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Own your space:

Leadership advice from a
trailblazing chief legal officer

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Susan Blount was executive vice president and general counsel for Prudential Financial, Inc. (“Prudential”) for 10 years and was one of the first women to advance to the top in-house legal position in a Fortune 100 company in the United States. She joined Prudential as an attorney in its commercial real estate operation. During her career at Prudential, she held a variety of legal leadership positions, including chief investment counsel and vice president and secretary. She recently retired and now spends some of her time coaching midcareer women in-house lawyers, through the Center for Women in the Law, to help them reach their goals and take on positions of leadership.

Susan recently spoke at Deloitte’s Next Generation CLO Academy where she described two critical elements of success for anyone seeking a CLO or general counsel role: “owning your space” and the “click.” We sat down with Susan after her presentation to take a deeper dive into these topics.



Can you describe the coaching work you do?

At the Center for Women in Law, we offer a coaching program for midcareer in-house lawyers. We solicit applications and establish groups of six to eight woman lawyers who meet six times over a six-month period. During those meetings, the groups discuss key management topics like mind-set and power, but we spend most of the time at each session helping each woman work on a problem or opportunity that she has identified. The idea is that each woman will personally work an issue that is highly relevant to her, with new career and leadership tools, while hearing about and contributing to the discussion pertaining to the issues on which each of the women in her cohort is working. We also encourage the women to strengthen their relationships outside of the meetings, and with the structure of monthly meetings, we have accountability built into the program. Now that I've retired from Prudential, I have the privilege of spending a large portion of my time devoted to mentoring future legal leaders, but I spent a good portion of time coaching while I was still in practice. As the general counsel of a large legal department, I needed to be in tune to the leadership potential of my team and active in helping to develop others. I'd go so far as to say that developing your team is one of the most important roles a leader has, whether it's the general counsel, CFO, CEO or other C-suite executive. My advice to the women I coach is built not only on the work I do now, but the many years during which I was accountable for building a strong, diverse team.

What is "owning your space" and why is it important?

"Owning your space" is a proactive mind-set that demonstrates that a rising leader is adding value to his or her organization beyond technical legal skills and is personally taking charge of his or her career. It is taking your legal portfolio and going beyond responding to the day-to-day demands (what I call "defining your job by your inbox") of the portfolio, by anticipating questions, adjusting strategies, and identifying opportunities for cost savings and client education without being asked. Through this affirmative embrace of responsibility, the emerging leader demonstrates knowledge, insight, and leadership. She also creates a vehicle for developing key relationships. When you own your space, others begin to see you not just as a legal expert, but also as someone who analyzes issues through a broader lens, exhibits business acumen, and adapts management techniques to your responsibilities. An example might be a litigation manager, who goes beyond dealing with the day-to-day questions that pop up on their cases and the production of required reports. Instead, they become someone who identifies and communicates trends in the litigation portfolio and observations on how industry trends could have an impact on the portfolio; they implement (and communicate) cost-saving initiatives and use these ideas and initiatives to broaden their relationship base—without being asked.

If you consider the history of the role of the general counsel and the in-house legal department, you will see that it has evolved significantly in a relatively short period. As demands on the in-house legal department—and on the chief legal officer or general counsel—continue to grow, being able to differentiate yourself as a strategist and business partner is critical to career advancement. CEOs are increasingly asking that their chief legal officers or general counsel (GC) to be more business focused, and owning your space is an essential element to meeting this demand. A recent study by the Association of Corporate Counsel and the Georgetown Law Center for the Study of the Legal Profession polled GCs and board members to determine what activities conducted by GCs contribute the most to the company. Interestingly, the area where there was the biggest disconnect was in the area of strategy. GCs thought they were more strategic than the directors did, and—this is important—the directors not only rated the GCs lower, but predicted this skill would grow in importance over the next 10 years. So developing this strategic mind-set is growing in importance.

What does owning your space look like?

It looks different for everyone, but here are five key elements to effectively owning your space:

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1. Create your own opportunities.

A person who owns her space doesn't wait for someone else to knock on her door and offer her an opportunity. In many legal jobs there are chances to stand out without being asked. Early in my career at Prudential I was working in a regional real estate investment office, just as the company was kicking off a program to sell a large number of properties, something it hadn't done in years. The first few times an internal business client dropped by to tell me about a new deal and get documentation started, I found that I had to track them down later, because there was important information that hadn't been discussed during that ad hoc meeting. Often the businessperson then had to contact someone else to get that information, and before you knew it, a few days had been lost. So, I sat down, made a simple intake sheet and shared it with the sales team so that they were able to collect the information at the beginning. This was not rocket science, but I got a lot of credit for that little piece of initiative.

