

Top 10 Habits of Successful Corporate Counsel: #1 Having Your Own Voice Like Quentin Tarantino

Career Development



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Later in life, after I became a lawyer, I realized that I wanted to be a screenwriter. I think writing a great movie screenplay is a monumental achievement. You face a blank page. It stares back at you with no words, no inspiration, and no ideas. The blinking cursor just ticking away, adding to the pressure to come up with a moving story and offering no assistance in the process. If you can face that challenge and develop these movies with novel stories, worlds, characters, plots, and even new languages that inspire and entertain us, you are truly talented in my book.

Quentin Tarantino is known for screenplays that have a distinct quality and feel. The dialogue captures your attention. In many interviews, he speaks about how important it is for him to direct movies he has written. By directing fewer movies and only those he wrote (although he directed a few not penned by himself earlier in his career), he is able to:

- **Keep his own voice.**

  He maintains control over his “vision” and “voice.”

- **Ensure quality control and avoid subpar quality.**

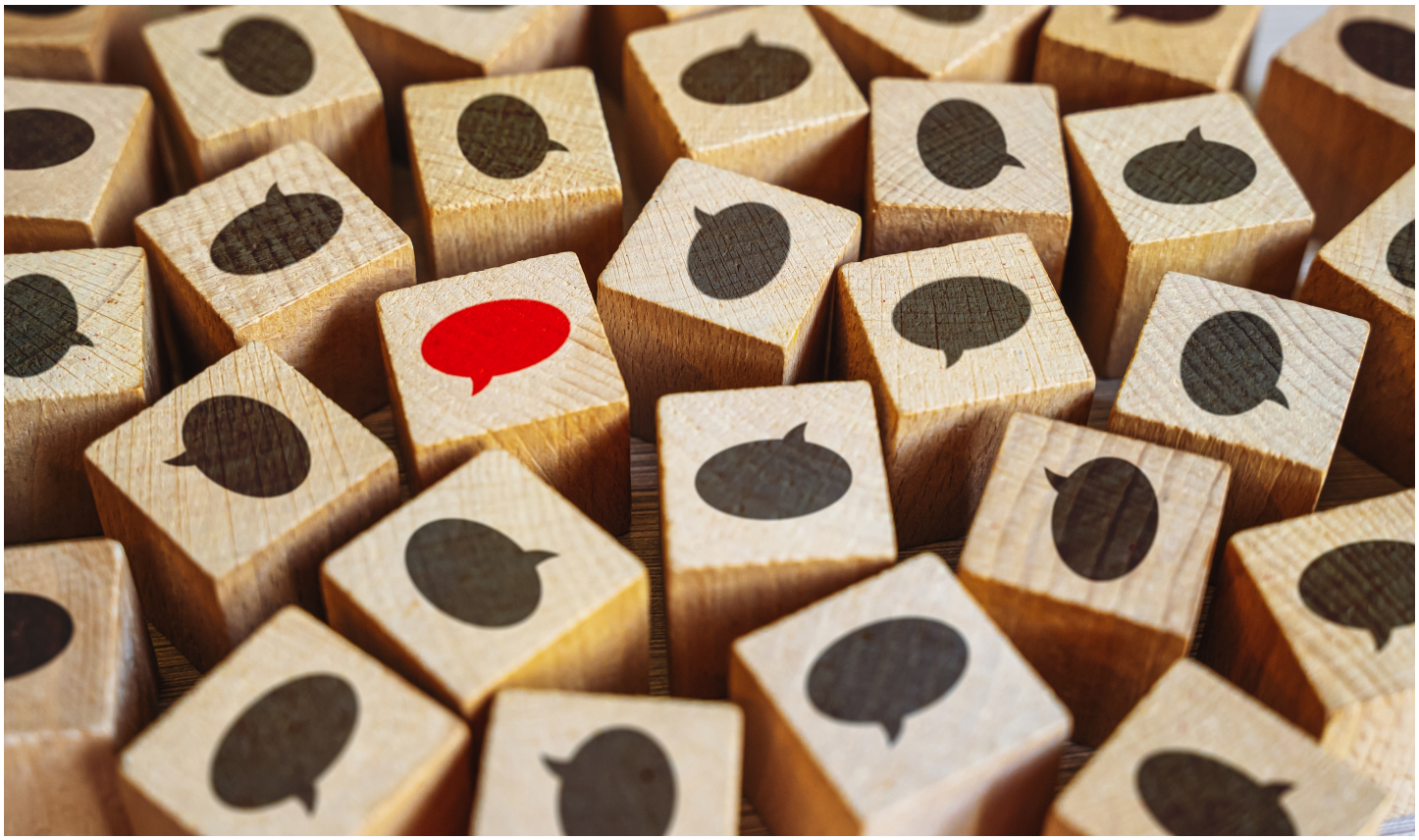
  He does not have to make compromises on his “vision” and “voice” or worry that they are

lost in translation by another director.

