



# 15 Strategies for Becoming a High-Impact GC

and Other Pieces of Wisdom from an Industry Veteran



# Introduction

With globalization, economic and regulatory changes, and other market disruptions, the role of the general counsel has evolved dramatically over the past few decades. Today's GC is far more than a legal advisor or organizational watchdog; they're a valued partner to the C-suite and a key player in business, financial, and risk management decision-making.

To be successful, modern GCs must be equipped with a technical knowledge base much broader and deeper than their predecessors. But building credibility with their team and the C-suite also means having those intangibles all strong leaders possess—emotional intelligence, resilience, and next-level communication skills, among others.

In this guide inspired by his personal musings on LinkedIn, legal executive search partner **Dimitri Mastrocola** shares insights and advice that can help you excel as a GC.

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## MEET DIMITRI MASTROCOLA



Dimitri Mastrocola is a partner at Major, Lindsey & Africa and one of the most experienced legal executive search consultants in the market. Since joining MLA in 2005, he has specialized in placing general counsel, chief compliance officers, and senior in-house counsel at leading public companies, global financial institutions, asset managers, and private equity- and venture-backed businesses across sectors. A former corporate lawyer, Dimitri combines legal fluency with 20+ years of executive search experience to help organizations make confident, high-stakes legal leadership decisions.

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## ABOUT MAJOR, LINDSEY & AFRICA

Major, Lindsey & Africa is the world's leading legal search firm. The firm, founded in 1982, offers a range of **specialized legal recruiting** and **advisory services** to meet the ever-changing needs of law firms and legal departments and to support the career aspirations of talented lawyers and legal and compliance professionals. With more than 25 offices and 200-plus search consultants around the world, Major, Lindsey & Africa uses its market knowledge and experience to partner with organizations to fulfill their legal talent needs and provide solutions to increase team efficiency and effectiveness. Major, Lindsey & Africa is an **Allegis Group** company, the global leader in talent solutions. To learn more about Major, Lindsey & Africa, visit [www.mlaglobal.com](http://www.mlaglobal.com) and follow MLA on [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).



# Embody the Qualities of Strong GC Leadership

The most effective general counsel exhibit the following extraordinary leadership qualities:

✓ **COMMITMENT:** An uncommon devotion, passion, and loyalty to the vision of the organization and the value its products or services bring to customers. GCs with a high level of commitment are willing to go beyond ordinary expectations of performance, time, and energy to realize the vision and achieve success.

✓ **CONVICTION:** A firm belief in one's personal and organizational values and the willingness to take a stand on the rightness of one's position. GCs who lead with conviction confidently communicate their personal and organizational beliefs and can inspire others to do the same.

✓ **CHARACTER:** Living daily with the highest ethical behavior in what one says and does, and the decisions one makes. Whether alone or under the watchful eye of others, exceptional GCs operate with unquestionable integrity. They are consistently honest and trustworthy in all they say and do, and can be depended on to complete everything to which they commit.

✓ **COMPETENCE:** The knowledge, understanding, and skill to effectively carry out the responsibilities of one's position. Highly effective GCs execute their job with extreme proficiency and possess the wisdom to seek advice and answers when they lack the necessary competency or insight.

✓ **CONFIDENCE:** The self-assurance to assert ideas and take action to bring goals and aspirations to fruition amid varying perspectives. Confident GCs have the humility to take risks, learn from setbacks, and move forward. These leaders do not confuse confidence with pride and arrogance, indicating they perceive their abilities and ideas as better than everyone else's.

✓ **COURAGE:** The capacity to make difficult decisions in the organization's best interest even in the face of resistance. Courageous GCs are determined to confront difficult circumstances and performance problems (with kindness and humility), and have the fortitude to have tough, unpopular conversations.

✓ **CARE:** Genuine concern for the well-being of those within one's sphere of influence. Caring GCs have the best interest of others at heart and intentionally work to support their team's growth, development, and success. Great GCs recognize the contributions of those around them.

✓ **COMPASSION:** The inherent ability to empathize with the challenges and misfortunes of others and the desire to help alleviate their hardship. Extraordinary GCs believe in helping team members balance work and life, and they know when to put people before profit.