But you can start even simpler—make a practice of reviewing the agenda for every meeting you are asked to attend, and identify something you are going to contribute to the meeting before you go. Where else can you find opportunities to show initiative? Survey the business and legal landscape of the company as it relates to your space. Think about what you know and how it might be helpful to others; then design a session to teach it. Take care to design the session to target the needs of the audience you have identified. Avoid the lawyerly tendency to create education sessions to impress other lawyers (e.g., including citations on the slides), rather than really thinking about what the business team needs to know. And you'll probably get extra credit if you make it fun and interactive. Aim to be proactive when new laws or regulations are issued that your colleagues, your business unit or even the board of directors needs to better understand. Are there opportunities for the business that you can identify and navigate? Try not to let your interactions be one-hit-wonders; be sure to provide updates when it makes sense.



2. Stay connected.

Whatever your career goals, you are more likely to achieve them if you own your space. An important building block to such ownership is having a strategy to learn information about and demonstrate your capability in your space, your industry, and general leadership, from and to a broad array of people inside and outside of your company. Over time, be vigilant to evolve your network along with your career. Early in your career, stay in touch with law school friends. Then branch out and do something like join the local ACC chapter or participate in a relevant committee at the ABA, state or city bar association. As you grow in seniority and need to develop broader-ranging perspectives, you will likely need to “upskill” your network to reflect the contacts and content that have become pertinent. It may be time to look for a not-for-profit board with influential corporate leaders or to join more sophisticated business organizations like the Council on Foreign Relations or the Economics Club—and then work hard in those new settings. These are opportunities to meet and learn from members of the C-suite of other companies and “demonstrate your stuff.”

If you are connecting in the right places for where you are in your career, it should be good for you personally and make you a more valuable employee because of the fresh perspectives and ideas you are incorporating in your work.

Another way to stay connected and advance ownership of your space is to get to know several good executive recruiters. These individuals have a pulse on the industry and can be helpful in identifying key skills that the most sought after people in your space have. They are also aware of trends in the profession and common hiring specifications for senior legal roles. They can help you identify skills that would make you better in your current job as well as identify potential holes in your experience that may affect your ability to grow.



3. Strive to be self-aware.

Another key to owning your space is understanding yourself, so you can be most effective. A key component of self-awareness is using this knowledge to flex to the needs of others. If you understand how you best interact with others, are likely to respond in times of stress, and what you enjoy and don't enjoy doing, you can manage your work and interactions and be transparent with others about who you are and how you work, while not expecting them to always accommodate you. For instance if you are more energetic in the morning, seek to schedule meetings and phone calls then. If you need blocks of quiet time to draft important documents, learn to schedule those blocks into your calendar. If you have a tendency to lose your cool during times of stress, learn to manage that behavior. By being self-aware you can show your best self to the world.

To execute on this imperative, start by taking time to reflect on a daily or weekly basis, about the situations you've encountered, how you have reacted, how others reacted, and what your leadership style and work preferences are. Take this skill one step further and think about the upcoming day or week, the situations you will likely encounter, and how you plan to navigate them. Then explore the self-awareness development opportunities available through your company. If your company doesn't offer any self-awareness training opportunities take the initiative with something simple, like finding a short course that includes a Myers-Briggs assessment, even if you have to pay for it yourself.

Once you have started doing this work, find out about the eligibility criteria for executive coaching at your company. Having the chance to work with a coach that can take your leadership skills to a new level can be beneficial by raising your self-awareness and helping you to understand whether you are perceived as someone who owns her space. This is also something you may want to consider investing in on your own, if your company is unwilling to pay for it. Any investment you make in yourself, in terms of time and money, is one that is likely to pay off. It is very easy to get caught up in work and find yourself being reactive; however, highly self-aware leaders are proactive and intentional about the way they engage and own their space.

Developing self-awareness is a continuous process and at times it is difficult, especially when you realize something about yourself that may be contrary to what you want to believe, or what you aspire to be. The key is to dedicate yourself to the process. By being aware of how you work and your impact on others, it will help others to support you, will allow you to be more transparent, and will help keep you focused on goals that are aligned with your core values.



4. Ask for feedback.

If you want to know whether you are perceived as owning your space, you need to get feedback. Obtaining feedback is an important component of developing self-awareness, and it can be useful to professional development in many ways. No matter how hard you work on your own to develop self-awareness and other skills, you can't see your own blind spots (that's why they are called "blind" spots!), and that's why it is essential affirmatively to seek constructive feedback. But be aware that asking for feedback is an art. Not only do you have to be sincerely open to hearing information about yourself that is potentially painful, you have to help others feel comfortable delivering that feedback, and you have to be committed to acting on the feedback you receive, which, after some reflection, has the ring of truth.

I found that getting feedback was critical to my career development. I remember one time when I was working with an executive coach and I learned about a true blind spot. She learned that my peers thought I was "playing things too close to the vest" by not participating enough in the early stages of group discussions. I was shocked. I thought I was being respectful and trying not to dominate the conversation, but I learned through this process that my calibration was off.

