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The Wizard Behind the Curtain: How to Leverage Key Strategies to Fuel Your Path to In-House Leadership

Skills and Professional Development



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CHEAT SHEET

- ***The long and winding road.*** Career paths to top leadership positions are rarely linear — embrace the twists and turns.
- ***Know your strengths.*** Maximize your chance to succeed by identifying your strengths and proactively improving upon your weaknesses.
- ***Invest in yourself.*** Secure feedback from trusted advisors and key members of your network.
- ***Build your brand.*** Self-branding requires concerted and prolonged effort, but the payoff is worth it.

Unlocking the path to in-house leadership can be complex and, at times, a bit of a mystery. However, with the right strategies and resources, lawyers striving to be leaders in their legal departments and beyond can ascend along that path by leveraging deliberate attention to progress. This article seeks to demystify the “how” part of the path to in-house leadership, sharing eight key strategies for in-house lawyers aspiring to lead. Whether it be by spending time “knowing thyself,” or building an authentic brand and influential personal board of directors, these strategies each offer resources and expert perspectives on how to leverage those strategies to the lawyer’s advantage.

The high points:

- Few, if any, paths to leadership in the in-house practice are linear, nor is success solely the result of an individual lawyer’s achievements in their technical practice. Technical expertise and excellence in one’s practice are the cost of entry, with a number of other forces driving the lawyer’s ascent to leadership.
- Generally, individuals who have achieved significant leadership roles in the in-house practice have done so by knowing their own strengths and opportunities for development, while also proactively creating and frequently refreshing a robust development plan that results in building strategic skill sets and leadership competencies.
- At the same time, those individuals are cognizant of and thoughtful about their internal and external personal brand, tweaking that brand along their path to leadership to use as a career lever and competitive advantage.
- Achieving and ascending along the path to leadership is often accelerated and enabled by the robust support of third parties, through both a network and a personal “board of directors,” which can include sponsors, mentors, trusted advisors, and key members of your network who leverage their influence and skillsets to support and assist along the way.
- Those individuals have also made concerted and strategic investments in their own development, while taking smart risks and stretch assignments along the way. Agility and resiliency are equally important skill sets.

You will often hear discussion about lawyers who have ascended to in-house leadership positions, with assertions that they were “lucky,” in the “right place at the right time,” or somehow came to their significant roles by serendipity. That misconception about the claimed leading role of “luck” on the path to in-house leadership reveals two things. First, it demonstrates a lack of understanding of the critical, multi-faceted strategies leveraged by successful individuals to advance their careers. Second, it shows a failure to recognize the deliberate, although not always visible, efforts required to

ascend on the path to leadership. In other words, what got you here will not get you there.

Through this article, we seek to not only demystify those strategies, but also to provide in-house lawyers with a short guide on how they can think about their career development plans, their personal brand, and their networks as they seek to undertake the path to a leadership role. We have leveraged conversations with career experts and experienced in-house professionals who are or have been on that journey as a looking glass with which to view those lessons.

Strategy 1: The importance of self-awareness

As with most things, the path to leadership begins with a hard look in the mirror. Rebecca Bortolotti, vice president and chief technology counsel at ConAgra Foods, notes that no journey to leadership can begin without a strong self-assessment. “You have to get your own house in order or you cannot make strides in your career in a strategic way,” Bortolotti says.

Bortolotti advises that the self-assessment process is really two-fold. First, the individual must identify the key characteristics that are required, and which are also competitive advantages, for the individual’s growth aspirations. Then, the individual must undertake a robust assessment of where the individual is on the continuum of those characteristics to begin the process of honing that lawyer’s key skills. That assessment has to be a wholesale inventory of strengths, opportunities, and other data points about the lawyer’s skills, personality, and passions. However, Bortolotti points out that you cannot make that assessment in a vacuum. You should not only be keeping track of the data you have about yourself, but should also be soliciting feedback from a full spectrum of individuals (e.g., supervisors, direct reports, internal clients, external connections, etc.) from both inside and outside of your organization.

What is typically the biggest hurdle for lawyers undertaking that self-assessment? Bortolotti notes it is not being curious enough to take a hard look at what it takes to be successful in whatever the lawyer’s aspiration is, and to make a realistic assessment as to how the lawyer’s skills and abilities truly match up to those required. Lawyers, as an occupational hazard, can be defensive, assembling facts to support the defense. When receiving feedback it is critical to be open to the full spectrum of inputs, leveraging the data to make necessary changes and bridge gaps where needed. Without being open to constructive feedback, and experiencing the discomfort that comes with it, you cannot experience impactful growth toward your development goals.

