



Frolic and Detour: Strategically Managing Career Transitions on the Path to In-house Leadership

Skills and Professional Development





CHEAT SHEET

- ***Stretch yourself.*** As you consider a stretch role or opportunity, begin by identifying your strengths, neutralizing your weaknesses, and getting others to invest in your success. Understand that by accepting a stretch role, you are no longer an expert on the subject.
- ***Into the promotion.*** Once you've finally received your promotion, it's important to take some time before making significant changes in your new sphere of responsibility. Engage your team in the changes you want to make to get their input.
- ***Expanding and contrasting.*** Evolving business conditions can sometimes lead to a reduction in in-house responsibilities. Look for an opportunity in this change, and remember that it's important for a leader to look beyond the personal impact before considering next steps.
- ***All in the tone.*** It's important to be perceived as a serious candidate. Clearly state your interests and only consider opportunities that allow you to build upon those elements.

No path to leadership in law can be fully planned, nor will it unfurl without transition or complexity. Careers focused on growth and an ascendance to in-house leadership require a bit of “frolic and detour.” Each of these detours, whether upward, downward, or side-to-side, require agility and a strategy for managing the transition. In this article, we share insight, advice, and techniques from a number of different perspectives so that you can leverage your next in-house career transition. Thoughtfully and intentionally managing these changes — whether self-imposed or foisted upon you — is a critical skillset for those who aspire to sustainably lead in-house.

Making the jump from individual contributor to law department leader

While many equate becoming a leader within a law department to a promotion, this step is not a necessary precondition to leading. In almost every law department, there are opportunities to lead projects that impact the entire legal team or company (e.g., planning an annual legal department retreat, or driving process improvement initiatives such as implementing a new technology for the department). If you aspire to become a leader within the legal department, you should volunteer to lead one of these efforts. Be sure to make it known to your manager that you have an interest in leading a department-wide project so that when opportunities arise, you are top-of-mind whether you’re in the room or not. While project work will typically be “in addition” to your current responsibilities, it will allow you to demonstrate your leadership potential and work more closely with other members in the legal team — opportunities which are invaluable to growing your role within any organization.

Volunteering for “extracurricular” responsibilities outside of the legal department can also serve this purpose. Every company needs great thinkers and doers to perform activities outside the purview of the legal department. For instance, leading a charity campaign, presenting at a management meeting, or starting a new community initiative. Showing a willingness to step into roles within the company, above and beyond your “day” job, will pay in huge dividends.

Becoming a leader within the legal department is often tied to managing other lawyers, which requires a different skillset than pure “lawyering” to be successful. Most in-house lawyers begin their careers at law firms and then move into a company’s legal team — a path of experience that does not always provide the needed training to be an effective manager. Effective people management is a critical skill for in-house lawyers to master as they progress along their path to leadership, and should not be overlooked.

It is important for you to recognize that managing others is not everyone’s inherent strength, and even the best manager will have an ongoing need for education and improvement in this area. ACC offers great resources for lawyers transitioning into a management role. Don’t wait until you are promoted to take advantage of these resources. Even more importantly, lawyers who aspire to take on leadership roles within their departments should make their aspiration known to their manager, and work on a development plan to prepare him or her for promotion in future.

In addition to preparation via ACC resources, lawyers should take advantage of any internal management training programs that their company offers. These development programs often lean heavily toward attendees from the operations side, so it is important that leaders within the legal department are aware of your desires so that they can lobby to have you included. Participation will not only help you develop core skills, but will also increase your awareness of the company’s culture and philosophy on management.

One of us was less than a year into their first in-house role when she was tapped to attend her company's foundations of management course. Given her background in private practice, she did not view this as value-added work. She was worried about the tasks that would be piling up when she attended these full day sessions for several weeks. In hindsight, the program positively impacted her career in ways she never realized at the time. She was given an instant network from areas within the company that she never had previously interacted with in her legal role. When certain questions needed answering, she was often the person who knew who to call for a solution solely based on this class. This cohort "came up" the ranks together in the company and would try to have lunches to stay connected — a network that proved invaluable time and time again.