This approach has much to teach in-house lawyers and brings me to my top habit of successful in-house counsel in my article series.

1. You speak your mind no matter what and give legal advice with your own voice and vision on the issue.

This habit of always putting your own “stamp” on any legal issue and giving utterly objective advice is the most important skill to demonstrate consistently. Legal issues can have many lawyers involved, many opinions, and many takes. Often, however, the advice sounds the same and coalesces around the same ideas and vantage points. Many of our issues will have an external counsel voice, which you should be sure to make distinct from your own to be successful. When you give your own distinctive voice to your advice, and you are not influenced by any other factors other than what is best in the given situation (including what others think), your advice will stand out from the pack.



Make your legal advice distinctive — setting you apart from the crowd and paving your way for success. Andrii Yalanskyi / *Shutterstock.com*

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If you demonstrate this ability consistently, you will get known for your own voice, ensure quality control by giving your own input to any advice, and avoid being lumped in with the "pack" by standing out. Indeed, you can often spot a Quentin Tarantino movie within a few seconds even on first viewing. You want your advice to have the same distinct feel. **You must be known for telling the company what it needs to hear, not what it wants to hear, to be successful.** This is often not easy and, as you know, the difficult nature of that advice will be challenged. In those situations, I often respond that my obligation is to tell them what I think and that is the best way that I can protect the company and its executives by telling them what they need to hear and not what they want to hear. This often resonates in difficult situations because they come to understand that you are trying to help even with difficult news.

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What's your voice?

Here are some ways other lawyers have impressed me or my business colleagues with their distinct voice to a legal issue (not a complete list of distinct voices):

Ureka lawyers

They consistently come at legal issues with important perspectives that were not considered but should have been. These lawyers think deeply about an issue before providing advice by mapping out the issue from a 360-degree business perspective.

A-List lawyers

Like Tarantino's dialogue, some lawyers earn reputations for a specific type of voice they bring to their legal advice that is well respected and much sought after. That voice can take many forms — "patient centric," "business oriented," and "passionate and committed" are examples. They are so known for that quality that their actual voices are synonymous with those viewpoints.

Lawyers' lawyers

You hear this term from time to time. These are the lawyers that lawyers would hire themselves if they needed advice or representation. It is a great compliment. They will come at issues with complete objectivity — unafraid to take either the well-worn path or the never traveled path depending on what they think is the best course for the client.

What does the boss think?

For my last article in this series, I asked my group general counsel of GSK, James Ford, who is also on ACC's board of directors, to impart his view on what most makes an in-house counsel successful.

He has certainly developed his own strong legal voice in how he advises the company and has taught me much about how to deliver hard and necessary truths as part of any advice. Here's what he said:

To be a successful in-house counsel, a lawyer must be courageous and objective, whilst being passionate about and aligned to the company's goals. Having a good grasp of how the business actually works and an understanding of the impact and areas of leverage created by relevant macro geopolitical trends and associated policy will be considered "table stakes" at senior levels.

Being a savvy team player is essential, with most lawyers at the leadership team table exhibiting less of a personal agenda than many around the table, necessitating a requirement to understand what is really important and to know your audience well. Honest and tailored advice delivered with a "can-do" attitude is important, particularly where the goal may be to bring restraint to a particular situation. Notions of preserving reputation, reinforcing essential elements of culture, and protecting profitability the right way can help in these typically tense "trade-off" moments. We are an integral part of the company's "conscience."

Words matter. Be precise and concise, because senior executives are highly intelligent, will be pulled in many directions, and only want to hear what matters, not what their lawyer finds interesting on a personal level. Back yourself and exercise good judgment based on all the necessary inputs, as part of creating your own corporate brand. At the end of the day, we are there to problem solve and protect the company to get results, tasks that become easier with a track record based on hard work, trust, and ambition for the contributions of those that we advise.

In three paragraphs, Ford captured the main themes regarding the habits of successful in-house counsel as part of this article series. I thought he concludes this series well by trying to tie it all together. If you focus on:

1. Having your own voice to speak hard truths, and
2. Giving practical legal advice that demonstrates superior understanding of the business, which is
3. Genuine and trusted, that will take you very far in your career.

I hope that I have given you a lot to think about and tips to become more successful. They were all things that my mentors and colleagues taught me along the way for which I continue to be thankful. I wanted to pass them along to you.

In your own story, be the writer and the director. That way, you can control your professional beginning, middle, and (as they say in any good story) THE END.

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