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INSIDE INSIGHTS

Corporate Counsel Women of Color discuss taking the next step

GCs talk shop at the CCWC's seventh annual career strategies conference

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Evolution is the theme of this year's Corporate Counsel Women of Color conference at the Beverly Hilton in Los Angeles. From offering tips for attorneys on how to advance their careers, stay motivated, brand themselves and read body language, all of the conference's content was intended to help women and minority counsel to continue to evolve both personally and professionally.

The session possibly most central to the evolution theme for in-house counsel was the GC Roundtable. A trio of GCs discussed the legal trends most affecting their business today, discussed how they rose to their current positions and offered advice on how others can reach their level.

First on the docket were the issues currently keeping the panel awake at night. Alfreda Bradley-Coar, senior vice president and general counsel of GE Healthcare, Americas, told the audience that she's most concerned about whether her company is doing what it says it's doing in terms of regulatory compliance. "We're always going to have rogue employees, so we need to make sure we stay ahead of that problem," she said.

Gary Roberts, executive vice president and head of Fox Group's legal department, agreed, noting that compliance is definitely the "flavor of the month." As a result, he said his team has built a program to stay ahead of the rapidly changing regulatory landscape.

Another issue giving GCs fits is the problem of relentless cost cutting. Roberts said that legal departments continually have to justify their value, and that it's an ongoing challenge to prove to the rest of the company that legal isn't just a cost center.

Denise Cade, senior vice president, general counsel and corporate secretary of SunCoke Energy Inc., a recent Sunoco spinoff, faces a different set of problems. She noted that it's important to build a culture in which the legal department is sensitive to the fact that they're all working for a new company. "Educating people about who we are and what that means for us is a definite challenge," she said.

On the professional development side, Roberts stressed the importance of people learning from their mistakes and differentiating between trying and training.

"If I start doing what needs to be done, I will be prepared for what's ahead," he said.

Roberts also noted that legal is typically thought of as being the "department where you always hear 'no.'" To combat this, he stressed that in-house counsel need to be seen as problem solvers and valuable resources.

Truly understanding the business also is a necessary trait of becoming a good general counsel. Bradley-Coar implored the audience to really get to know the company's products, its competitors and agencies that service them. "When you're about to intelligently discuss the strategies and what's meaningful to your business, that's what's most important," she said.

Identifying and executing a plan also is important for in-house counsel who aspire to rise in the corporate ranks. Cade

detailed how she drew up a five-year plan and hired a professional coach on her way from transitioning from law firm partner into a GC role. Along the way, she took a position with which she initially wasn't enthralled that gave her the direct business management experience and taught her the specific skills necessary to eventually become a GC.

"You have to make personal sacrifices to get to where you want to go," Cade said. "In my case, it positioned me for the next level. I identified what I wanted and seized the opportunity."

When looking to get ahead, Bradley-Coar suggested that attorneys volunteer for cross-functional projects within the business that add to their normal role. Going outside their comfort zone and being willing to learn something new and make mistakes will help attorneys get to the next level.

"It's all about attitude," Bradley-Coar says. "You can be the best and smartest lawyer in the department, but if you don't help others and work well within the team, you will get passed over." She also says she's more apt to notice people who are hungry to advance. "I want people who are there at the critical times. I want the people who I don't even have to ask to help out because already I know they get it."

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