✓ **COMMUNICATION:** Great GCs know that one of the most important motivators for team members is the feeling of being in on things and the freedom to express their own ideas and point of view. Top-performing GCs invite and listen to the input of others.

✓ **CONNECTION:** A GC's success hinges on the capacity to create, represent, advance, and embed a shared sense of "us" among team members. GCs know that creating a sense of belonging among team members is critical to motivation, engagement, productivity, and dedication.

**GCs who lead with conviction confidently communicate their personal and organizational beliefs and can inspire others to do the same.**



# 2

## Master the Business Inside and Out

There's a lot to consider when becoming a general counsel. When you're a new GC, one of the first things you should do to build credibility is understand all aspects of your company and its business.

So, what does this mean, practically speaking?

Start with mastering the basics. Make it your mission to get up to speed on the following:

- ✓ The company's business structure and type of entity(ies)
- ✓ Headcount and size of operations
- ✓ Industry and the nature of its goods and services
- ✓ Locations of its operations (domestically and internationally)
- ✓ The company's risk profile and tolerance for risk
- ✓ Governance and business decision-making processes, including the legal department's role in that process
- ✓ Corporate culture (e.g., internal politics, business lingo, cultures of different groups, and which groups are most valued and have the most power within the company)

The best GCs we've worked with don't just understand the business; they see how legal decisions affect deal timing, product launches, and market advantage. They know which battles are worth fighting and which ones create more drag than value.



# **Master Exceptional Communication Skills**

When you become a GC or senior in-house legal leader, you must explain legal issues, risks, solutions, and opportunities to your C-suite peers and business leaders—and business priorities, strategies, and objectives to your legal team. Effective communication skills are critical.

## **1. Do not speak unless you have something to say.**

It's ok to say you don't know and have to talk to your team. When you're in a senior leadership position with a wide set of responsibilities, people understand that you DON'T KNOW everything. However, they expect you've surrounded yourself with people who know everything.

## **2. Be succinct.**

As a GC, your key internal stakeholders have no time to listen for hours or read a lengthy dissertation. Most things can be shared in one paragraph or a concise verbal update. Just be sure that you are still accurate and factual and not omitting critical information in your brevity. It's an art that comes with experience: ruthlessly editing out unnecessary words without impacting the substance of the message.

(Side benefit: you'll make yourself popular by being brief).

## **3. Keep it very simple.**

GCs spend large chunks of their day digesting and repackaging information that others provide to them. Everything can be made simple if you truly understand it yourself and use terms your audience can relate to.

The trick is taking the necessary time up front to fully grasp an issue. Then, turn it around so you can explain it to someone in under one minute—without taking any essential information away or compromising on the accuracy of the message.

## **4. Don't defer entirely to outside counsel.**

When you express an opinion as an in-house lawyer, you need to own it. For instance, as GC, you shouldn't accept that someone on your team says to someone outside legal that "outside counsel" has opined that a risk is remote. You want them to write that they (or the legal department) believe the risk is remote. You want them to stand behind the position and take responsibility for it.

## 5. Grammar, spelling, and punctuation matter.

The credibility of your message can stand or fall with how you present it. You want your audience to take you seriously. Form does not trump substance, but substance cannot go without appropriate form. If what you write is very important, ask someone to proofread it.

## 6. Get your timing right.

Mastering the TIMING of communication might be one of the toughest practical challenges you'll face as a general counsel. This is much easier said than done:

- ✓ **Communicate too early** with incomplete information, and you risk raising issues unnecessarily or inciting many needless questions from the C-suite.
- ✓ **Communicate too late**, and you risk being overtaken by other sources. And the people who rely on you for information (e.g., the CEO) are surprised or misinformed.

In today's environment, general counsel must master the art of progressive disclosure. Share what you know when you know it, clearly flag what's still developing, and build trust through consistent, proportionate updates.

And it's perfectly fine to preface updates with "This is an evolving situation," or "We'll share more as we learn more." These phrases build clarity and trust.

**The bottom line:** Be responsible and timely. Take ownership of what you write and time your communications (as best you can) to go out at just the right moment.

