

General Counsel at GSK Consumer Healthcare on How to Be an Impactful Business Leader

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It is organisational change, constant technological advancement, disruption, globalisation, increasing regulation, and shifts in social and geopolitical factors that are the new norm for today's General Counsel.

Over the past year, Global Leaders in Law and Morrison & Foerster have collaborated on a global study entitled 'The GC {Re}Defined.' It illuminates that the GC who embraces complexity and new ways of working, strategically and operationally, will give more impact as an executive business leader of the future.

In keeping with the themes in the GC {Re}Defined report, which will be launched on the 29 April, GLL talks with the Senior Vice President and General Counsel at GSK Consumer Healthcare Sean Roberts as he outlines the strategies he implements to become integral to the board, as well as his investments both in Tech IQ and, crucially, in people.

Global Leaders in Law: What do you do, or will you need to do, to be an impactful executive business leader that is integral to your CEO and board?

Sean Roberts: You have to be very visible and be with your business colleagues and contribute a view way beyond the law; work hard at learning the business inside out so that you can contribute meaningfully.

You have to demonstrate to the board that you are on their side. Contributing actively to make things happen when they make business sense and are perfectly legal will then help you when the guardian aspect of your business partner/guardian role has to be put into action. People will listen more willingly if you balance both aspects of your role.

GLL: How do you now, or will you in the future, invest in your Tech IQ?

Sean Roberts: Business is not just about creating digital products, it's about the digital transformation of the business full stop.

We have invested in a few things such as document management systems, we have experimented with Chatbots and we are thinking about experimenting with AI.

You have to put technology transformation into context – companies with massive technology needs will not put the legal function at the top of the pile. When you have a budget to manage you have to balance investment priorities (Is there a cheaper

way of doing what we already do so we can invest the money in Tech? Will investment in Tech balanced against other resource investments create a better risk profile for the company?). It is business chess. While we are doing a large amount around technology, the crunch point will come when you have real-time benchmarking data and much more realistic information about the benefits technology can actually bring to the business, not just the legal function.

We invest in operational efficiency and have a team for legal operations and several people managing our external legal relationships with law firms e.g. agreeing business terms and negotiating alternative fee arrangements. In addition to this, we have an e-discovery and global information/records management resources, and then we have the technology investment side related to it.

GLL: How can you be a culture creator?

Sean Roberts: Culture is how you get things done. I think it is incredibly important for employee engagement to have a culture that resonates with people as you then create an organisation that elicits passion, a sense of pride and which gets that discretionary effort out of individuals.

You can create this in several ways: Leading through example, setting very concrete expectations on ways of working, and making it clear what you expect of others.

You need to demonstrate that as a function you are aligned with the culture of the business. For example, that you have a growth mindset which feeds directly into how you participate in discussions around risk tolerance.

GLL: Are you a talent cultivator? What innovations do you use to maximise opportunities for people and ensure people's careers are developing?

Sean Roberts: I definitely differentiate talent from development in its broader sense. Talent management is an exceptionally important thing. In my team, we have a structured approach with talent management sessions every year. Those talent management sessions are not to look just at talent within our own function because I

work as part of a large group and I am a divisional General Counsel. We look at talent broadly within the legal function to see what kind of a pipeline we can build most broadly from a succession perspective. This broader approach enables us to nurture talent within my team of 55 lawyers, but also to highlight people from outside my team who could be nurtured through development interventions to succeed in my team. This not only helps motivate the broader legal team with development opportunities on offer quite broadly but also aligns with the organisation's needs.

I am firmly of the belief that people must manage their own development, but they need assistance with it through a structured offering. Most of the development will be on the job, for example, supplemented with mentoring schemes and broader opportunities.

In my leadership team, as we are setting our goals for each year, we identify unique development opportunities that will allow non-leadership team colleagues to support the achievement of those goals. Then if certain people have stated in their development aspirations that they want to get experience in a particular area, we can then allocate tasks to those with particular development aspirations or development needs. After this, for any remaining projects that we haven't allocated to people, we put it out to the function as a list of development opportunities that are above and beyond the standard development opportunities that are available in the year. We then ask people to volunteer to lead those, particularly in the case of some of our lawyers who are alone in markets, or are part of a small team, to get them involved in the central projects to enhance their visibility. Visibility is always incredibly important when you are going through talent management. If you don't know somebody it is very hard to talk about them.

Beyond that, we have a structured learning programme and have a digital academy which is a long term learning programme designed to ensure our lawyers remain relevant as our business and our products evolve.

GLL: Can you provide an example of when you have demonstrated courage in your role as General Counsel?

Sean Roberts: I have faced a situation where I have been told by management that I am operating in a way that could jeopardise my own role because I have disagreed with an action being taken. This has been where the action being taken was not illegal but the risk being taken was not a smart risk relative to the potential business benefit. When this happens, you need to reflect and have the conviction and the courage to risk being fired for doing the right thing than being kept for doing the wrong thing. Courage is relative if you work for an organisation which you know, at the end of the day, will support you to do the right thing. It might take a couple of levels of escalation to get to that point which can be incredibly painful. Even when you know at the end of the day the situation will be all right you need to stand up and have that metal. Remember the company is your client, not one person or group of people employed by the company.

Of course, courage also runs the other way: Taking smart, risk-based decisions, supporting them and taking accountability for their consequences is a crucial part of my role.

GLL: What three words describe the GC of the future?

Sean Roberts: Agile, external facing and trusted.