Being an effective and influential leader as an in-house counsel

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As their careers progress, many lawyers find themselves making the switch from law firm to in-house counsel within a company or organization. Leadership as in-house counsel differs from other workplace settings because in-house counsel are active participants in the business itself in addition to providing legal services and expertise.

BLG, a proud sponsor of the ACC Alberta Fall Conference 2021, recently hosted ***Leadership: Managing Up and Across***, a panel discussion highlighting the leadership influence that in-house counsel have within their organizations. Participants discussed how to navigate office dynamics, remote teams and flexible/hybrid work environments, increased responsibility for the legal team and effective partnership and contribution. The esteemed panellists were:

- Malinda Kellett – Managing Director & President, Durum Capital
- Curtis Serra – General Manager, Commercial, Suncor
- Chika Onwuekwe – QC – Vice President, Legal, General Counsel and Corporate Secretary, Trican Well Service Ltd.

Alan Ross, BLG's Regional Managing Partner (Calgary), moderated the panel discussion.

Navigating office dynamics

Panelists discussed networking within the company across departments, working with a new boss or direct report outside of the legal team, dealing with multi-generational differences (e.g. boomers, millennials, etc.) and the role that the legal team plays within an organization.

According to Suncor's Curtis Serra, how you present your identity as a legal team to the business matters significantly. Serra suggested sitting down and creating a team philosophy for providing business services as a way to build up trust and credibility for your team within the organization.

Trican's Chika Onwuekwe added that having a deep understanding of the business is equally important. Onwuekwe said that listening, interacting and having regular

conversations with your colleagues across departments is key to becoming a trusted advisor for the organization.

With respect to handling intergenerational differences, the panelists shared that solutions arise by fostering relationships and developing your people and communication skills through:

- getting to know your colleagues' values and work preferences;
- being open-minded to new approaches and innovations; and
- being self-aware and trying to learn from your colleagues.

Navigating remote teams and the transition to flexible work/hybrid work environments

Panelists discussed the ability to provide strategic leadership when working remotely and collaboration with remote environments.

"In remote working times, it becomes increasingly important and critical to make sure you are dedicating focused leadership energy and effort into your team," said Serra. "Once you put that energy and thoughtfulness into being a leader, the dividends are amazing when you see it in terms of how your team will react and respond to that."

Durum Capital's Malinda Kellett explained that being deliberate about improving communication and creating opportunities for casual and informal interactions is important for relationship building as we continue to move towards virtual and hybrid work environments.

- For example, at the start of each meeting Kellett asks each member to share a weekly "personal great" and "professional great" with the team. This exercise allows team members to think of their colleague as an individual and better understand them as a person while working remotely.

Onwuekwe added that leaders should recognize that hybrid work is here to stay, and should ask themselves, "How does this help my company better attract people to work for me?"

Navigating increased responsibility for the legal team

Panelists discussed how the legal team role could include transformational change and expectations from members in terms of ownership and leadership within an organization.

When asked if legal teams can change or shape an organization, Kellett responded with "Absolutely."

Kellett said that in-house legal departments should act as thought partners who are able to bring different perspectives to work through problems and find the right solutions. Legal teams should be proactive by recognizing the potential impacts of a problem for the larger part of the business instead of focusing on the smaller issue at hand. In-

house counsel can lead those conversations by initiating discussions with business leaders early on.

Some examples of emerging areas where legal departments can play an ownership and leading role include ESG, EDI and Indigenous Relations.

Navigating effective partnership and contribution

Panelists discussed how legal teams could become more visible, effective and valued contributors to other sectors of the company.

Onwuekwe said this ultimately comes down to trust. As in-house counsel, your colleagues should see you as part of the team, not just “the lawyer”. To gain trust, it is important to be respectful, actively work on communicating and building relationships across departments and try not to overpromise.

To learn more about in-house counsel leadership, legal functions, management and more, or for a link to the full panel discussion, please contact us at RSVPCalgary@blg.com.

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