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# 4 Open Your Mind

There's incredible power and wisdom in being radically open-minded. Are you? Here are cues inspired by Ray Dalio's framework on open-mindedness:

- ✓ **Open-minded people are not angry when someone disagrees with them. They welcome contrary viewpoints.**
- ✗ Close-minded people don't want their ideas challenged.
- ✓ **Open-minded people genuinely believe they could be incorrect.**
- ✗ Close-minded people are more likely to make statements than ask questions.
- ✓ **Open-minded people always feel compelled to see things through others' eyes.**
- ✗ Close-minded people focus more on being understood than on understanding others.
- ✓ **Open-minded people approach everything with a deep-seated concern that they may be wrong.**
- ✗ Close-minded people lack a deep sense of humility.

In every challenging or problem-solving situation, you should look for THE best answer, not just the best answer you can come up with yourself.

There's a real difference. GCs who embrace that distinction tend to earn trust faster.





# 5 Develop a Growth Mindset

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**The bottom line:** Be responsible and timely. Take ownership of what you write and time your communications (as best you can) to go out at just the right moment.

## Here are practical ways GCs can cultivate a growth mindset:

### Mindsets to Strengthen

- › Believe your skills and instincts can evolve with effort and feedback
- › Accept that mistakes are part of progress, not signs of weakness
- › Take 100% responsibility for your outcomes, even in complex environments
- › Let go of the idea that you have to control everything

### Habits to Practice

- › Listen more than you talk
- › Take calculated risks on people and technology
- › Regularly ask for feedback from your team, peers, and CEO
- › Reflect after setbacks—What did I learn? What would I do differently?
- › Reframe challenges as opportunities to grow your impact

### Relationships to Build

- › Find a GC or executive role model who's operated at scale—and learn from them
- › Build internal relationships before you need them
- › Surround yourself with people who stretch your thinking

The most successful GCs I've worked with share these traits. They lean into ambiguity, stay curious under pressure, and keep evolving as their companies grow. They don't just manage risk. They expand what's possible.

# 6

## Master the Art of Listening

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Today's most persuasive business leaders cite LISTENING as THE soft skill crucial for their success. I think the same is true when it comes to being a successful general counsel.

Without excellent listening skills, it's virtually impossible for a GC to become a trusted advisor to the C-suite and internal business clients. By becoming a better listener, you can improve your ability to influence, persuade, and negotiate. You'll also avoid conflict and misunderstandings.

You can achieve this by engaging in ACTIVE LISTENING. This is where you make a conscious effort to hear not only the words that another person is saying but, more importantly, UNDERSTAND the complete message being communicated.

To do this, you must pay attention to the other person very carefully.

### A few tips:

- ✓ Make direct eye contact with speakers.
- ✓ Ask questions at appropriate intervals during a conversation.
- ✓ Don't interrupt or speak over others.
- ✓ Don't check mobile devices during meetings and conferences.
- ✓ Repeat back to the speaker points discussed and action items each party agrees to deliver.
- ✓ Use BOTH your eyes and ears when listening, since a speaker's body language can amplify or contradict what they are saying.





# Focus on Productivity, Not Activity

I've learned myriad things in my 35+ years in the legal profession and executive search arena. Here's a fundamental lesson, applicable to everyone, that still comes into play for me every single day:

Being BUSY is not the same as being PRODUCTIVE.

## BUSY is:

- Working harder
- Frantic
- Fueled by perfectionism
- Being good at everything

## PRODUCTIVE is:

- Working smarter
- Focused
- Fueled by purpose
- Being great at a few essential things

Productive people and busy people are different in several important ways:

✓ **Productive people have a mission for their lives.**

✗ Busy people want to look like they have a mission.

✓ **Productive people have few priorities.**

✗ Busy people have many priorities.

✓ **Productive people say yes slowly.**

✗ Busy people say yes quickly.

✓ **Productive people focus on clarity before action.**

✗ Busy people focus on action.

✓ **Productive people close doors.**

✗ Busy people keep all doors open.

Productive GCs know that presence doesn't equal performance. They protect their time for the conversations that actually move the business forward. They have few priorities and say yes slowly. They focus on clarity before action and are willing to close doors that don't align with their mission.

Busy GCs, on the other hand, want to look like they have a mission. They have many priorities, say yes quickly, and keep all doors open. They talk about how little time they have and unintentionally keep their teams underwater too.

**Bottom line: BE PRODUCTIVE.**





## Develop Mental Toughness

There's truth in the old saying, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going."

