



Positively Legal: Navigating the Changing Role of General Counsel

Skills and Professional Development



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The role of General Counsel has transformed beyond the role of legal adviser and risk manager to that of a trusted adviser and strategist helping navigate uncertainty and transformation.

How can they navigate the changing role and expectations to be increasingly productive and show value while looking after themselves and their teams' well-being.

Engage in strengths-based leadership

Leaders engaging in a strengths-based culture focuses on continually developing each person's potential, [resulting in an engaged workforce and organic business growth](#).

Strengths-based leadership focuses leveraging individual and team strengths rather than fixing weaknesses because the [greatest potential for development and growth in employees lies in their strengths](#). This leadership approach is found to "maximize followers' capabilities, optimize goal achievement, and promote high performance." The consequences "are [greater commitment](#), career advancements, increased efficiency and productivity, and improved psychological well-being which enhances both the professional and personal development of subordinates and enlisted personnel."

This type of leadership:

- [encourages inclusivity and diversity](#) by recognizing the strengths and experiences each individual brings to the team, which builds stronger relationships and trust;
- [results in](#) higher employee engagement, profit, sales, and significantly lower turnover;
- allows people to rely on their strengths in a crisis or in difficult work environments and situations. This may be individual strengths or relying on those within a team;
- helps address low engagement and burnout by making employees feel valued and fostering a positive, inclusive workplace culture;
- can ensure better hiring by asking candidates strength-related questions;
- allows better delegation and distribution of work based on each team member's strengths – however, this should not be at the cost of growing other individuals with potential but who lack experience to display certain strengths; and
- promotes and identifies strong leaders within an organization who align their leadership style with their personal values and strengths while fostering an inclusive and strengths based culture in the team.

There are [several types of strengths-based assessment tools](#), which help identify and leverage an individual's unique strengths, talents, and positive qualities. While not specifically designed for lawyers, these tools can readily apply:

- [Clifton Strengths](#) identifies a person's top five strengths from 34 talent themes, focusing on innate talents for career and leadership development.
- [VIA Character Strengths](#) assesses 24 universal character strengths grounded in positive psychology, emphasizing virtues like kindness and bravery for personal growth and well-being.
- [The High5](#) test identifies an individual's top five signature strengths, helping with meaning and energy in life.

These tools use self-report surveys or questionnaires and provide detailed feedback to help individuals apply their strengths effectively. They should be applied to the workplace and a legal team broadly and can be effective but should not be misinterpreted to suggest that people should only work on their strengths and ignore their weaknesses.

Build resilience in high-pressure environments

The GC role is demanding and requires resilience against stress for long-term sustainability. [Building individual resilience](#) is the ability to [adapt well in the face of adversity, pressure, or trauma](#). A successful leader combines their own personal self-management and care with a strategy for their teams to build resilience and thrive. Resilience is important because it helps withstand stress without burning out and [make stress work for us](#).

Research based practical [strategies](#) for developing greater resilience include:

- **Physical self-care** – Prioritizing sleep, nutrition and exercise, while minimizing substance usage allowing the body to recover from stress and underpins emotional and physical stamina;
- **Cognitive reframing** – Challenging negative self-talk and interpreting setbacks as temporary and learning opportunities rather than permanent helping to reduce worry and rumination. Building psychological safety;
- **Emotion regulation** – Learning to label and process feelings in a balanced way rather than suppressing them;
- **Social support** – Relying on trusted colleagues, friends, or a mentor network to vent frustration and celebrate wins boosts morale;
- **Mindfulness meditation** – Engaging in mediation practices which helps leaders remain focused and adaptable as well as regulating decision making and emotional control;
- **Limiting multi-tasking** – Focusing on one task at a time instead of constant switching improves concentration and productivity;
- **Clear communication** – Conducting regular check-ins to address uncertainty, clarify priorities, and recognize stressors fosters transparency and trust;
- **Competence development** – Ongoing skills training for evolving demands, like change management or problem-solving, builds both hard and soft skills to effectively manage pressure; and
- **Wellness programs** – Offering mental health EAPs, onsite gyms or yoga classes, meditations apps for all, and encouraging use signals care for employee well-being.

[ACC Members: Download the ACC Well-being Toolkit for In-house Lawyers, Second Edition](#)

In addition, leaders should model healthy habits and self-care and ensure they communicate effectively and regularly to avoid uncertainty and misunderstandings.

Anchor leadership in purpose

Purpose-driven leadership means helping employees find [personal meaning in their work and fostering a deeply committed workforce that thrives on shared goals and aspirations](#).

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their employees and connect work to a greater objective. Researchers have shown that [we are hard-wired to connect on a collective level because our ancestors depended on one another to survive](#). Throughout most of human history, rejection by the group was the equivalent of a death sentence. This need to connect endures – the need to connect with people and with a purpose in the workplace.

Finding meaning and purpose at work helps people feel motivated and more resilient to setbacks.

Six things that [drive a sense of purpose](#):

- **Utility** –Work being relevant to our goals and aspirations, either now or in the future.
- **Personal development** –Work facilitates opportunities for self-growth, developing either skillsets or mindsets in personally meaningful ways.
- **Impact** –Work empowers us to make a tangible and positive difference in the world, contributing to the greater good of society, our communities, or those close to us.
- **Identity reinforcement** – *Work reinforces our sense of self, aligning with the core elements of who we are.*
- **Intrinsic Interest** –Work is inherently fun and energizing, offering enjoyable experiences that naturally appeal to our interests.
- **External rewards** –Work leads to a desirable payoff, from a paycheck to a promotion.

Each person finds a sense of purpose in a different way and this can change across their careers. A good leader works with their team to identify what purpose resonates with them or, at least, tries to tie the legal team's purpose to the greater organizational purpose.

Practical takeaways for GCs

In addition to strengths-based leadership, building resilience and helping identify purpose, a GC's role also requires building connection across the business. This includes:

- Approaching governance with stakeholders in a constructive and collaborative way and reframing conversations to include ethical questions, “How can we achieve this in an ethical way” rather than simply identifying risks.
- Spending more time outside the legal team to build strong stakeholder relationships and modelling commercially focused leadership, leading with empathy (including through [Legal Design](#) principles) and focusing on achieving the businesses' priorities rather than simply providing legal advice.
- Model optimism and resilience to others in the business outside of the legal team.
- Encourage the legal team to model resilience and self-care for others in the business.

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She combines technical legal skills with practical business understanding and a love of innovation, project management, and legal technology to improve ways of working within the legal industry. She is a member of the ACC's In-House In-Health and Legal Technology and Innovation Special Interest

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In addition to her legal skills she has a Diploma of Positive Psychology and Wellness and is a freelance writer. Her “Positively Legal” column for the *ACC Docket* focuses on the intersection of neuroscience, positive psychology, and in-house practice by interviewing experts and fellow lawyers and curating up to date quality research, podcasts and books to help lawyers learn to take control of their own wellness and support their careers.

Outside of work, Cavallaro loves traveling, snorkeling, meditating and spending time in nature.