As you seek out feedback, think about whom to ask. It should probably be more than a single person. Identify people you work with who have a reputation for developing talent and being insightful about career development. Do not limit yourself to people in the legal department. Someone with a thorough understanding of your company may have a better understanding of essential core competencies than many members of the legal department. You might also think about people who are more senior than you are, or who may view the organization differently than you. If the people making decisions about your future have a different lens than you do, it is important to try to see the world through that lens. You may be surprised at what they notice that you don't.

When seeking feedback there are a few rules to keep in mind. Off-the-cuff assessments are sometimes useful, but a serious developmental conversation should be scheduled in advance. The person who you are seeking feedback from should know in advance that this is the purpose of the conversation so they can prepare. Find a way to make it clear that you are looking for constructive suggestions... not just plaudits. Consider a gambit like, "I am not as effective as I would like to be at _____. Having seen me in that situation last week, do you have any suggestions for how I could have done that better?" This shows you are serious about getting information that will help you develop. And when you hear something that you are surprised by, you may ask a few follow-up questions to better understand the comment—but *never* argue the point. No one likes telling people things that hurt their feelings. If, as the person who requested the feedback, you make the interaction uncomfortable, you are unlikely to ever get a difficult insight from that person again. At the end of the conversation, always say thank you.



5. Ask for what you want.

You may be asking yourself, *Once I fully own my current space and everyone acknowledges that, what's next?* Few can know what you want unless you tell them, and few people are as familiar with your skills and background as you are. So, you are likely to miss some excellent opportunities if you wait for others to find them for you.

Career advancement discussions done well are an ongoing, holistic process:

- a. As part of staying connected (see above) talk to people throughout your organization on an ongoing basis about their careers, their ideas about key skills to do different jobs in the company, and changes they see on the horizon.
- b. Use that information to formulate ideas for your development and career goals that you can describe to others.
- c. Engage people in conversations about what you are interested in, how you think you can contribute and solicit their ideas for you as well.
- d. Repeat steps (a) through (c).

Then, keep your eyes open for changes in the business and the company's organization. Don't assume that having done steps (a) through (c), your work is done. When you see a job posting or an organizational change that you think could be an opportunity, let people know you are interested and the ways you can contribute.

To the extent the position requires skills that decision makers may not be aware you have, be sure to let them know. For instance, if a role has opened up that requires public speaking, and you do a lot of public speaking in your life outside of work—only you can make sure the boss knows that you have the requisite skills.

Another tip: When speaking about your goals, the more specific you can be the better. If you would like to advance to a job leading people in the legal department, you are more likely to gain some traction if you do one of the following, rather than just say you want to “get ahead”:

- Take a course or read a good book about basic management skills.
- Take responsibility for doing the performance reviews for the paralegals in your current section.
- Work on a project that crosses disciplines so you can showcase your ability to lead while not in charge.

Really use those informational discussions to help formulate your game plan, and understand that through this process, other people will become invested in your success.

I have seen many people miss out on opportunities, because they did not position themselves to take advantage of industry changes or likely upcoming retirements, and I have seen a *few* clear-headed individuals who kept tabs on these matters and made sure that senior members of the legal department understood what they were doing to prepare to contribute when these events came to pass.

What is “the click”?

I've borrowed this term from my friend Linda Chanow at the Center for Women in Law. It is the point in your career when you have successfully adopted the mental framework we have been discussing and embraced the transition from technical specialist to strategist, from issue spotter to problem solver, from lawyer to trusted advisor. It is when owning your space has become as natural as breathing. Making the “click” requires a growth mind-set, and the transition isn't easy; backsliding in the beginning is common. Most people's instincts are to be reactive, particularly when balancing a demanding workload. It is hard enough to complete the work you have been asked to do. But making the shift, so you are always looking for opportunities and communicating trends and continuously improving the work you are doing, is the “click” from one approach to work to a leadership-oriented approach that will become a habit that stays with you as you move up the ladder.

You coach women. Is this advice applicable only to women?

This advice is not limited in its applicability to women; men also benefit from proactively owning their space and focusing on achieving the click. I tend to focus my personal work on coaching women because they continue to be underrepresented in the senior ranks of the profession, despite having constituted more than 40 percent of law school graduates since 1985. But all of the advice I have given today is equally applicable to both genders.



Any final advice?

During my time as general counsel and in my current role with the Center for Women in Law, I see so much talent in the profession, and I am excited about the potential of these ambitious lawyers. But I know from experience that many potential leaders do not make the transition to developing the skills that will give them a seat at the table. To do so entails a process of growth that is often uncomfortable, but like the uncomfortable processes that young lawyers navigated to develop in the beginning of their careers, these skills are learnable and achievable. By embracing an attitude of perpetual growth and development, you can prepare yourself for the challenges of leadership that will serve you well throughout your career.



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