I love it because, for me, those nine words capture the essence of MENTAL TOUGHNESS.

That is, the idea of being able to push past adversity by remaining positive and on track.

I believe being mentally tough is critical to achieving world-class performance levels in today's complex and stressful world. It means being mentally ready for the myriad challenges that will come your way. Staying mentally tough will give you the strength you need to deal with your mistakes or setbacks and the resilience to keep moving forward despite them.

The general counsel role uniquely requires saying "no" from time to time to people who don't want to hear it, while maintaining the relationship. Mental toughness means delivering tough messages with clarity and respect.

Staying mentally tough will give you the strength you need to deal with your mistakes or setbacks and the resilience to keep moving forward despite them.

### **Here are six things I've noticed over the years that mentally tough people always do:**

1. They move on. They don't waste time feeling sorry for themselves.
2. They embrace change. They welcome challenges.
3. They stay happy. They don't waste energy on things they can't control.
4. They are kind, fair, and unafraid to speak up.
5. They are willing to take calculated risks.
6. They celebrate other people's success. They do not resent that success.

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# 9

## Cultivate a Strong Relationship with the CEO

As a general counsel, you must develop a solid working relationship with the CEO. (Even if you're in the 20% of structures where the GC doesn't report directly to the CEO).

In your initial discussions with the CEO (or your direct manager), your objectives should be to:

- ✓ Understand the expectations for the role.
- ✓ Understand how the CEO processes risk information and makes decisions under pressure. The best GCs learn to frame legal guidance in terms of business outcomes, not just compliance requirements.
- ✓ Become a trusted advisor.
- ✓ Develop a relationship where the GC can be frank.
- ✓ Alleviate any concerns about competition.
- ✓ Provide additional insight into the board.
- ✓ Agree on legal reporting.
- ✓ Establish a protocol for disagreeing.

The most effective GCs I've worked with understand that their relationship with the CEO is fundamentally about enabling better, faster decision-making under uncertainty.

When the relationship works, Legal becomes a real-time partner in decision-making, not just a control function



# 10 Build a Formidable Legal Team

As general counsel, you want to hire and grow the best in-house legal team possible. Here are some suggestions for GCs on growing a strong team:

- ✓ The best GCs surround themselves with people who know more than they do about specific areas. Your job is synthesis and judgment, not expertise in every legal domain
- ✓ Pay your team competitively. Benchmark regularly with a trusted legal executive search professional to ensure alignment with the market.
- ✓ Play well with your team. Take the time and invest in activities to build and be a cohesive, collaborative team.
- ✓ Generously delegate work to your team and regularly acknowledge their expertise, contributions, and value. Every day might not be fun, but every day should be meaningful in their career development.
- ✓ Require annual performance objectives that are real and meaningful for professional and personal development. Hold them and yourself accountable for progress and achievement.
- ✓ Identify your likely successor, test their skills, and groom them for the top spot (more on that later).

**If you're the smartest person in the room as the GC, you're probably in the wrong room.**



# 11

## Connect Meaningfully with Your People

How can you best cultivate a relationship with and assess your legal team as a new general counsel?

Here are a few suggestions:

### ✓ **Schedule one-on-one meetings.**

Spend at least an hour with each team member (including non-attorneys) to:

- Gain insight into the department and what it can do better.
- Learn about their workload.
- Ask about their personal goals and challenges.
- Determine who the “A players” are.
- Articulate your management style, business objectives, and expectations.
- Understand how you can help your team grow and succeed.

### ✓ **Work with each team member on a project.**

This is a way to get to know team members’ personalities and work styles and enable them to understand your leadership style.

### ✓ **Assess the skills, strengths, and weaknesses of each team member. The goal here is to determine if:**

- Gaps exist in the legal talent required to address needs, mitigate risks, or achieve strategic goals.
- Staffing changes should be made in the short and long term.
- Legal should take on any additional responsibilities.

### ✓ **Look for development opportunities.**

After assessing the skills of your team members, look for ways to use and grow those talents. Aligning people with their strengths creates efficiencies and builds morale.

# 12 Measure Your Success as a GC

As a general counsel, it's important to articulate the value proposition of the legal department in a way that is meaningful to the CEO and other company executives.

