2012 Top 10 30-Something: Megan Belcher

Interviews and Profiles

Vice President, Chief Employment Counsel

ConAgra Foods

Age: 35

Proudest achievement: My two little girls – I have a 3-year old and a 1-year old — and my husband. He's a good egg.

Leveraging relationships

Since joining ConAgra Foods in 2007, Megan Belcher has designed and implemented a compliance training program; started an inhouse CLE lunch program and the ConAgra Foods Institute on Law and Policy; empowered her staff with cross-functional experience; and dramatically narrowed the number of firms her law department works with. Building, nurturing and leveraging relationships with key groups has been essential to her success.

Belcher says that designing and drafting a compliance training program — "ConAgra's next phase of compliance culture" — was only possible with the buy-in of senior leadership. She earned their support through constant communication about why the process was needed and how it would work, but says she had the benefit of a strong foundation. To create a client relationship with trust at its core, Belcher says, "It's important to establish as many proactive, positive interactions with them as possible, before a problem comes up. That takes a lot of work, but it pays off when the rubber meets the road on an issue."

To drive change, Belcher capitalizes on her rapport and relationships with outside counsel, too. She started ConAgra Foods' CLE program by asking contracted vendors and law firms to present courses at no extra cost. It was a win–win opportunity that Belcher saw as "low-hanging fruit." "They would want to get in front of us, and we'd get presentations on specific topics that are relevant to our company," she says. "It's also a team-building event; it brings us all together and we usually have lunch." Courses are offered at least monthly, and Belcher's request has not been turned down yet.

Belcher also organized the first annual ConAgra Foods Institute on Law and Policy last fall. After reading about a law school's CLE program featuring John Dean of the Watergate case and a partner at Thompson Hine, she successfully convinced the duo to present at ConAgra Foods' headquarters in Omaha. When the cost was unfeasible for the department, she partnered with three of its law firms to host the event. "Having a great program doesn't always have to be expensive — use your relationships with key firms and business partners," she says. "My policy is: Never be afraid to ask. The worst thing you're going to hear is 'no.'" Belcher encourages staff to follow her lead in capitalizing on relationships. A believer in the value of being a generalist, she also gives them opportunities to perform outside of their niches. She assigned ConAgra Foods' EEO specialist to an auditing project unrelated to affirmative action, and which requires heavy cross-functional collaboration, "so she can grow her knowledge in that practice area, interact with our HR department and gain experience working with outside counsel." Belcher supports another direct report who is working extensively with HR on diversity and inclusion initiatives. "That visibility has aligned our department's efforts with what we're trying to do in the organization as a whole," she says.

With transparency at the crux of her management style, Belcher says she encourages staff to "put everything out on the table, so we can address issues quickly." She approaches outside counsel the same way, handling "hard conversations" about discontinuing service by being upfront and honest.

ConAgra Foods has grown by acquisition, and as a result, inherited many outside counsel relationships. Over the past two years, Belcher has helped narrow the number of firms they use to five and is continuing to consolidate work. Honing the remaining relationships has led to significantly cutting outside legal spend with alternative fee arrangements. "In today's environment, budget is a huge priority," she says. "Leverage your relationships and constantly look for creative avenues."

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