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Top 10 Tips to Develop In-House Legal Leaders

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Highlights:

- *Help each team member find their unique leadership path.*
- *Allow a team member to shadow you on a high visibility or high priority situation.*
- *Share the practical realities of running the legal department.*
- *Team training sessions not only help your team learn, it can also build camaraderie.*
- *Support your team members' continuing education.*

The way to get the most out of your team members is to develop each person into a leader. This does not mean that you have to set them onto the path of becoming General Counsel (GC). In truth, many of our colleagues would like to forge a path of leadership within the Legal team (or even elsewhere in an organization) that doesn't culminate as a GC. Leadership has many facets, leading people, leading large projects, or leading as a trusted advisor with an expertise to help business partners. Of course, if the ultimate goal is to become a GC, these Top 10 Tips are equally useful. In return, those leaders will provide valuable service to their current team and company, provide the GC with a succession plan and quality support, and go on to build leadership skills in others.

1. Know Your Team. Every team has a shining star or even a few exceptional teammates who express interest in leadership. As a manager, developing a leader means helping each person find their individual path. Defining what leadership means is an individual journey, and you have an opportunity to focus your team's attention on finding their unique voice and strengths in leadership. One size does not fit all was never truer than when developing each individual into the type of leader they yearn to be.

To get to know your team in ways that can help you foster their leadership journey, try some of these activities to bring out their communication styles, learning styles, and personality profiles: i) the [Myers-Briggs Type Indicator](#), ii) [DiSC profile](#), and iii) the [True Colors](#) Methodology. Each of these activities can help your budding leader decide on the best way to develop your leadership skills in line with your respective preferences and talents. The benefits of these preference and personality indicators will

enhance shaping the more human-centered skills, and allow you and each team member to understand how to be their best self in a multitude of situations.

2. Map Out a Career Plan. Many lawyers will have a path set for them depending on their summer internships, family law practices, or other opportunities that may have been presented during their educational years. Some may have arrived in-house from a law firm where they had a narrow focus into the more generalist in-house world. Not unlike choosing law school classes and electives, there is value in exploring all the in-house options and seeing if there is a path that sparks the person's interest, or works well with existing strengths.

To support someone taking a new path, allow them to fill-in for a colleague who is going out on an extended leave, or set up a strength training option where they shadow and second chair with a colleague. Share practical information with anyone who shows an interest in a certain path. Being a GC means understanding Corporate Entity Governance, Compliance, often Securities, and certain Board skills and even how to manage a budget. For a different path, such as Chief Privacy Officer, or Chief Compliance Officer, or Head of Commercial Transactions, walk through the necessary continuing education and experience they will need to pursue these leadership roles. Providing a clear path will ensure that they use their time wisely in becoming a leader in their chosen area.

3. Lead by Example. In a fast-paced business environment, there is little time to sit down and teach someone everything you know. Allowing a team member to shadow you on a high visibility or high priority situation, will give them invaluable insight into what you do, and will show them how to approach novel or challenging issues. When you are challenged with a novel problem, such as whether to allow employees to use their own electronic devices for company business, involve them in brainstorming, have them review the situation, and ask them to provide their solution and engage in thoughtful discussion on options. Use these opportunities to assess their strengths, and identify where they take a special interest. Practice without the pressure of responsibility will allow them to progress.

4. Prepare a Seat at the Table. "Unboss". "Debunk the hierarchy". These are concepts that are gaining traction quickly in many areas of business. It used to be that certain meetings and projects were reserved for certain titles. That kind of thinking tends to result in the emergence of only a few leaders and many unhappy and unfulfilled team members, high turnover rates, intolerable administrative and organizational bottlenecks, and single points of failure. To counteract that tendency, introduce your team members to the types of questions and problems you wrestle with as a manager and leader. For example, ask for their input on organizational design, or where resources need to be used, and give input on what skills are really needed to excel at certain roles. Send these rising leaders to meetings in your place, if you are double-booked. This allows you to ease the pressure on yourself, as well. Introduce them to the executive level so they understand how to interact with different roles in the organization, learn what's important to each executive, and understand how to support varied business goals.

Work towards them taking on leadership of larger projects, or perhaps be the point of contact for a high impact issue, or high needs business team. For instance, allow the team to contribute to presentations to the Executive level and the Board of Directors. Even if they are not in the actual meeting, they will be confident that their work is well represented and appreciated. If you feel they are ready, then have them present the material and practice their executive presence. An example of a leadership role within Legal is overseeing Privacy. This type of assignment engages all aspects of in-house leadership, including substantive knowledge, exercising judgment, project management, executive presentation skills, and continual commitment to success. Providing these opportunities can create leaders who can step in to contribute in multiple areas.