One proven way is to use metrics to track the performance of the department and demonstrate its value. Tracking performance with metrics can help you maximize your resources and better manage spending and workload.

However, it's important to note that there may be internal resistance when implementing a metrics-tracking system. Your legal team may see it as extra work or a form of report card. To overcome this resistance and successfully launch a legal metrics program, consider the following steps:

- ✓ Get team buy-in by presenting the value and benefits of measuring productivity. For example, tracking time spent on lower-value work can help rebalance workloads among your staff.
- ✓ Define benchmarks by establishing clear targets and key performance indicators (KPIs) that provide a benchmark to evaluate progress. Being an effective partner to the business requires measurable goals.
- ✓ Clarify your audience by determining who will be receiving the legal department's performance metrics. Is it C-suite executives? Are you seeking greater insights into what is happening internally? Knowing your audience will help tailor your metrics and messaging for maximum impact.

By following these steps and leveraging the power of legal metrics, you can effectively demonstrate the value of the legal department and improve its performance.

**As a general counsel, it's important to articulate the value proposition of the legal department in a way that is meaningful to the CEO and other company executives.**

# 13 Prepare Your Successor

All sitting general counsel must provide opportunities for succession candidates on their team to develop the necessary skills to be an effective GC. However, most boards still prefer external GC hires for transformational moments, even when strong internal candidates exist. If you're grooming a successor, ensure they're getting board exposure on strategic matters, not just operational legal issues.

Below are some suggestions:

- ✓ Push your team members outside of their comfort zones, e.g., have them take the lead on a transaction, assume responsibilities outside their area of expertise, present to senior management, etc.
- ✓ Have your direct reports participate in and lead discussions with regulators and stakeholders.
- ✓ Tap an AGC to act as head of a function or business unit. Consider rotating succession candidates through these roles.
- ✓ Consider promoting the top succession candidate(s) to Deputy GC.
- ✓ Get your team members involved in committees (e.g., M&A, enterprise risk, or business development committees). This will help refine specific substantive skills and expose them to the inner mechanisms of the business.
- ✓ Increase the visibility of succession candidates to the Board and executive leadership team. This will develop business-conscious lawyers who can effectively communicate legal issues and viable solutions with key business decision-makers.

If there's no obvious successor on your team, speak with a quality legal search firm to understand the market for top legal talent. Engage a search partner if you need to run an external succession process.





# 14 Practice Perseverance

When the world says, "Give up," Hope whispers, "Try it one more time."

I don't know who wrote those words, but they've inspired me my entire adult life. They offer a clue to a special ingredient that I think is essential to anyone's personal and professional success: PERSEVERANCE.

## **Here's a shorthand definition of perseverance that I like:**

*It's persistence plus resilience; it's stubbornness with a purpose.*

Perseverance is the ability to keep going during tough times, overcome adversity, and never give up. It reveals your true character by causing you to look in the mirror, dig deep, and take responsibility for what will happen next.

Successful people learn to expect adversity as they work toward excellence. They are not surprised when it shows up. They don't let it deter them from their goals. They know it's part of the game. They know easy things are not worthwhile.

Here's the thing: When you are not stretched, you do not grow. Perseverance is like a muscle. The more you exercise it, the stronger it becomes.

The ability to persevere and continue in the face of adversity often separates extraordinary legal leaders from the merely ordinary.



# 15 Embrace Change

One quality I've noticed in all successful leaders is their willingness and ability to embrace change.

Leaders don't resist change; they embrace it.

How do they do this, and how can you do the same?

A few ideas I've picked up over the years:

- ✓ Always believe it's possible to create positive outcomes.
- ✓ See yourself as someone who can successfully adapt to any kind of change.
- ✓ Acknowledge your fears—but take action regardless.

Whether you perceive it or not, EVERYTHING is constantly changing. In all areas, on all levels, ALL of the time. So the better you can embrace change in whatever is happening in your world, the more and better opportunities you will create for yourself.

Change can be fantastic once you stop resisting it and learn to accept and grow with it.

**Leaders don't resist change; they embrace it. The GC role will only continue to expand. The GCs who thrive won't be the busiest or most brilliant technicians. They'll be the ones who lead with clarity, partner with purpose, and make Legal indispensable to the business.**





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