


# From the Boiler Room to the C-Suite in a Single Generation

**Interviews and Profiles**





**Elisa Garcia**

**CHIEF LEGAL OFFICER AND CORPORATE SECRETARY**

**MACY’S INC.**

During the grand reopening of Macy's downtown Brooklyn location, Chief Legal Officer Elisa Garcia asked for a tour of the store's basement. It was the day after her birthday, and she was anxious to visit the site where her father had worked for almost 30 years as a boiler room engineer — back when the store was owned by Abraham & Strauss (A&S). The old lockers were there, along with the very boilers her father worked on all those years ago. One of the engineers asked if he could show her something he found during the renovation. He pulled out an old bulletin board that was crusted with coffee and dirt and pointed to a picture and asked, "Do you know them?"

The photo was of 25 men gathered for a retirement party. Garcia looked from face-to-face until she stopped at the person in the center of the top row — it was her father, around age 37. She and the engineer both became emotional as he pried off the photo with his pocketknife. The last time Garcia had been in this basement was to gather her father's belongings from his locker. He had passed away at work when she was 19 years old. Garcia shares, "He never saw me graduate college or law school. But I think he orchestrated that moment just so he could tell me that he knew what I had accomplished and how proud he was."



Photo of a retirement party at A&S recovered from Macy's boiler room in downtown Brooklyn. Garcia's father is top row, center.

## Working the shift

The former A&S flagship will always be important to Garcia, but she can often be found in many of Macy's locations. She believes that understanding the day-to-day operations and "how busy folks are — how they're on their feet all day" helps her do the job better. It's a philosophy she picked up when she was general counsel of Domino's Pizza. During her annual reviews, the CEO would ask

how many stores she had visited — and the expectation was a three-digit number. “Domino’s motto was everybody had to know how to make it, bake it, and take it,” she explains. “And I did all of that. I was able to make a large pepperoni pie in 44 seconds.”

Garcia kept that mindset when she became CLO of Office Depot, visiting distribution centers to understand the product supply chain and working in stores during the back-to-school season. Now, she engrains this mentality in her lawyers at Macy’s Inc. During the holiday season, all members of her legal department work at least one shift in Macy’s stores, doing recovery work and similar tasks.

This isn’t the only initiative Garcia instituted when she joined Macy’s executive team in 2016. Her predecessor had managed the legal department for 27 years. “One of the things I love about Macy’s is the long tenure of people and the dedication and loyalty they have to the company. But you know any place that’s been managed by the same person for 27 years is ripe for some change,” Garcia says.




## Bringing change to the legal department

With her process hat on, Garcia first restructured reporting lines — including having her report directly to the CEO. She also made an effort to delayer the organization by increasing the levels of reporting, saying, “If I’m going to have seven or eight people reporting to me, you’re going to have seven or eight people reporting to you.” In her experience, this increases everyone’s span of control and helps with communication. Garcia created what she refers to as her legal leadership team, or “LLT,” comprised of representatives from the labor and employment, real estate, business operations, and litigation functions.

After revamping the structure of the legal department, Garcia focused her attention on the

management philosophy. The department was being run like a law firm — a common model in the past. She introduced the idea of running legal like a business and brought in a legal operations director to help with the transition. They did an internal assessment to measure their department's maturity in relation to financial management, contract management, technology, and process. From the results, the team formed a legal transformation roadmap to bring the department up to speed. Garcia shares that they're currently changing processes related to spend management, finding alternative legal service providers, and implementing new legal technology.

As part of the transformation, Macy's has also made a concerted effort to stay on top — and ahead — of current and future US regulations related to data privacy. Macy's assesses every potential partner to determine its level of consumer data protections.

In the midst of so much change, Garcia knows it's a priority to maintain the confidence and trust of her teams and peers. She does so by being available, regularly checking in with her LLT as a group on a weekly basis and individually bi-weekly to understand what's going on within their departments and share feedback. However, this communication merely cements the strong foundation she laid in the beginning.

## Getting to Know… Elisa Garcia

**WHAT DOES A TYPICAL WEEKEND LOOK LIKE FOR YOU?**

**I have to say I am living the life. My kids are grown, and neither of them are in New York. My weekend starts out with long dog walks, and then there are always cultural elements: museums, shows, concerts.**

**This weekend, Friday night, I went to the Met and we saw an opera. Saturday night, I saw this cabaret singer from Berlin who was incredible.**

**On Sunday afternoon, we went to a concert at the Irish Arts Center. It was all traditional music. And then I cooked a pot of sauce, and we stayed home and watched a movie.**

**New York is home to my husband and me. We have a great apartment in Hell's Kitchen, and we're reconnecting with family that we haven't seen in years. It's been great. And I have to say, I am eating my way through New York from Michelin-starred restaurants to little mom-and-pop type places.**

**TELL ME ABOUT YOUR EARLY LIFE IN NEW YORK.**

**I grew up in Brooklyn, Queens, and Long Island. My early childhood was in Brooklyn. My grandparents took care of me while both my parents worked. So, my first language is Spanish — and Gallego, which is a dialect from the northwest of Spain. And then we moved to Queens when I was five, and overnight my parents started speaking to me in English. And after that most of my childhood was spent on Long Island.**

**I KNOW YOU HAD OTHER CAREER INTERESTS BEFORE LAW. IF YOU WEREN'T A GENERAL COUNSEL, WHAT WOULD YOU BE?**

**I always wanted to be a doctor. But my family made it very clear that I would not have the right**

**bedside manner. So, I would probably be a coroner because I'm very inquisitive and figuring out what killed people just sounds like so much fun. And my family wouldn't get any free medical services — I would just offer one free autopsy per family member.**

During her first week with Macy's, Garcia reached out to everyone, from the most senior lawyers to the assistants, asking for three to five things that the legal department does well, five things that could be improved or stopped, and one piece of advice. Once she received feedback, she went on her "Rainbow Tour," visiting every office from New York City to San Francisco and meeting with everyone one-on-one. "I was able to see patterns and the different cultural things coming out of various offices," she shares. Garcia dug deeper into issues that were raised by some as negatives and others as positives and identified processes that could be immediately stopped. For example, Garcia did away with the required written monthly activities report, given that she would be meeting with her LLT regularly. Beginning this year, the legal team will use dashboards as a mechanism for reporting and tracking work in a less time-consuming manner. The experience instilled mutual respect between Garcia and her teams.

At the executive level, Garcia sees her role as a mediator, making sure everyone is heard and focusing on solutions. Her one-on-one conversations did a lot to establish that level of trust. She adds that she spent most time fostering a relationship with the chief financial officer — and encourages other CLOs to do the same. Garcia explains that it's important to be on the same page given the overlap the positions see during public reporting. But she gives the company credit for starting her off on the right foot with her executive peers: "Macy's is the most structured company I've ever joined. They really worked hard to find someone that was going to fit in well with the management team." It's no surprise that this New Yorker was a perfect match.

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