BLG Calgary lawyers share insights for general counsel from business, the bench and government

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A conversation with Melinda Park, Marina Paperny and Sonya Savage

In October, BLG and the Association of Corporate Counsel (ACC) Alberta hosted an engaging session titled: Boardroom Evolution: Strategy, Law and Governance in 2025, drawing on the diverse perspectives of BLG leaders, Melinda Park K.C., Hon. Marina Paperny K.C., and Hon. Sonya Savage K.C., moderated by Makiko Hata, Assistant General Counsel, ATB Financial. The panel explored timely issues shaping Alberta and beyond, including:

- Leadership evolution strategy and political landscape
- The current climate surrounding leadership dynamics
- Key risks across politics, governance and the courts

Meet the panel

Melinda Park K.C.

With more than 30 years of experience in corporate, securities and governance, Melinda Park, regional managing partner in Calgary, combines transactional expertise with a commitment to strengthening client relationships, developing talent and advancing BLG's culture of service, integrity and community connection.

Hon. Marina Paperny K.C.

The Honourable Marina Paperny K.C., senior counsel at BLG and former justice of the Courts of Appeal of Alberta, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, draws on more than two decades on the bench to provide strategic advice and dispute resolution insight in complex corporate and commercial matters.

Hon. Sonya Savage K.C.

The Honourable Sonya Savage, senior counsel at BLG and a leading advocate in the energy sector, brings extensive experience from private practice, corporate leadership and four years as a senior Alberta cabinet minister, offering clients a rare blend of legal, policy and industry insight.

In the wide-ranging discussion, they explored how legal professionals can shape outcomes across corporate, judicial and political environments. From anticipating political risk to reinforcing the role of the courts and embedding legal teams within business strategy, their perspectives offered a practical view of how counsel can bring clarity, stability and value in complex systems of influence.

Key takeaways: Blend confidence, knowledge and collaboration to build long-term success

In-house counsel and external lawyers find lasting success when they combine legal skill with strategy and collaboration. They must show confidence, think strategically and work closely with clients, in-house legal teams, boards and other parts of the organization. The following points highlight how legal professionals can build influence, manage risk and create long-term value in their roles.

- Anticipate risk, understand risk and have a plan – understand your personal risk tolerance as a legal professional, your client's risk tolerance and the risk profile of the main stakeholder
- Be prepared and understand your client's goal and the perspectives of other involved parties
- Be confident – trust and believe in yourself and your instincts
- The road to success is always under construction – it is important to determine what success means to you and the institution you act for
- Legal counsel need to create an environment where the board and management understand the guardrails in place to ensure the organization has the skills to act
- It is hard to be heard when you're not being seen - bring yourself to the table and take up space
- Integrate yourself into the business to be seen as an investment instead of an expense
- Understand that everyone has a different agenda, purpose and objective – align and find the common purpose
- To enjoy your work in the practice of law for the long term, you must do it with your authentic self

Empowering general counsel as trusted leaders and strategic advisors

In the conversation, and reflecting on her time in politics, Sonya spoke about the complexities of navigating government structures and emphasized the need to anticipate political change, understand risk and prepare strong mitigation plans. She explained that all governments experience change, and organizations that plan for transitions adapt more quickly, maintain stability and continue advancing their objectives. She emphasized that general counsel plays a key role in this process. They monitor legislative and regulatory developments, assess how changes affect operations

and advise leadership on proactive strategies to manage changing risks. By building relationships with policymakers and industry associations, general counsel can gain early insight into shifting government priorities. General counsel also strengthen continuity by embedding risk awareness into governance processes, keeping compliance frameworks adaptable and guiding organizations through transitions with clear, practical advice that protects both legal and business interests.

For general counsel and boards, Marina shared the importance of respecting the rule of law as the foundation of sound governance and decision-making. Court rulings—though sometimes slow—redefine legal and regulatory expectations, influence corporate conduct and shape future risk. General counsel help boards anticipate and interpret these shifts, ensuring that corporate actions align with evolving legal standards and uphold the organization's integrity and accountability.

Melinda focused on corporate governance and the role of general counsel in advancing business objectives by understanding stakeholders, aligning with corporate mandates and ensuring key issues remain on the board's agenda.

Specifically, for in-house counsel, they discussed the importance of becoming a trusted advisor, suggesting that in-house legal teams can work to provide accurate and thorough information to management to become a resource and a voice at the table. Melinda encouraged embedding the legal team in the business. In-house counsel should understand the business strategy and seek out mentorship opportunities to create more organic conversations and become integrated into the business rather than being seen as a consultant.

She explained that business transactions are nuanced, and the legal team can be an objective third party to view the corporation's actions from an independent perspective and see if specific actions are aligned with the overall objectives of the transaction.

Together, they reflected on finding their voice as women in leadership, the importance of preparation, confidence and taking up space, and the value of building meaningful connections through informal conversations. They spoke about getting to know who you are dealing with, finding common ground to move work forward and becoming trusted advisors by embedding within the business, fostering trust and providing clear, informed guidance that supports strategic decision-making.

General counsel: Set the agenda for better governance and stronger decisions

1. **Create nuanced standing agenda items for board meetings.** Standing agenda items have a multitude of functions and additional, nuanced items can be helpful.
    - Live standing agenda items allow the team to be proactive and aware of issues that may arise, ensuring they can be addressed before a crisis occurs.
    - Standing items progress the business of the company. In-house counsel can add value to the business by creating and acting upon standing agenda items to encourage advancement.

- Third, boards can become overwhelmed, and having standing agenda items can help narrow the focus and curate the issues that need to be addressed in a timely manner.
- Additional standing agenda items can be used to ensure important ongoing topics—such as safety and cybersecurity—are consistently reviewed and updated, reinforcing the organization's commitment to risk management and accountability.

2. **Be seen as an investment, not an expense.**
   - General counsel must show up and demonstrate they are the investment rather than an expense. Aspects of this include understanding the business and/or transaction, coming prepared with an understanding of the end goal, bringing knowledge and being ready to share it, becoming embedded in management to be part of the conversation, being a trusted advisor through thorough and consistent communication, and becoming a valued resource.
   - General counsel can also demonstrate that they understand the business strategy, recognize the objectives at play and work with management on aligned priorities.
3. **Recognize, understand and implement your organization's internal mandates.**
   - Most organizations have established mandates for numerous roles and committees; however, it is important for them to be effectively implemented and acted upon. It is the role of legal advisors to remind the organization of what their mandates are, assist in carrying them out, and adjust them to fit the organization's needs.

Connect with us

To discuss any of the topics outlined in this article or other matters related to their practices, please contact Melinda, Marina or Sonya below.

By

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