



Be Proactive: 5 Ways for In-house Legal Teams to Build a Better Relationship with the Business

Law Department Management



Business leaders often avoid relying on legal resources unless it's absolutely necessary — like when a crisis is happening. As a result, legal departments often end up being reactive in the business, waiting for tasks and problems to come to them, rather than [playing a proactive, strategic role](#)... not to mention getting a bad rap as "[The Department of No.](#)"

But being proactive about building relationships with internal business clients isn't just about popularity. It can actually help you do your job more effectively. Proactive involvement in everything from day-to-day operations to major corporate initiatives helps you get the information you need to see the big picture. With that kind of perspective, you'll be better equipped to see potential legal pitfalls earlier, suggest alternative paths to success, and avoid unnecessary risk.

Along with understanding the business as a whole, being proactive also allows you to better understand the key players in the business. As you get more involved, you'll be better able to tailor your services to meet the needs and risk tolerances of stakeholders, so you can discover and define the right legal path quicker.

In short, getting proactively involved allows you to bring more value to the business and finally be seen as more than a cost center or necessary evil. Next, we'll explore five ways your corporate legal team can leverage proactivity to build stronger relationships across the business.

1. Get started on the right foot.

Whether you're onboarding new counsel or turning over a new leaf, take the time to get to know the business from top to bottom. Tour company facilities, [explore how the company runs](#), and get familiar with any new operations. Understand what the business wants from its legal team, and how you will be involved at various levels of the company.

[Set up meetings](#) with company leaders, department heads, and anyone else within the company who will typically need legal services. Key topics for discussion should include any past or present legal issues, existing legal processes, and commonplace legal needs. Be sure to get a firm grasp of what is most important from a business standpoint and try to understand the risk tolerance of internal clients.

One particularly effective strategy is to host [business unit boot camps](#). While similar in purpose to a meeting, a boot camp is much more intensive, and places as much focus on helping legal understand the internal client as helping the client understand legal. Depending on the business client, a boot camp could last a couple of hours or a couple of days. Here are a few topics you might consider when hosting a boot camp with your internal stakeholders:

- Discuss key business and legal issues specific to the client
- Respond to any questions or concerns about the legal department
- Review contractual agreements used most frequently
 - Tip: Walk through each and discuss key provisions, identify any problematic clauses, etc.
- Get to know one another better
- Help each other get more done
 - Tip: Explore how to increase efficiency, improve communication, set reasonable expectations, or establish processes
- Clear up any misperceptions or issues

2. Stay engaged with employees and management.

Too often, legal teams justly earn a reputation as being insular or isolated. But if you want to be seen as a valued part of the business, it's crucial to make the legal department visible in the eyes of both management and employees. "You ultimately want the department to be approachable and a place where employees know they can go for help," explains three-time general counsel and consultant [Sterling Miller](#).

The time for building trust is before — not *during* — a crisis. That's why it's so critical to build personal relationships, particularly with senior members of the management team.

"Not only will you obtain updates and insight into the business, but it is also much more likely that — as your relationship becomes more personal — these colleagues will view you as a sounding board and collaborator in the business versus just a lawyer they need to deal with on legal issues," Miller says.

Just as in-house counsel tend to fly under the radar, so do their accomplishments. Instead of operating in stealth mode, be proactive and let the C-suite know about your successes — particularly if your actions brought in money or resulted in significant savings. Make your wins visible to the whole organization, so they can appreciate how much you're contributing.

3. Communicate effectively

Relationships are built on communication, even in business. That means poor or ineffective communication and delayed response times can have a serious impact on your relationships with business clients.

To keep those ties strong, ensure that you're consistently responsive. Providing regular updates on a project's status will go a long way in helping your internal clients know that you are committed to providing excellent service.

[Check out our whitepaper, *Naysayers No More: How In-House Legal Professionals are Leveraging Collaborative Work to Say 'Yes' More*, to learn how you can improve collaboration with internal clients and external counsel.](#)

Another important aspect of communication is tailoring it to your audience — most of whom are not versed in legalese. Instead of flexing your legal expertise, focus on being clear. Here are seven tips to help in-house counsel communicate more effectively:

1. When writing, organize your thoughts to help the reader understand.
2. Avoid technical language. Keep it simple, but not condescending.
3. Be clear and concise, particularly for executives whose time is limited.
4. Exhibit good personality traits (e.g., politeness, loyalty, confidence, and respect — even humor) where appropriate.
5. Target the needs of your audience in form (verbal, instant message, email, etc.) and function (high-level or detailed).
6. Provide solutions; don't just point out problems, and help your audience understand you are here to help them assess and mitigate risks, not to tell them “no.”
7. Be transparent about your timing; you have dozens of competing priorities, and every stakeholder thinks theirs should be number one on your list.

How you communicate is a reflection of who you are, whether that's helpful, approachable, and competent ... or detached and reluctant to be a team player and problem solver.

4. Focus on how.

When an internal client approaches an in-house attorney with a request, there's often fear that the answer will be “no” — that's why corporate legal departments have such a reputation for being naysayers.

But instead of simply saying yes or no, in-house counsel should proactively focus on how and why. This can help attorneys provide better service and build better relationships in several different ways:

- Internal clients may not be experts in the type of legal services they need. Focusing on how — that is, actively listening to understand the underlying issues or goals of a request — will help in-house counsel deliver the best advice or suggest alternatives.
- As you get to know the business better and build stronger relationships with individual internal stakeholders, you'll be more equipped to provide insight on big decisions and day-to-day operations. Don't just give a stamp of approval — focus on how and why to make things better.

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- When the answer to a request or suggestion truly is “no,” don’t dismiss the ask out of hand without trying to figure out how to get to “yes.”

5. Be a part of the fabric of the business.

In-house counsel plays a unique role in the business in regard to legal matters, but that role is even more valuable when coupled with in-depth business knowledge. The more you can weave together your knowledge of the law with your knowledge of the business, its clients and customers, and its employees and teams, the more effectively you can fulfill your role within the team.

This is, indeed, the whole point of being an in-house attorney: to provide legal advice “with a [deep understanding](#) of the goals, risks, competitive landscape, and nuances of the business.”

The truth is, business leaders want this kind of strategic value from their legal departments. They want the legal department to care and be engaged with more than just the “legal stuff” — they also want them to protect company assets and increase their value and returns.

If business leaders are asking you to be more strategic, they’re not asking you to be more strategic about legal matters, but to “[think] [more strategically](#) about the company and its business goals and objectives while you work. ... By doing so, you can influence the business beyond just everyday legal issues.”

And if your business leaders are not asking you to be more strategic, they should be! Don’t be afraid to ask them how legal can be more involved in architecting the company’s goals, and point out what and how legal can add to those by being tactical.

Expectations are certainly high. But taking a proactive role in the business will also serve to make you an invaluable resource to your organization.

Proactivity is key to your team's success.

While the above suggestions may seem to be adding more responsibility to an already-full plate, the reality is that having a better relationship with business units and executives may, in fact, make your life easier and your job more rewarding. You’ll be better equipped to provide service and advice, work more effectively with internal clients, reduce misunderstandings, achieve better outcomes, and be a more valued part of the team.

As you more proactively manage internal business relationships, you’ll be more empowered to leverage another superpower: collaboration.

[Download your copy of *Naysayers No More: How In-House Legal Professionals are Leveraging Collaborative Work to Say ‘Yes’ More now.*](#)

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