



14 Ways to Prepare for Your First General Counsel Role

Skills and Professional 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.

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.

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.

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Demonstrate the art of leadership through presence and participation. Artwork by Qvasimodo art / [Shutterstock.com](https://www.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.

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

[Ashoo Sharma](#)



Vice President and General Counsel

Harry Norman, Realtors

[Ashoo Sharma](#) joined Harry Norman, Realtors in 2014. As the company's chief legal officer, Sharma is responsible for ensuring that the company's legal strategies maximize its business objectives. Sharma provides legal support to the company's agents, brokers, and various business units. Her responsibilities include developing and implementing risk management programs, assisting brokers through real estate issues that get difficult, educating agents and brokers on legal topics and best practices, reviewing vendor contracts, managing company litigation and regulatory actions, and

monitoring compliance of the many rules and regulations governing the real estate industry. Sharma additionally serves as ambassador of the company's People and Culture Council and leads diversity, equity, and inclusion goals.

Sharma is considered an industry expert and regularly serves on panels discussing real estate, legal, diversity, and professional best practices. "Paying it forward", she often mentors law students and junior attorneys through various organizations. She earned her law degree from the University of Georgia School of Law in 2001. As an active member of the Georgia legal and business community, she served as the EVP of Georgia Indo-American Chamber of Commerce and VP/founding board member of Georgia's South-Asian Attorney Bar Association. She is a past Barrister in the Bleckley Inn of Court and recipient of several professional excellence awards, including: "Georgia Rising Stars" by Super Lawyers publication (2006 and 2011), GC Impact Award by Fulton County Daily Report publication (2017), and Top 100 Corporate Counsel award by OnConferences (2020), and Georgia Legal Award for Diversity Champion (2022), and the GC Powerlist Atlanta award by The Legal 500 publication (2023), Diversity Champion Corporate Counsel award by Atlanta Business Chronicle (2023), and appointment to the prestigious Leadership Atlanta Class (2023).

In 2020, Sharma was appointed by the Governor to the Georgia Equal Opportunity Commission's Advisory Board to help safeguard Georgians from housing discrimination and elected to become the Board's Vice-Chair. Since 2020, she has also served as Vice-Chair of the Association of Corporate Counsel's Georgia Chapter Board.

[Kimberly D. Lerman](#)



Talent Manager

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[Kimberly Lerman](#) is a Talent Manager in the Atlanta office of Consilio. She works primarily with attorneys, placing them in a variety of positions in corporate legal departments across numerous industries as well as at law firms.

Prior to the start of her career in recruiting in 2015, Lerman spent 15 years practicing law in Atlanta, and she was involved in hiring attorneys throughout that time. In her last legal role she served as Vice President & Associate General Counsel for a large company in Atlanta. In addition to seven years of in-house experience, Lerman also worked as a litigation associate at local law firms, including several years at both King & Spalding and Eversheds Sutherland. Throughout her law firm tenure Lerman was involved with interviewing law students and lawyers at job fairs, on-campus interviews and onsite interviews. She also was a member of the Hiring Committee at Eversheds Sutherland from 2005 – 2007.

Lerman currently serves as Co-Chair of the Duke Atlanta Women's Forum, and is a Member of the Duke Law Atlanta Board. She also volunteers with Emory Connects as a speaker and a mentor for current Emory students considering a career in law. When not working or volunteering her time, Lerman enjoys swimming, biking and running, having completed 21 Ironman® triathlons. She is also an avid scuba diver and enjoys standup paddleboarding, hiking, nature photography (including underwater photography), yoga and cooking.