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A Black Belt in Business

Interviews and Profiles





Tom Trujillo

CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

BANK OF AMERICA

The business side can be an enigma for some lawyers. Not for Tom Trujillo, the chief operating officer for Bank of America's legal department. He knows exactly what it needs because he has worked on the business side.

In 2008, after already serving two years as an assistant general counsel for the bank, he transitioned to one of the global banking teams. There, he was a senior vice president and a product management executive. Before he made the move, he conferred with then-Deputy General Counsel Ed O'Keefe about positions outside the legal department. Trujillo remembers him replying with a Bank of America truism that came from the company's then-general counsel: "How will you know if you have a successful legal department? When the business starts hiring your lawyers." Knowing that a return to the legal department was always possible, Trujillo decided to go for it.

He quickly understood what business leaders require from the legal department, and what the stakes are. "You really have to make sure that you've got the right legal partner at the table, one who's willing to really help you think through some tough issues and really manage the risk on the risk-reward decision basis because at the end of the day, you have to make the decision," Trujillo explains. "As a lawyer, you're giving the advice but you typically don't own the decision." It boils down to trusting your lawyers.

Trujillo's main objective during this period was restructuring the contract management team that he oversaw. The current business processes of the team weren't scalable so he had to break down the processes and build them back up. With the help of Six Sigma black belts, they used the Six Sigma process, a business theory developed by Motorola and popularized by GE's Jack Welch. It involves setting quality management methods to measure every step of the process and eliminating redundancies.

His second business side role asked him to do a similar reorganization. In February 2010, he moved

to the home loans division as a senior vice president and business executive for strategy, governance and operations. The needs of the division had out-grown the processes managed by the team he joined and it needed to be quickly rectified. “As my manager at the time use to say...this was like changing the wheels while you’re going 100 miles an hour down the road,” he relates. The ability to continue to operate as usual while simultaneously implementing significant changes was a skill that stayed with him when he transitioned back to the legal department.

Return to legal

After spending a year and a half in the home loans division, Trujillo was asked by senior leaders in the legal department to come back to help provide legal support and advice to a business that was working through some significant challenges. No stranger to pressure-filled situations, he accepted the challenge, assisting the business team as it worked through its design of a reorganization to meet its challenges, and the subsequent reorganization of how his team delivered their legal support.

His hard work paid off. Not only because he was able to assist his business clients, but also because a he was now able to take on a new opportunity within the legal department. It was a short wait, as the general counsel created a new function and Trujillo was named associate general counsel and director of operations for the legal department in late 2011. He was promoted to COO for the legal department in 2015.

It was a true operations team. It had two components. One was creating a centralized e-discovery practice for the bank. The second goal was to assemble a team who could support all of the bank’s global legal services, covering everything from management of outside counsel, legal vendor management, analytics, technology for the legal department to management of its support staff and the various office locations around the world. Trujillo inherited some of the resources but also built the structure with his own roadmap.

The Bank of America legal team, and the entire banking industry, has experienced unprecedented times over the past few years due to increased legal and regulatory challenges. “The fortunate thing is we have some just incredibly talented lawyers, paralegals and support staff within this legal department. Starting with General Counsel Gary Lynch, all the way down through pretty much every member of this legal team. We have been working through uncharted territories over the last several years and I think we’ve come to some great results,” Trujillo says.

Big family, big ambition

Trujillo grew up in the little town of Redford Township, just outside Detroit, Michigan. He has 14 older brothers and sisters. Most of his family did not go to college. The youngest of the Trujillo progeny, he was accepted into University of Michigan-Dearborn where he was fascinated by business law, thanks to an engaging professor. He double majored in finance and marketing, paving the way for his future business roles, when he graduated with distinction in 1990.

Trujillo didn’t know many lawyers growing up. Coming out of undergrad, he had a vague idea that he wanted to practice business law. After working as a consultant with Accenture for almost three years, he enrolled in law school. He graduated from University of the Michigan Law School magna cum laude in 1996 as a member of the Order of the Coif. He found that if he really listened to his professors and did not take any shortcuts, that there would be a payoff for him, not only in law school

but as he applied those same principles during his legal career.