Strategy 2: Knowing your culture

After investing in knowing yourself, it will be essential to understand what makes for a successful leader in your organization’s culture and in the broader external culture. Individuals should be cognizant of the qualities and competencies of those who are successful in the organization and of what data that provides you about your organization’s culture of development and leadership. While all leaders will likely have their own perspective about the “what” and the “how” they think about their work, it is critical for a leader to be grounded in the unique drivers of the organization’s culture and its successful leaders.

“At its core, when someone truly understands their internal culture as well as their external, they will then be able to successfully influence. This ability is paramount on the path to leadership,” says Vijesh Patel, Head of the South Asia In-house Practice Group for Major, Lindsey & Africa. Regardless of the type of company you work for, from family-owned business to worldwide public company, those

organizations will have their own culture that leaders will need to learn, understand, and navigate. Individuals must separately be sophisticated operators in the external culture, ensuring they understand the uniqueness of that culture and how its hierarchies work both formally and informally. In short, “everything is local” and your development plan should reflect that principle.

Strategy 3: Rethinking and refreshing your development plan

On any complicated journey, you cannot reach your final destination without a detailed map. And that is exactly what your development plan is to your career. Kari Potts, corporate attorney for Valmont Industries and a board member for ACC’s Mid-America Chapter, highlighted the tremendous importance of having a development plan, and also refreshing it regularly to grow and stretch with your career and shifting goals.

Why is it so important to have a development plan? Potts points out that with the speed and breadth of the in-house practice, it is easy to get bogged down in day-to-day work, failing to make the investment in projects and development that will drive you toward your strategic goals. “Hard work is the imperative, but you must also have a roadmap to propel you forward, with checkpoints along the way,” Potts explains.

Potts also encourages flexibility when developing your career plan. Make it a living document that will change as your career grows and career aspirations change. As you move forward on the path to leadership, you will gather more data about yourself. In addition, organizations and industries also change. To that end, bringing agility and flexibility to your development plan enables you to take advantage of new data and unexpected opportunities.

One of the best pieces of advice Potts received about her development plan is to break it into shorter bites. “It is easier to lose sight of your development goals when you are looking out a full year ahead,” Potts says. “I started using a 90-day planning tool that broke development goals out into a 30-day window, with a 60-day look ahead to the future.” Potts noted that breaking her development into shorter time frames made the plan less overwhelming, and her goals more achievable.

Potts also highlighted the importance of support, and the accountability that support drives. “I have built a group of people who do not let me get off course, and offer me opportunities and support,” Potts shares. That team is not only familiar with Potts’ development plan, but also checks in with Potts on how she is achieving against her goals. They also keep their eyes open and alert her to opportunities they become aware of that would support her development goals. “Development is hard, but so rewarding,” Potts says. “Having a supportive network to share candid feedback and encourage you along the way is truly transformative for your development plan.”

Strategy 4: Deploying your authentic personal brand

Paula Edgar helps lawyers and law students every day to develop and deploy an effective personal brand strategy. Unfortunately, many of her clients and mentees see “branding” as a dirty word. “There is a lot of pushback around having to advocate for yourself, or having to do anything extra because they feel they have reached the goal and do not need to do any more,” explains Edgar, principal of PGE LLC, a boutique coaching and consulting firm, and a former lawyer. However, Edgar points out that this is a dangerous misconception that misses the strategic importance of a thoughtful personal brand.

As in-house counsel, your brand is as important to your organization as it is to you as an individual. “Aligning your brand with the brand of your organization adds value,” Edgar explains. For example, if you are writing an article or serving on a panel, you elevate not only your brand, but also the brand of your company by reaching an audience not readily accessible to the company.

“The more you invest in being deliberate and strategic about your brand, the more you are helping yourself,” Edgar notes. Leveraging your self-assessment work, you can be well positioned to understand your strengths and how to use them in support of your brand. Some strategies Edgar recommends to lawyers who are working to develop and maintain that brand include:

- Attend events at least every other month to stay visible. Be front and center as an active member of the community, or a subject matter expert.
- Dip your toe or jump fully in to social media. Social media speaks for you when you are not there. Take a balanced approach and plan strategically week by week. You do not necessarily have to promote what you are doing but post an article that may be of interest to your network.
- Speak on or moderate a panel once or twice a year. Be in a place where you can be teaching and demonstrating your knowledge as an expert, or position yourself to be learning and benefiting from others’ knowledge.