Now a decade later, she makes it a point to read management books, like *360 Degree Leader*, *One Minute Manager*, and *The Speed of Trust*. It is vital that we, as legal managers, do not trust that our successful legal accomplishments will translate into effective management and leadership within the law department on their own. Lawyers have to consciously and deliberately learn how to manage employees, and move from tactical execution to being strategic.

Side-to-side: Expanding to your potential by leveraging a stretch role or opportunity

Opportunities come in many coats, and are not always understood to be the obvious next step. Some, for instance, are considered to be lateral moves — which refer to either internal or external changes to your organization which, on their face, are not clear promotions. Don't be afraid to consider lateral moves if they will give you skills, exposure, or experience that will help you move up in the future.

Previously, one of us held the role of chief litigation counsel and was a direct report to the general counsel. She saw her workload — and job security — diminishing as the company worked through a group of significant cases that had originally led to the creation of her role. At the same time, she knew that she wanted to move away from litigation and toward transactional work. When an opportunity arose to move into the company's bankruptcy and workout group, she jumped at it — despite the fact that it was a lateral move at best. The new role turned out to be a fantastic learning experience that she never regretted. Through the transition, she learned that flexibility and openness to change is a key characteristic of leadership.

If you can't or don't want to change roles, stretch by looking for projects that you can take on in your current position that will allow you to develop new skills and gain visibility. Look for a business need that is going unfilled and propose a project to address it.

That leads us to a second type of transition to consider, namely a stretch opportunity. A stretch opportunity is a project or other work assignment that gives you a chance to grow or develop in some way. As you consider stretch opportunities, begin by identifying your strengths, understanding the things that you do well, and recognizing the topics that energize you. Because they are strengths, you will excel at them. At the same time, identify and neutralize (as best you can) your weaknesses. Get others to invest in your success. If you don't have the support of your colleagues in a stretch role, to answer your questions and ensure you don't make any irreparable mistakes, it will be much more difficult to succeed. Stretch roles are perfect opportunities to fill a gap in your résumé. However, understand that once you take on a stretch assignment, you are no longer completely an expert on the subject. Use the opportunity to ask "outsider" questions and give an outsider perspective.

To succeed in a stretch opportunity or a lateral move, you must be willing to do your homework; you may need to take courses and/or do more basic, lower level work in the new area to pay your dues and stabilize your foundation. However, also recognize that what you bring to most new roles is more about judgment — knowing when to ask for help and having an instinct for risk and opportunity — not so much technical expertise. Being asked to make a lateral move into a highly technical area that you have no background in should be questioned carefully.

From middle management to leader of significant influence

Job titles do not automatically translate to influence. Lawyers recognize that their legal expertise earned them a seat at the table with the business, but it is important for lawyers to realize that such expertise will not keep you at the table. Having a strong network among company colleagues who respect your legal counsel will allow you to be influential on legal issues, but more is needed to influence strategic business decisions. Get out of your office and roll up your sleeves to gain first-hand knowledge about any problem you are trying to solve. One of us was facing a quality problem with a product and a mentor gave this advice: Go down to the assembly line, watch the assemblers, and talk to the supervisor to truly understand the problem and the impact of possible solutions. That solution was somewhat obvious when dealing with a product related issue, but the same approach can also be used with HR matters, accounting, marketing, etc. By showing additional interest in the technical side of the problem and leveraging your (hopefully) sharp analytical skills, you can begin to make important connections and develop a reputation as a “go-to” business-oriented problem solver.

Just as important is to continue to develop your internal network. Invite a colleague from another department to lunch to learn more about that division’s strategic goals, which can help you identify how legal can provide more value-added support. The key for each of these tactics is that you are making your understanding about the business and industry deeper. By demonstrating that your grasp of issues extends beyond a legal perspective, you can begin to weigh-in on “non-legal issues” and have your opinion valued.