5. Mentorship v. Sponsorship. Know the difference; mentorships are relationships that are built organically and cannot be forced. As a manager, you can become a sponsor, which means you are purposeful and intentional in advancing another person's career development. For instance, introduce them to your network, encourage them to build their own network. Have them join peers from other companies in informal roundtables. [Join ACC!](#) Encourage them to speak at continuing legal education (CLEs) events, [write articles \(such as those ACC publishes\)](#), and to exercise their own thought leadership. This type of support and show of confidence is invaluable. It also teaches them how to be a sponsor for others along their career journey.

6. Allow Time for Continuing Education. Every manager understands the CLE requirement, but you can take continuing education to a new level. Encourage your team to engage in leadership and management training. Some skills can be learned on the job, but there are a lot of skills that require more time, attention, and practice. Developing a leadership style is an important part of being a successful leader. Recommend and support attendance to programs and conferences, such as the [ACC Leadership Academy](#), [Corporate Counsel University](#), [the Executive Leadership Institute](#), [the ACC In-house Counsel Certification Program](#), and recommend books that worked for you. One of my favorites for new managers is [The First 90 Days](#), by Michael D. Watkins. For non-managers, [The 7 Habits of Highly Successful People](#), by Stephen R. Covey, is still a classic.

7. Encourage the Human Skills. Leaders need IQ and EQ – Emotional Intelligence / Emotional Quotient. No one wants to work for a manager who doesn't have awareness of how his or her actions, speech and management style can inspire or deflate. The basic skills included in targeted management training are:

- i) [Active Listening](#);
- ii) [Crucial Conversations](#) (when the stakes are high, opinions differ, and emotions are strong);
- iii) [Managing Stress](#); and,
- iv) [Public Speaking](#).

You can have your team members attend third-party programs, but providing team trainings can also provide bonding experiences and foster camaraderie.

8. De-mystify the Business of Running a Legal Team. Many consider the role of General Counsel, or a legal manager, as one of prestige. These roles require substantive knowledge, project management, business acumen, and strong leadership skills. However, some GCs don't share the practical reality of running the department. When a team understands the reality of managing people, setting budgets, choosing an outside counsel panel, and opining on legal operations, it will prepare them for the reality of leadership and emphasize that no task is too unimportant, even for the GC.

9. Leave Time for Play and Community Contributions. Work-life integration is important to avoid burn out, and to keep your emerging leaders feeling like they have the mental and physical stamina to address the work in a competent manner. Addiction, burnout, depression, and other stress-induced conditions have long been a reality of the legal profession. Leaders have learned the value of wellness as a part of the daily work routine. No one can give 100% all the time. A recent ACC Docket Article with [10 Tips for Mindfulness and Well-being](#) (March 2021) is a great resource to share with your team on the benefits of taking time away from the job to be an even better leader.

10. Be Willing to Let Go. As an established leader, you are growing a less experienced legal professional into an independent leader. One day, you will be able to promote them, name them as your successor, or even watch them take on a new role at another organization. The last scenario is bittersweet, but in each of these situations, be proud. Being the manager that helped a team member map out their leadership journey and ultimately reach success is the hallmark of a true leader. Watching them pay it forward is worth its weight in gold.

Conclusion

Although organizations focus on succession planning for their management layer, it's not enough. There is value in building multiple leaders within your organization whether they want to become a GC, team managers, or remain individual contributors. While certain characteristics like charisma cannot be taught, you can encourage and develop confidence, logical problem solving, time management, career development, and practical leadership skills that will serve to define leaders, regardless of the actual job title or role. You will find that building leadership skills in all members of your team will improve your team's effectiveness, and boost the value of Legal within the larger organization.

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Check Out Additional Resources:

- ACC Resource Collection: [Leadership Skills](#)
- ACC Top Ten: [Top Ten Tips for Improving Your Career](#) (2019), by Rich Cohen, President and General Counsel of Corporate Creations
- ACC Article: [The Half-Time of Your Career](#) (2020), by Rich Cohen, Former President and General Counsel of Corporate Creations

- ACC Checklist: [Tips to Be a More Effective Communicator](#) (2019), by Seyfarth Shaw LLP
- ACC On-demand Program: [6 Strategies to Help Build Your Influence](#) (2019) – 38 minutes
- Presentation: [“Talk Like TED”: Tips and Tricks for Public Speaking](#) (2016), by Steve Leroy

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