In summing up the value of a personal brand, Edgar states that focusing on your brand can drive your career strategy. There is no time like the present to start moving that strategy forward. “Get over the initial hurdle of ‘why should I do this?’” and just do it. Decide what you want to be known for and put yourself out there in a different, more strategic manner,” Edgar says.

Tracking your individual development

When looked at a year or more at a time, an individual development plan and its milestones can sometimes become overwhelming. Consequently, it is often beneficial to have a separate plan with a shorter time frame that reflects outputs, milestones, and required resources along the way. Belcher often recommends to individuals on her team or that she coaches to leverage a 90-day plan tool. That tool consists of three columns on one page, each column representing a 90-day period. A sample 90-day plan table, with subcategories for inputs, is provided below as a template. By seeing the upcoming three months on a single page, with a succinct map for the upcoming 30-day time period, individuals can more easily stay on their development track.

0-30 DAYS (MONTH)

- Priorities/goals
- Milestones
- Outputs
- Potential derailers/risks
- Manger inputs
- Other inputs from network

30-60 DAYS (MONTH)

- Priorities/goals
- Milestones
- Outputs
- Potential derailers/risks
- Manger inputs
- Other inputs from network

60-90 DAYS (MONTH)

- Priorities/goals
- Milestones
- Outputs
- Potential derailers/risks
- Manger inputs
- Other inputs from network

Strategy 5: Link your personal brand and your development plan

Damian Atkins, general counsel of Panasonic North America, set his sights on the general counsel position 10 years into his career. As part of that focus, he realized the importance of linking his development plan and his personal brand. “I looked at myself critically. There I was 10 years into my career and no one knew what I was doing, so what good was that doing me? What could I do to make myself known?” As Atkins realized, he needed to build a more powerful link between his brand and his goals, he began to explore how others had accomplished this successfully. “If they could do it, I could do it,” Atkins says. The linkage of those two efforts supported and empowered both of those tools as he continued along the path to eventually becoming a general counsel.

Atkins notes that you have to start with your strengths and use them as your base to build and empower your brand. “You cannot promote something that is not really there,” Atkins says. In addition, you have to be willing to continue to build muscles in other strategic spaces in support of your development plan, and then ensure that those new muscles are visible to your internal and external networks. By using the tools in your personal brand tool box, like social media, you can begin to purposefully and thoughtfully brand yourself and present your knowledge to your networks. That linkage is critical, according to Atkins. “Every day is game day and you have to treat it that way. You can’t take any days off and you have to stay on top of your game.”

Strategy 6: Build a network that feeds your development plan and career aspirations

Felice Gray-Kemp is more than just deputy general counsel at Amphenol Corporation; she is a connector, a master networker, and a mentor. Gray-Kemp values relationships and the benefits they can reap. “Relationships will carry you through this life. It is not enough to go to work and think you are going to have that job for life just being a solid performer.”

Gray-Kemp highlights that it is incredibly important to be strategic and purposeful in building the relationships that support your development plan and career goals. She points out that everyone has finite resources, and you cannot possibly know everyone or be everywhere. Consequently, it is important to focus on building richer, broader, and deeper relationships that are genuine and authentic to you, and also support your goals.

How do you decide what relationships to nurture? Gray-Kemp offers some key advice:

- Start by determining what you want to achieve from your relationship building. It is not your network’s obligation to solve that problem for you.
- Look at your current network and ask yourself whether they are the right relationships and whether you have optimized them. It is easier to rekindle than to start from zero.
- Decide with whom you will start fresh relationships, and look for ways that relationship can be mutually beneficial. When people reach out to you, or you to them, ask yourself, “What do I have to give to this person so that they can benefit from the exchange?”

Are relationships truly a critical element on the path to in-house leadership? Gray-Kemp says definitely. “The story doesn’t always end the way you thought it might. People who are engaged in the world get the opportunities because they are aware of them.”

Strategy 7: Empower your network and “board of directors”

As you continue to tend to grow and invest in your network, it is critical to also dedicate focus to identifying, building, and leveraging a powerhouse “front row” or personal board of directors who can provide you with dedicated and individual support as you work toward your development goals. Miriam Frank, vice president of global client services and leader of MLA’s executive coaching program, both for the company’s In-house Practice Group, notes that having a personal board of directors is not only important, it is a competitive advantage.