Successfully launching after a promotion: You’ve caught the car, so now what do you do with it?

Success in any new position, particularly after a promotion, is all about relationships. We recommend putting outreach high on your list of first todos. Reach out to your predecessor (if possible); to your new direct reports; to your new peers (both inside the law department and in other areas with which you work, such as finance and HR); and to your internal clients. Ask them what you should know, and then truly listen. Let them get to know you, and try your best to get to know them in return. Always end an initial outreach session by asking for the other person’s support in a specific and targeted way. Outreach is not a one-time task — after making the rounds, repeat as often as necessary. In a situation in which you have been elevated above your former peers, this practice is particularly important.

Next, consider getting a coach. A coach is a professional expert who you or your company engages with to help you transform in some way, either in a specific skillset or holistically as a leader. A good coach can help you transition successfully into your new role by providing you with insight into possible areas of improvement. Your company may be willing to support you financially in this area, but if not, it is worth spending your own money. You may also want to find and consult a mentor. If you already have one, consult him or her about the challenges you face in this new role. If you don’t have a mentor, find someone either in your company or in another company who has held a similar

role to help you navigate the new challenges that you face.

It's also important to take some time before making significant changes in your new sphere of responsibility. Ideally, work with a savvy outside consultant who can give you objective insights into what is working and what needs work, in terms of talent evaluation, organizational structure, team dynamics, and technology. Be sure to connect with your internal clients to get their feedback about what is working well and what changes they would like to see in the legal team. Engage your team in the changes you do want to make. Get their input, while letting them know that you are the ultimate decider. Understand that most people are afraid of change and will do better if they know what is coming and feel heard in the decision-making process.

Managing a reduction in responsibilities or reduced team size

Evolving business conditions and shifting talent management needs can cause in-house legal departments to be prone to contraction and expansion in today's business environment. Those changes may at some point result in a reduction in your responsibilities, or a reduction in the size of your team. While these situations can be complex on a number of fronts, they require not only a positive outlook, but also a careful degree of attention so they do not derail your future growth.

First, consider the "why." Why was your role or team reduced? If the change was simply related to cost pressures, recognize and understand the complexities facing your business and deliver what you can to help spur growth for your company. However, if the change is driven in part by your individual performance, or an assessment by your manager, seek appropriate feedback so you can grow and learn from the moment. Once obtained, build or revise your development plan to incorporate the feedback. In short, understand what is driving your reduced team or role, and leverage that knowledge for your own development.

Next, look for an opportunity in that change. With any shift of this type, there is typically a gap to fill somewhere. Engage in a robust self-assessment, and use that data to double down on your strengths in a space where you can add greater value or fill in a gap created by the change. By exhibiting this growth mindset, you can display your resiliency and agility, allowing you to continue your growth and development even if it might feel like a failure or step back. Seek out the ways that you can use this time to build your personal brand and demonstrate that you can shine even during complex times.

Additionally, it is always important for a leader to look beyond just the impact on yourself. If you are managing a team through one of these situations, ensure that you are being mindful about the impact of the changes on them. Bringing thoughtful change management to your team as you manage complexity will not only ensure that they perform better, but also ensure that they are empowered to deliver their best work as they transition to a reduced scope. Demonstrating transparency and managerial courage are mission critical.

Finally, as you look toward your "next," begin building a script for how you will talk about the changes you experienced and why they occurred. It is never too early to think about how you will explain reduced responsibilities or a reduced size of your team as you look for a new opportunity. This includes internal and external messaging — part of building a long-term plan will rely on building a cogent story about the challenges you have faced and how you have reacted to them in a way that displays leadership.

Thoughtfully making a transition to a new organization for your next opportunity or dealing with an unexpected job loss

Be prepared for an opportunity, or the loss of an opportunity, to knock. Keep your LinkedIn profile up-to-date and be sure your profile photo is a professional head shot. Always listen to reputable search professionals who reach out to you and ensure that your basic résumé is current and ready to be tweaked for a specific opportunity.

