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Strategic Building: How Uber's Salle Yoo Leads to Success

Skills and Professional Development



"A disruptive innovation," Clayton Christensen first coined in 1995, "is an innovation that creates a new market and value network and eventually disrupts an existing market and value network, displacing established market leading firms, products and alliances." In 2016, the term could be defined with one word: Uber. More than doubling in growth each year since its launch in 2010, delivering services in over 72 countries and 425 cities worldwide, and disrupting an industry that has been stagnant for decades, Uber is accomplishing what many thought would be impossible.

Salle Yoo took the helm of Uber's legal department as its general counsel in 2012 and it's almost hard to imagine that in just over four years she has gone from being its first and only lawyer to managing a team of over 200 people in 21 offices. It's difficult to succinctly summarize Yoo's experience, but it has definitely been unexpected, diverse, and full of many steep learning curves. Yoo is quick to point out that fundamental to her success was building and nurturing the right team.

Team-building: Generalists vs. specialists

Yoo's strategic growth of Uber's legal department is a highlight in her career. Yoo's willingness to embrace change is one of the key factors contributing to her team-building success. When Yoo first took the job, she projected a three-year hiring plan that, at the time, seemed very aggressive. Yoo fulfilled her three-year headcount in little over one year. Like many small legal departments, Yoo's team initially consisted of generalists who were willing to tackle a broad spectrum of legal issues.

Ultimately, as is common with explosive growth, Yoo realized that in order to maximize her department's impact on the business, it was time to move her team from a group of generalists to specialists who have the expertise and time to thoroughly know every side of a narrower set of issues.

“You have to hire generalists in the beginning when the team is small and give them the opportunity to learn everything about the company and its products. As the company grows, your team has to turn towards a specialist model because the business needs change and the details are in the execution; you start needing team members who can go 10 feet deep on an issue because the issues get more complex” Yoo says.

Yoo admits that this type of transition is quite challenging. “The only way to get through it successfully is to make sure you constantly reiterate to your team the need for the legal team to scale with business, that you believe in them and want to see them succeed not only at Uber, but in the arc of their own careers,” she says. “It all comes down to trust.”

Building loyalty

Although Yoo’s decision to come to Uber was risky at the time she took the job (after all, this was before Uber became the explosive rocket ship it is today), Yoo knows that attorneys are usually particularly sensitive to transition and change. She quickly discovered that in order to build a team that is open to change and taking risks, there must first be a foundation of trust.

“As changes were needed, I tried to make that everyone knew why the changes were needed and that sometimes, adding layers meant that they could get the hands-on coaching that could benefit their career — regardless of how long they stayed at Uber,” Yoo explains. “I tell my team members that each of them are responsible for managing their own careers and that I want them to reach their goals whether at Uber or when they move on. While it’s always hard to lose a strong member of the team, when they leave to take on a role with more responsibility or challenge, I feel a measure of satisfaction — it makes me feel like I’ve done something right.”

Yoo also believes that her support of equality on her team, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, etc., and her efforts to foster an environment of fairness and transparency can bind a team together. With respect to equal pay Yoo says, “I don’t think the question is why women should be on equal footing in terms of pay. The right question, I believe, is why not?” Yoo has tried to be and to teach her team to be intentional about ensuring that starting pay (for the same job title, level of experience, and job location) are fair and that raises and bonuses (at the same level, job location, and the same caliber review) are equal. Those who report directly to her know that if there is a discrepancy on their teams, they be asked to explain it to her before it is finalized.

She has also focused on making sure women and minorities are paid equally by giving them equal starting salaries even if they fail to ask. Yes, it’s unusual — but Yoo believes that change has to start at the top. “It’s so important to calibrate and make sure you know the industry vernacular and which levers you can pull. I had to learn these lessons the hard way and I want to make sure I pass that on to my team. I remember the first time I gave a woman a sign-on bonus even though she hadn’t asked for because a man getting an offer at the same level did ask and did receive a sign-on bonus,” Yoo says. “I explained to her why I had given her the same bonus and encouraged her to ask next time that she’s negotiating for her compensation. When I first went public with this story, I was nervous. But the support I received from the Uber team is one of the reasons I love this company.”

Yoo believes that being intentional about pay equity and making sure that all team members are rewarded based on their deliverables, being conscious of the unconscious bias that “we all hold” builds loyalty and trust on her team from the very beginning, a team that will become visible and be able to more effectively implement change.

Strategic layering

Another way that Yoo navigated the explosive growth in her department is layering strategically. Yoo admits that one of the most difficult challenges of scaling a team so quickly is the need to layer someone between herself and more junior members of her team. “I would start by hiring high-level people first and let them hire a team,” Yoo says, when asked what she would do differently. “It was always so difficult to tell someone who’s really good, thorough, and driven that I need to hire someone above them. Ultimately, I realized the only way to do so and continue a relationship of trust and loyalty would require complete honesty.”

“I told my high-performing, but more junior, team members that I wanted to see them succeed both at Uber and elsewhere and there just weren’t enough minutes in a day to be the kind of mentor I needed to be in order to guarantee this type of success for them,” she explains. Yoo also made sure she hired managers who held a similar philosophy. “The best qualities in a manager and ones I always look for are judgment, drive and a desire and know-how to build trust with their team,” she says. By strategically layering, Yoo managed the risks of her accelerated expansion plan and ultimately ensured what was best for both the company and individual employees.

Although she began her career at Uber as its one and only lawyer, Yoo’s high-speed journey has been defined by focused, well-managed change and a commitment to building her team in an organized and thoughtful way. Yoo is the embodiment of the notion that there is no “i” in “team,” and, unsurprisingly, her belief, confidence in and desire to quickly recognize the achievements of her team make her an even greater force and source of strength. Yoo’s support and commitment to helping her team succeed will perhaps be her greatest legacy yet. After all, it’s not hard to imagine that after years spent under her leadership, she has planted the seeds for the great legal leaders of tomorrow.

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Olga V. Mack is a fellow at CodeX, The Stanford Center for Legal Informatics, and a Generative AI Editor at law.MIT. Mack shares her views in her columns on ACC Docket, Newsweek, Bloomberg, VentureBeat, Above the Law, and many other publications.

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