What is a personal board of directors? Frank notes it is a lot like a real board of directors, but focused on you as an individual. Like a real board, it should be diverse in its makeup. It should include professional colleagues, personal friends, mentors, sponsors, current and/or former supervisors, current and/or former subordinates, and other trusted advisors who can give you honest feedback and guidance. You should seek to have an inclusive set of perspectives and backgrounds to provide you with the broadest set of insights possible. “The broader and more candid the board of directors, the better off you are,” Frank says. That personal board of directors can be leveraged not only for feedback and advice, but also as a resource pool for opportunities.

Wearing her recruiter hat, Frank points out that if an in-house lawyer aspiring to lead has not built some group of advisors akin to a personal board of directors, it is very telling. If an in-house lawyer has spent her whole career focusing on her technical work, and has not spent time learning from and helping others, then that lawyer is not going to have the right approach, the right gravitas, or the right judgment to step up to a very senior level position. It is, in short, a marker of an opportunity area for that aspiring leader.

For individuals who struggle to ask members of their network to invest in being on their personal board of directors, Frank encourages the lawyers she coaches to understand that, generally, other people are interested in helping. “Don’t discount your network members’ willingness to provide the support you need, as you would provide it to them,” she advises. She also coaches them that it is equally important paying it forward to others, sitting on other’s personal boards of directors, and being willing to give back to those within their networks.

Strategy 8: Investing in your development plan and taking smart risks

It is often said that there is no safer investment than those you make in yourself, and in furtherance of your own development. Chelsea Grayson, executive vice president, general counsel, and chief administrative officer for American Apparel realized the truth of that credo very early in her career and made those impactful investments along her path to being an influential law department leader. That early realization turned out to be an incredible enabler for her career.

How did Grayson prioritize how and where she would make those investments? The short answer is very deliberately. The long answer is a fascinating story. Grayson established 10 guiding principles for her career very early on with the help of a mentor, and has adhered to those principles throughout her journey to leadership. More importantly, she learned early that great careers require incremental investment. She consequently made those strategic investments in herself and her development based on her guiding principles. She credits those investments to being critical to her success, as well as her guiding principles which acted as key guideposts.

One of Grayson’s key guiding principles is to stretch every day. That principle recognizes the development truth that if you are not uncomfortable, you are not growing. Part of being uncomfortable is taking smart risks. Grayson has taken a number of those smart risks along her career path in

furtherance of her growth and development, including leaving her successful big firm M&A practice in 2014 to take over the general counsel seat at American Apparel.

Elizabeth Cronise McLaughlin, executive coach, founder of “40% and Rising” and a former lawyer, offered a number of key insights about lawyers and risk taking behavior when it came to their own careers. McLaughlin points out that it is critical to keep striving for your goals, even when they scare you. By training, lawyers are risk adverse, sometimes leading to behavior that can hold lawyers back from reaching their full potential. For example, being unwilling to shift to a new role at a start up company, which might have more risk from a stability and longevity viewpoint, but which might be a big win from a leadership and skill development perspective. Consequently, having the grit and resilience to keep striving even in the face of what McLaughlin calls the “terror field” (i.e., the full set of an individual’s rational and irrational fears about an issue or change) is a critical skill set for lawyers aspiring to lead. Grit and resiliency are driven by knowing your worth, and if the lawyer is grounded in their own value, it is easier to take those smart risks.

How does one assess if it is a smart risk? Grayson had several pieces of great advice about the keys to making the risks you take smart, but two stand out. First is to do your robust due diligence on the front end of your decision-making by assessing the risk and understanding that there are times when you will not have perfect data, and will have to listen to your gut and make a leap of faith. The second is to ensure you are not opting out and taking yourself out of the race early merely because there is risk in a potential pathway. Separately, McLaughlin points out that the assessment of these risks is a perfect time to use your personal board of directors. Seeking out support and advice from your trusted advisors is critical.

The devil is in the details and the deliberateness

The law department leaders, executive coaches, and in-house leadership experts we have highlighted here agree that ascending along the path to in-house leadership is neither predictable nor accidental. That path requires a deliberate and methodical plan, which demands that the lawyer be both reflective of herself and very cognizant of how she presents to the external environment. It also requires the support of a diverse network and influential personal board of directors who can not only support the development of the lawyer and provide feedback, but also offer potential new pathways and opportunities. Finally, the lawyer has to be committed to investing in herself and taking risks along the way to ensure growth in the strategic areas. There is, in short, no magic wand that mystically turns the lawyer into a leader. There is, however, a wizard behind a curtain that is deliberately and thoughtfully pulling many different levers to drive to a miraculous end result. That wizard is you.

[Megan Belcher](#)



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