Top 10 Habits of Successful Corporate Counsel: #10 Providing Value (and the Seinfeld Joke That Changed My Perspective)

Law Department Management

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I enjoy creating lists. Lists of things to do at work. Lists of shows to stream. Lists of reasons that one golden retriever is enough to talk my wife out of getting another. There is something about a list that helps organize your mind and where you want to focus. It is a habit that I picked up from my father who loves his lists on post-it notes that litter his house and work files.

With over 25 years of experience working for a law firm and in a corporate law department, I have created a top 10 list of successful habits by corporate in-house counsel. I will share these habits in series of articles in the *Docket*, counting down from #10 to #1.

You should not feel like you need to do everything on this list, but pick up on things that resonate with you to become more effective. This list reflects my own personal view on what makes in-house counsel successful. You are free to disagree. Let's begin!

#10. You provide valuable input during every call, meeting, and interaction.

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Successful in-house counsel are not afraid to voice their opinion and provide valuable input to their team members at all times. BackArt / *Shutterstock.com*

Being this type of person takes courage, confidence, and the ability to block out the noise. There will be some who will say: “They love to hear themselves talk.” There will be questions flying around your own head that may prevent you from speaking. What if the group hates my idea? What if I am not senior enough to disagree? Did someone already say something such that this will sound repetitive? And many, many more. You will generate far more reasons not to speak than to speak.

I think you are more likely to be successful if you push past this internal and external noise. Why? In-house counsel who are a constant source of thoughts are seen as energetic, problem-solvers, and therefore vital team members. The complex legal issues that face our companies have no easy solutions. The more ideas that are generated based on as many perspectives as possible, the more likely that a solution will be found. The many rejected ideas are just as important as the idea leading to the solution because those unpursued ideas led you to the right path.

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When I was younger, I did not have the confidence in high school to offer my view. Like most people, speaking publicly felt intimidating. It can become so comfortable hiding in the safety of silence and the rest of the audience that does not speak.

Build up your confidence — never be afraid to publicly offer your view to others and speak up. lash Vector / *Shutterstock.com*

But a Jerry Seinfeld joke changed my view. In one of his monologues that opened his classic show, he said: “According to most studies people’s number one fear is public speaking. Number two is death. Does that sound right?” He then delivered the punchline that forever changed me: “This means to the average person, if you got a funeral, you’re better off in the casket than doing the eulogy.”

It was at that moment that I realized how silly my fears of speaking up had been. No more, I told myself. Here are the tips that I use to get over any lingering fears of speaking up and offering my view:

- This contribution you want to share is **your view**. Every view is valuable. You should have 100 percent confidence in sharing it because your view has value even if everyone else sees it another way. That **one** person thinks it means that the team needs to consider it.
- No one will remember any mistakes made in sharing your view in the long run, they will remember how you made them feel and your contribution. I have misspoken in sharing my

view. I have suggested things that 20 other lawyers hated. I have offered ideas that would never work on reflection. They are forgotten and what remain are the ideas that no one else thought of or had the courage to express as well as how you were seen as a problem-solver and not passive.
- I ask myself whether my contribution to a meeting, call, or brainstorm was sufficient. If not, I press myself to contribute and that in turn presses me to think of ideas or angles to the issue that I might not have considered.

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If someone says something I thought to share or did not think of, push the line of thinking. Give them credit for the original idea and then build on it. This will become your brand.

I will talk a lot about your brand as in-house lawyer as part of this article series. This habit is one of the most important habits around your brand. This does not mean that you should constantly dominate the conversation. No one wants that. But find the right balance. Be a contributor. Be someone who has energy around problems, not passivity. Be someone who shares an idea. And if it turns out that your idea is always wrong, like George's instincts in *Seinfeld*, then just offer the opposite.

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