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Building a Legal Department for the Future

Law Department Management



When Stephen Gauster was promoted to executive vice president and general counsel, he knew that the amount of information he would need to digest was enormous. As GC for MetLife, one of the world's largest providers of insurance, annuities, and employee benefit programs, he must understand a wide range of businesses and their individual risks.



But the information he is most intrigued by are the answers to human-centered questions, like how can MetLife source and retain talent in today's marketplace? Improve work-life balance? Increase opportunities for diverse staff?

His journey to the top legal seat illustrates MetLife's approach. Gauster joined MetLife in January 2016 as senior vice president and chief counsel of its general corporate section. When he joined, it was clear that the company took succession planning and career development seriously.

"My bosses were generous mentors and sponsors. That is what made it possible to take this job," he says candidly.

The projects he worked on during his initial years — like the spinoff of Brighthouse Financial, one of the largest providers of annuities and insurance in the United States — were critical experiences.

The exposure across the legal department was instrumental in developing and deepening his understanding of the business. It was obvious that MetLife is a people-driven company, more-so than he realized when he joined.

Goals for MetLife's legal department

As general counsel, Gauster has two goals: build on the decades-long strategy of succession planning, including its focus on diversity and inclusion, and sharpen MetLife's focus on risk management.

He worked to broaden the company's approach to talent development. "For example, we opened up roles that were traditionally based in our US headquarters to employees in other regions who could succeed remotely," he says, noting that MetLife aspires to keep the pipeline as gender balanced and diverse as possible.

Especially right now, the company needs employees to embrace servant leadership, which means putting colleagues, customers, and communities ahead of yourself. "It's not a new concept — but it remains vital today," he says.

Gauster points to the relationship between managers and employees. "If you think about it, managers really have a profound responsibility to their employees to provide the tools, support and environment necessary to create a learning organization," he explains. "But employees also have an obligation to own their own career development and leverage the resources provided." If everyone is motivated, it creates a positive work experience, employees thrive, and the company has a constant series of candidates.

Photo: Grand Central Station and MetLife Building in New York City

Gauster was quick to cite the legal department's sponsorship program as one example of a learning organization in action. Its talent stewardship initiative seeks to create multiyear sponsorship relationships between employees and department leaders. He sees it as a way to turbocharge talent development, especially for diverse talent.

Regarding risk management, Gauster's team set out to create an active and efficient model alongside business partners in order to spot issues. One simple but critical key is plain language.

"No business leader has ever praised an attorney for writing a brilliant legal memo. What they look for is commercial judgment — judgment that is informed by business and legal knowledge," he counsels.

"Having courage and integrity to do the right thing in complex situations and the ability to communicate clearly in a way that reduces complex ideas to the essence, but without sacrificing precision. If you can do those things, you are really practicing at the top of your craft."

A diverse desert upbringing

Stephen grew up in Albuquerque, NM, the son of a teacher whose family immigrated from Mexico and a father who immigrated from Austria. He grew up in a trilingual household with his father's German, his mother's Spanish, and English.

"It was an environment dominated by teaching and academics. Civil rights and equality and opportunity were issues that were big in my household, and they were among the issues that inspired me to pursue law," he reflects.

Business was unfamiliar to him when he was young — no *Wall Street Journal* on the table at his house — but as he got older, he developed a curiosity for the subject that influenced the course of his life. "I tend to be analytical but open to different ways of thinking," he says.

It's a skill that he is using every day during 2020's incredibly difficult times. "We feel a tremendous sense of urgency about the future and we are trying to position ourselves to emerge from the crisis in the best shape possible," Gauster shares. With MetLife's focus on the future, and its bench of talent, the outlook is very bright.

Getting to know... Stephen Gauster

How do you relax these days?

Spending time with my family, including art projects and reading with my kids. We recently bought a new place, so I'm also enjoying fixing up the house.

What's the last book or article you read that made a lasting impression?

Christine Noestlinger's *Fly Away Home*, which describes the chaotic end of the Second World War in Vienna through the eyes of a child.

What is something your employees would find surprising about you?

I dabble in music composition. I just learned that one of my choral settings will be performed this coming spring at my church in New York.

[Joshua H. Shields](#)



Editor

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