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# The makings of a great general counsel



Bernadette Baynie of Batelco group reveals the top ten traits a general counsel should develop to maximise growth for the organisation.

**M**ost General Counsel (GCs) today are highly visible executives, holding significant positions of influence in their organisations.

Whilst they enjoy an important seat at the top of the executive ladder, their accountabilities to their Boards of Directors and CEOs have increased considerably over recent years with the pressures of industry competition, digitisation, regulation, corporate governance and enforcement. Not only must General Counsel lead their law departments successfully and keep regulators at bay - they must also consistently protect their company's assets from risk whilst helping the business to maximise value from such assets.

GCs generally have the specialist technical knowledge, skills and experience to provide high calibre legal advice to their clients but what attributes do they need in order to make them stand out and become a valued asset to their organisation?

Here are the top ten leadership attributes that will enable GCs to achieve consistent success and maximise growth for their organisation:

## **1. INTEGRITY - An unquestionable level of integrity and commitment to their organisation.**

This attribute sits at the top of the list as it is a core value for GCs.

A GC who has unqualified integrity knows 'what is right' for their company and has the trusted voice and confidence to be able to relate such messages to their internal stakeholders - especially when it matters the most. This is irrespective of whether the relevant subject matter 'is legal or not', as something that is legal, does not always mean that it is right.

A GC with solid integrity and commitment will always seek to prioritise and promote the ethical and reputational considerations of a situation (ahead of

compliance with 'black letter law') in the best interests of their organisation.

## **2. BIGGER PICTURE PERSPECTIVE – A natural capability of stepping back with solid business acumen to assess the situation from a 30,000 metre perspective.**

The hallmark of a great GC is one who has: (i) a detailed understanding of the market dynamics of their industry; (ii) a sound enterprise perspective of their company's business; (iii) a fine capacity to think strategically and holistically in relation to the commercial imperatives of a situation; (iv) assess a problem from multiple perspectives; and (iv) advise confidently upon the situation as swiftly as possible.

## **3. JUDGMENT - A capacity to readily assess issues and risks and make swift decisions and recommendations that are reliable and unwavering**

The value that a high-calibre GC brings to the table is their strategic thinking and capacity to envision objectively what is in the best interests of the company (not just the individuals that help to run it). A great GC knows how to quickly win, in any situation presented to them the trust, confidence and commitment of their clients. They have the capability to: (i) promptly sift through data; (ii) identify various issues and risks; (ii) forecast potential consequence and situations ahead of time; and deliver their messages clearly and concisely to their audience. They know how to follow through and make sound and swift judgments and credible recommendations to their CEOs and Boards with 'an independent voice'. More importantly they know how to: say 'no' to their C-suite executives, in the best interests of the company, when it matters the most and convey messages that other "do not want to hear" with fortitude and conviction, whilst making them feel at the

same time like they have had a caring client experience.

**4. VISION** – *The ability to visualise the nature and scope of the legal services required to support the fulfilment of the strategic goals of the organisation.*

A highly-competent GC can focus upon, identify and envision from the outset the goals and strategies that need to be introduced to the legal department that will enable them to: (i) maximise value from the annual legal budget spend allocated to them; and (ii) meaningfully partner and support their internal clients to successfully: deliver major revenue earning projects for the organisation and achieve relevant business performance targets in quarterly and annual work plans.

**5. EMPOWERMENT** – *Instill confidence in your employees and a strong belief that they can achieve consistent success in their roles.*

A capable GC know how to empower their employees to take successful charge of their work; make timely decisions and set performance targets for their direct reports that are aligned to the overall business objectives of the organisation.

**6. TEAMWORK** – *Leading by example and uniting the team deliver their best performance.*

A highly-competent GC know that the glue that holds a team together is their capacity to care and support each other and to act in unison at all times. This level of team commitment requires a great deal of time to cultivate and maintain. A strong and competent GC will consistently seek to promote talent, lead by example and give their best to their team - this will in turn over time to enable their team members to bring out the best in themselves and each other.

**7. COMMUNICATION** - *The ability to successfully impart key information and messages to a variety of audiences in a clear, concise and meaningful manner.*

This attribute is fundamental for all GC. A outstanding GC knows to convey complex information and messages in simple language to a variety of audiences. They do so with confidence and a compelling voice that is both engaging and convincing.

**8. INFLUENCE** - *This attribute involves gaining support and buy-in from others when it matters the most.*

An effective GC has the capacity to successfully present comprehensive advice and compelling submissions that influence the strategic thinking of key internal and external stakeholders of the organisations; such as boards, executive committees and regulators. They understand the key values and specific interests of their stakeholders and know how to direct information and business cases to them that will positively influence their thinking and decision making for their organisation.

**9. RELATIONSHIPS** - *This attribute involves investing their time, energy and commitment to develop and maintain effective and harmonious relationships across the organisation and beyond it.*

A competent GC appreciates the value and benefits of establishing collaborative and committed relationships with their direct lawyer reports and their fellow C-Suite executives. They make time to get to know these individuals and meaningfully celebrate joint achievements and successes with them. They also know how to foster and cultivate trusting and loyal relationships within their organisation and with their external law firm service providers in order to achieve the best overall outcomes for their corporations.

**10. CREATIVITY and INNOVATION** - *The ability to lead innovation by identifying new opportunities and ways of generating real value for their company*

This final attribute is one that will set a successful GC apart from the rest. It involves the capacity of a GC to consistently innovate by introducing new methodologies and thinking to the organisation - then weave such approaches into their decision-making and processes in order to generate valuable revenues for their organisation and reduce operational expenditure. 🚀



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