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Perception is Everything: How To Be Perceived As A Leader

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Perception is Everything: How to Be Perceived as a Leader

As I sat down to write this article on how lawyers can be perceived as leaders, a daily legal news email popped up, with an article that again brought home the importance of perception and being viewed as a leader for anyone hoping to someday have the role of General Counsel.

The article detailed how a major international pharmaceutical company – we'll call them Pharma A - had just chosen as their new GC someone who was most recently a Deputy GC at a totally different pharma company here in the U.S.

Now Pharma A has hundreds of lawyers in-house all over the world, and at least 50 very qualified in-house lawyers here in the US. And yet, when their current GC left, they did not consider any of them for the position; they went outside.

Companies going outside when the General Counsel position opens up is certainly not a unique occurrence. Here in the DFW area, one company with a large legal department has conducted outside searches for a new General Counsel not just once, but three times in a row in the past decade or so. Three different and exceptionally competent interim General Counsels were not given the opportunity to step up into the role.

A recent survey showed that in 2020, our pandemic year, more than 50% of open General Counsel positions were filled by outside searches. In addition, a very significant number of General Counsel openings simply remained unfilled rather than filled from within.

The point of these statistics on the frequency of General Counsel positions being filled from outside is this very important fact: if you want to be a General Counsel, being a super competent lawyer who is capable of leading is clearly not enough. You also have to be perceived as a leader by the decision makers, generally the executives and board members at your company who have the primary voice in choosing the General Counsel.

I have listed below the ten characteristics of leadership. The more of these you are perceived to have, the greater your chance of stepping into a General Counsel role. These characteristics have been chosen based on what surveys of corporate executives and board members have indicated is important to them. Demonstrating these characteristics can be crucial to being perceived by these relevant stakeholders as a leader who is capable of being their General Counsel.

Once you are in a General Counsel role, you may find other characteristics to be equally or even more important in successfully implementing your new role. But first you must get there. For that to happen, you need to be perceived not just as a good lawyer, but as a good leader.

Leadership Characteristic Number One: Be Perceived As a Good Communicator

Being perceived as a good communicator is not as simple as it might seem. Remember that you have to be perceived as a good communicator by the critical stakeholders, the executives and board members involved in the decision making. You have to communicate well to a business audience.

Important communication tips to keep in mind include:

- Your communication should demonstrate that you have an understanding of the business and the business objectives.
- Be proactive. Be sure you are bringing solutions to the table.
- Know your audience and adjust your communication style accordingly. Think about the subject from their point of view and present it with that in mind.
- Know your objective for each communication.
- Lead with the headline. Business people tend to not like long winded explanations – be sure to cut to the chase. And be sure to have the underlying details so you can answer any questions that arise.
- Always communicate with an eye to the future – executives and board members tend to be more focused on the next quarter than on this one.
- Avoid legalese jargon. Use their business-speak whenever possible.
- Simplify – take advantage of stories and analogies to communicate more complex matters easily, and consider using visuals to simplify complex legal matters.
- Listen. Always listen. The more you understand your audience, the more effective the communication will be.

And remember that knowing how to communicate that you have some or all of these leadership characteristics will also be important, as not every decision making stakeholder will have the experience of working side by side with you and seeing it for themselves. Know what your personal message points are and how to communicate those successfully to others.

Leadership Characteristic Number Two: Be Perceived as Confident

A recent survey of business executives on why certain middle management personnel were not promoted made clear that being confident is relevant in being perceived as a leader – more than 85% of individuals who were not promoted were described as not having confidence. No one is comfortable when the advice being given by their lawyer sounds tentative or unsure. Of course, this is not to say that you should present indefinite information as a truth; rather it's to say that you should deliver the advice confidently, even if it's explaining why it's a gray area of the law.

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