In addition, it cannot be overstated how important your network and relationships are in providing fertile ground for opportunities to come to you, or to enable you to recover from an unexpected job loss. Many times, and particularly with in-house roles, candidates find a new opportunity as a result of a pre-existing relationship. Consequently, regularly and consistently managing and building your network is essential. Don't be haphazard about this — quality should trump quantity in your networking. Develop and follow a strategy for building and nurturing your network that matches your desired development plan.

Constantly refine your value-add proposition, and get comfortable talking about it. What do you bring to the table that is unique (or at least special)? Spend time building a strategy for and growing your connections so that people will think of you when opportunities arise — and be sure to refer others for opportunities that are not right for you. Stay on top of the news in your target industry/companies/locations and nurture relevant contacts.

From the emotional perspective, it is important to stay positive. You should never complain about your current company or your boss — it's possible to let people know you're open to new opportunities without saying negative things about your current job, and badmouthing a previous boss will make a new potential boss wonder when you'll start talking about them. Master the art of demonstrating passion for your current role while signaling a desire for continuous growth. Remember that the best platform for getting your next job is success in your current role. The pursuit of most opportunities will end without leading to a new role, so don't forget about continuing to do great work in your current role while treating these attempts as learning experiences.

As you think about working through this transition, be a serious candidate. You should be able to be very clear as to what elements are sufficient to interest you in a different role and only consider seriously the opportunities that have at least some of those elements — reporting relationship, expansion of role, managerial opportunity, size of the company, attractive industry, etc. Ensure that the people who are critical to a successful move are on board with the your decided parameters. Specifically, you should not pursue roles that involve relocation to a city that your partner hates, for example. Think about other family obligations — aging parents, children, etc. — that could stop you from actually making a move. Don't waste the time of recruiters or prospective employers if you're not serious about the opportunity.

When an opportunity does arise, be responsive and honest. Do your homework on the company and the industry, and do your homework on yourself — be ready to present your best for this position. Only one person can actually get each job, so ensure that you are getting all that you can by learning from the process and cultivating the contacts that you make along the way.

When you do get the job, be professional in your separation conversations but do not be open to counteroffers. Remember why you were open to the new opportunity in the first place and recognize that once you have accepted another role, you are to some extent tainted in your old one. Recognize

that renegeing on an accepted offer will not endear you to recruiters and prospective employers. Be helpful in your soon-to-be-former employer's transition, and don't burn bridges, but also be firm in your decision that you've made.

Finally, if possible, take some time off — it may be a while before you can do this again with a clear conscience. Find an external coach to help you through the transition to your new role and then dig in and enjoy.

Where to start on your search for the right coach? Ask friends for recommendations, or seek out experts who could offer reliable referrals. Do not worry too much about whether the coach is local, as coaching via phone or videoconference is common and effective. Ensure you read up on coaching FAQ's on the [International Coach Federation website](#) and use their directory of certified coaches. In short, do your research, your own diligence, and find a coach bespoke for your needs.

Using your career transition, even if it brings struggle and complexity with it, as a springboard for success

The common theme we've highlighted throughout this article is that, regardless of the type of career transition discussed, building a strategy for growing and bringing visibility to your strengths is a core competency for lawyers aspiring to lead. That advice applies to the traditional "success" of a promotion, new job, or new project, just as it does to the perceived "failure" of a reduction in responsibilities. At all times, consider how you can use the transition you are facing or living as a springboard to the next step in your leadership journey.

Parting direction with these many types of transitions in mind? Bringing grit and a growth mindset to navigating those transitions is a baseline expectation for success. Moreover, you cannot navigate detours alone. Resource yourself appropriately, whether it be leveraging your network, personal board of directors, mentors, and sponsors. Don't forget to look to outside experts, like coaches, and leadership and business resources. Above all, be intentional about your path through the transition, building a strategy and matching it to your development plan. And don't forget to have fun along the way, making it more frolic, and less detour.

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