

Top 10 Habits of Successful Corporate Counsel: #5 Being Curious and Avoiding Typecasting

Career Development



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Early in my GSK career, I was at lunch with my colleagues when I received a call on my cell phone that was career changing. It was from the general counsel. He asked whether I would be willing to put aside my litigation work for a year and revamp the legal and compliance framework for GSK's sanctions and export control program.

The call and this ask was completely unexpected. The subject matter was completely unfamiliar. The only thing I knew about sanctions was seeking costs against opposing counsel in litigation for misconduct. I knew nothing about economic sanctions driving foreign policy or export control regulating and restricting the movement of goods and information. I had done nothing like this in my career and the chances of failing were frighteningly high.

I immediately answered "Absolutely… I will do it!" and was on a plane to London in less than 24 hours to get to work.

This memory brings me to #5 in my series of the top 10 habits of successful corporate counsel:

#5. You are curious to learn, develop, and grow, including willing to give legal advice in areas outside your experience to avoid being typecast.

Why would I stray from what I had years of experience and felt comfortable (litigation) for something so novel and unfamiliar (sanctions and export control)? Because it was vital that I avoided being typecast in my career if I wanted to successfully move up the corporate ladder.

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Very few people are promoted to the highest level of a company within their role. To do so, you need to be able to demonstrate having a broader and broader ability to advise the business in many practice areas. The higher you go, the broader you need to be. The challenge is, however, that the longer you stay in a role, the more you become typecast as only being able to do that one practice area (litigation, employment, mergers and acquisitions, privacy, etc.).



Being experienced in multiple practice areas can eventually advance your career and professional development. Cagkan Sayin / *Shutterstock.com*

Having attended many talent review sessions, a common discussion is about the employee's ability to advise the business outside the area you currently practice. Our practice areas have become so specialized that they require years of experience. That specialization is strongly desired by the company, but it is a limitation for your development. It makes us seen in a certain mold that you must break or risk staying stuck in your development. It is a "I will believe it when I see it" kind of test of you and your career.

I find that most of these limitations are perceptions. If you have excellent judgment and solid legal

instincts, that type of lawyer can advise the business in any setting. Why then does typecasting happen?

The same reason it happens with actors and actresses. If I say Jason Alexander, you think George Costanza from *Seinfeld*. If I say Carrie Fisher, you think Princess Leia from *Star Wars*. If I say David Schwimmer, you think Ross from *Friends*. The same thing can happen to you unless you show a constant curiosity to learn new practice areas and show that your legal skills translate outside the areas of comfort. They say that curiosity kills the cat, but I like to say that a lack of curiosity can kill the career.

3 ways to break the typecasting

1. Demonstrate a consistent desire to learn and a fearless sense of advising the business in new areas.

While it is intimidating to put your legal advice on the line in uncharted areas, it is the fear of the unknown that is the worst part, and the best professional experiences are on the other side of that fear. Those who avoid corporate typecasting in talent reviews get high marks for their curiosity to learn and grow.

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2. Push for opportunities off the beaten path of your career and seize them when given.

I once received a unique opportunity outside of litigation at GSK **only** because I sent an email asking for a new opportunity at exactly the right moment when the company was considering who would lead a new project that I was not even aware of. Never be afraid to ask for development opportunities. Don’t be discouraged if you are turned down. Embrace the opportunities when given.

3. Remain confident that sound legal judgment translates everywhere.

Excellent legal judgment is a universal language in a corporation. Experience is valuable, but excellent legal judgment is priceless. As you try more and more opportunities outside your practice area, you will be amazed that you ever thought the subject matter was intimidating. You will break your typecast.

The previously mentioned David Schwimmer, the *Friends* actor, had a great quote about being

typecast. He said: “Sometimes I've felt that the industry has typecast me as a certain kind of character. But then I think all it really takes is one role, the right role, to shake that up and change that perception.”

The same is true for successful corporate counsel. It takes only one role to show what you can do. When you get that call, make sure you answer it.

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