence and participation. Artwork by Qvasimodo art / *Shutterstock.com*

If you are able to provide input into the physical location of your office, request to sit amongst the leaders of the business units. It may also be helpful to join Employee Resource Groups to become more visible and learn more about how employees feel about the company.

It’s also a good idea to attend office social events, and to accept invitations for lunch, in order to increase your visibility within the organization. If your company has pivoted to a hybrid working environment, consider being physically present in the office more than most of the other employees.

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11. Adopt an “owner” mindset.

Become a brand ambassador for the company. Take responsibility for the success of your business overall, not just the success of your department. Pursue initiatives that will benefit the company even if they are outside your typical scope of responsibility. When you operate with an owner-mindset, that will be noticed by the CEO and other members of senior management, because they don’t see it

from everyone in the organization.

These employees are the backbone of the company. Of course, your relationships with the CEO and CFO are of utmost importance, but it's also important that you are in touch with the workers who are not in executive or managerial positions but whose crucial work keeps the company running. If these employees aren't happy, addressing their concerns may be more important for the company than many other matters on which the senior management team is focused.

12. Engage with the rank-and-file employees.

13. Learn how to manage and when to disregard a budget.

Lawyers are accustomed to excelling and succeeding, so your first instinct may be to "beat your budget" in your first year. But most seasoned GCs will tell you that there's no benefit to beating your budget, because nobody is going to thank you for beating your budget. Also, the following year's budget will be based on the current year's expenses, so if you beat your budget, you likely will find a smaller budget allocated to you the next fiscal year.

Ideally, you want to be right on the mark, and not under or over. However, when the company is facing a very significant legal issue, you may want to consider throwing your budget aside and doing what is best for the company. Some legal matters require a large team of outside counsel with high billing rates to be handled properly. When you're faced with these types of matters, consider whether it's better to go over your budget than risk a major loss in a bet-the-company litigation or other high-risk legal matter.

Some of the most successful CLOs make a point of responding to emails the same day they are received. That doesn't mean they provide a substantive response the same day, but they do acknowledge receipt of the message and manage expectations regarding a timeline for a substantive response. Of course, things will come up that may keep you from meeting these timelines, but good communication and an explanation of the reason for delays will go a long way towards managing

expectations.

14. Be responsive.

From legal advisor to legal leader

The transition to your first role as general counsel or chief legal officer can be a very exciting time, but also very nerve racking. It's a big opportunity and a big job that carries high expectations. It also requires a lot of complex and challenging work, but when performed properly it's a role that can offer you the opportunity to have a significant impact on your business. The better you understand the role prior to your start, the more prepared you will be to succeed and mentor more junior lawyers in your organization to become part of the company's future succession plans.

Now that you have these tips for the new position, click here to brush up on your compensation negotiation tactics!

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practical guidance and references for the busy in-house practitioner and other readers.

Ashoo Sharma



General Counsel

HomeServices of America

As General Counsel for four real estate brokerage brands across Georgia and Alabama owned by HomeServices of America, a Berkshire Hathaway company (Harry Norman, Realtors, BHHSGA Properties, RealtySouth, and Roberts Brothers), Ashoo Sharma oversees all legal and compliance matters. As part of the senior leadership team, she also impacts company culture goals and for this work earned the Diversity Champion awards from Fulton County Daily Report and Atlanta Business Chronicle. For her professional excellence and industry impact, she has earned several awards, including 2024 RISMedia Newsmakers “Crusader” award, “Georgia Rising Stars" by Super Lawyers, "GC Impact Award" by Fulton County Daily Report, Top 50 Corporate Counsel by OnConferences,

GC Powerlist Atlanta award by The Legal 500. Sharma serves on Georgia's Association of Corporate Counsel Board, was member of Georgia's 2024 prestigious Leadership of Atlanta Class, and serves on Emory's Board of Visitors and University of Georgia Law School's Corporate Counsel Advisory Board. As part of her civic duties, she was appointed by Georgia's Governor to the Equal Opportunity Commission's Advisory Board to help safeguard Georgians from housing discrimination and most recently, appointed as Georgia advisor to the US Commission on Civil Rights. Established in 1957, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights is an independent, bipartisan federal agency charged with advising the President and Congress on civil rights matters and issuing an annual federal civil rights enforcement report. Sharma is often asked to speak on panels regarding industry best practices and is considered a legal and civic leader in Georgia.

Kimberly D. Lerman



Partner

Legacy Executive Search

Kimberly Lerman is a seasoned legal professional with over 25 years of experience. She currently serves as a legal recruiter at Legacy Executive Search. Her career has spanned both law practice and legal recruitment, providing her with a unique perspective on the industry. Lerman has dedicated the past decade to attorney recruitment, specializing in placing legal professionalism various roles across multiple sectors. Her placements include roles such as general counsel, associate general counsel, division general counsel, and senior counsel in industries ranging from financial services to hospitality. Before starting her recruiting career, she practiced law for fifteen years. Her legal career culminated in her role as Vice President & Associate General Counsel for a large company based in Atlanta. She also acquired valuable experience as a litigation associate at well-known law firms, including King &Spalding and Eversheds Sutherland. Lerman holds a J.D. from Duke University School of Law and a B.A. from Emory University, where she graduated magna cum laude. She remained actively involved with both institutions, co-chairing the Duke Atlanta Women's Forum and serving as a Duke Law Atlanta Board member. Lerman also volunteers with Emory Connects,

mentoring students interested in pursuing legal careers. Outside of her professional life, Lerman is an accomplished athlete and outdoor enthusiast. She has completed 21 Ironman® triathlons and enjoys various activities, including scuba diving, stand-up paddleboarding, hiking, and nature photography. She also dedicates time to mentoring busy professionals who strive to balance endurance sports with their careers and family commitments. She currently serves on the Board of Officers for the Southern Appalachian Bicycle Association, demonstrating her commitment to community engagement and passion for outdoor activities.