After spending nearly three years at a firm in Detroit, he secured his first in-house position at General Motors. “The thing that really struck me when I first went in-house was how much different the practice of law is than when you’re at a law firm,” he reflects. “Law firms are around for the sake of lawyers — everything centers around their delivery of the legal services. When you’re in-house, the company typically doesn’t exist to provide legal services, and thus the legal departments are cost centers. You’re helping them run the corporation from a risk management perspective so you quickly realize that your value isn’t driven by how much revenue you bring in, it’s about how much value you add to the business equation.”

Trujillo’s career continued to advance. He moved to the other Detroit automaker — Ford Motor Company — in 2001, where he was given the opportunity to perform in various roles over time. He credits the ability to almost never say “no” to his success. “It’s not avoiding risk,” he explains. “The value you want to bring to the table is, ‘Hey, we’ve got problems to solve. Help us solve these problems through the proper management of the risk, not avoiding the risk,’ because you cannot really avoid all risk.”

Until 2006, Trujillo had spent his whole life in Michigan. His wife had spent her whole life in the state. Although they very much enjoyed their experiences there, it was time for them to explore. “We started looking at places to move our family, places that offered great opportunities for all of us,” he says. With the help of a recruiter he was able to land a great position at Bank of America and he hasn’t looked back.

When asked what role he might be in down the road, Trujillo says he doesn’t focus on that. “I don’t really worry about where the future is because that stuff kind of takes care of itself. If you do a great job at what you’re doing and earn people’s trust and respect, where you go and your next opportunities work their way out on their own.”

Getting to Know... Tom Trujillo

WHAT ARE SOME OF YOUR HOBBIES?

I absolutely love spending time with my wife and kids. I exercise quite a bit and so I do that mostly by myself, but with my family I like going out and mountain biking or playing basketball out in the driveway, or even just taking our dog for a walk. Vacations are another thing we like to do together. Once in a while I get a chance to golf, but that requires big blocks of times that I don’t often have the luxury of these days — it’s taking away from my family time and so I try not to do it too often. My work travel sometimes affords me time to catch up on reading as well.

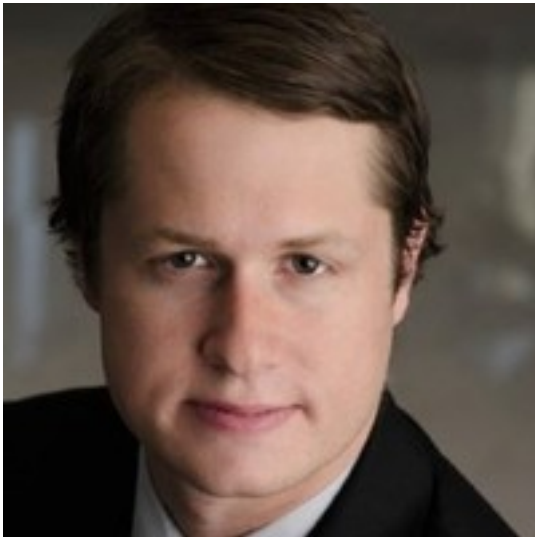
WHAT BOOK ARE YOU READING RIGHT NOW?

It’s a book called Rebel Yell. It’s a biography of Stonewall Jackson and it’s absolutely fascinating. I’m really enjoying that quite a bit. And then, there’s another one that I was reading called The Anatomy of Peace that is more of a self-development type book but it’s a great book as well. I also like to throw in some fiction books by authors like Michael Connelly.

IDEALLY, WHAT WOULD YOUR PERFECT VACATION BE?

I think if you ask my family, you'll get four or five different votes of where that's going to be. I guess we're kind of eclectic in that way. We love going to Hilton Head and relaxing on the beach. We love going to the mountains. Here in North Carolina, you're lucky to have access to both of those within a couple of hours. We've also been spending a lot of time out West recently. I think ideally we'd like to get over to Europe and travel a little bit over there. But if there's just one place we all had to pick as a future vacation spot, it would certainly be Hawaii.

[Joshua H. Shields](#)



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