

Remember me? I'm the Client

10 points on what the Chief Legal Officer wants from their external Counsel

by guest author, Ian White



Once when working as a Chief Legal Officer I was having one of those days.

Actually, I was trying to put right something my predecessor had done. I needed to find the document he had worked on to assess what our rights over something were. The document was nowhere to be seen.

I could, of course, have tried to contact him. However, he had left the building rather abruptly to - how do they refer to it? - pursue other opportunities (you should interpret "opportunities" loosely here!). Not a problem I thought - I will just contact our external lawyers.

The partner concerned came back almost immediately (for once!) "I am rather busy at present. Is it really that important?" It was, but clearly the relationship the partner had with my company wasn't. I tactfully re-introduced myself to him as 'his client' and for good measure I cc'd in my CEO.

The document miraculously and immediately appeared. Shortly after, that particular firm's lucrative relationship with my company unmiraculously disappeared.

I tell you this slightly tongue-in-cheek story because it still amazes me how many external firms do not really understand what in-house counsel expect from their legal panel and the relationship - and it *is* a relationship - they need to build and maintain with their corporate client.

So here are my brief tips for a successful and happy relationship with your clients!

1. **Understand my business** - If you are to be any use to me you must understand my business. And that does not mean, if I manufacture widgets, that you understand the process of widget making.

Rather, I want you to understand the culture, know the people - those to trust, those to avoid, the risk appetite, the internal workings, and the external market.

I am viewing you as an extension of the internal legal team and that has to be seamless as possible. So you must know my business - not as well as me, perhaps but well enough to be a trusted adviser.

Try this: Offer to spend a day with me, my team and the business people (please don't charge me for the experience though!) to understand the huge variety of issues and challenges I face.

2. **Like my business** - If I make paperclips it may not be a sexy operation but I probably don't get out that much as Chief Legal Officer so it may be my life (I am writing this point as a piece of fiction you understand!).

I have to be enthusiastic about the business to my peers at work even if at times that is difficult, so you need to share my enthusiasm.

Try this: Be really up to date about both my sector and my company - and talk to me as if you are a member of the company and not simply an outside adviser.

3. **Remember I'm human** - well most of the time. The Chief Legal Officer role is stressful and lonely at times. I have few people to talk to and fewer friends. So if you are the most brilliant lawyer in the world, but arrogant and aggressive, it is not going to make for the best of relationships.

I like to work with people I....like. A little bit of charm helps; a kind word or two when I have just been into see the CEO who is like a bear with a sore head (and that is on a good day!).

If you are the type of person I can go out for a beer with, then you have passed my compatibility test even if you don't drink alcohol (though I reserve the right to revisit that one).

Try this: Find out as much about me as you can and be prepared from time to time just to pick up the phone and ask how I am. At times like these there's no need to talk about the business or law, just a friendly relationship building chat.

4. **Listen – really listen** - few lawyers do. As Peter Drucker once said about managers: "The good manager listens first, speaks last." This applies equally to directors, lawyers, HR officers, accountants – particularly accountants.

Seriously, try and really listen to what your client – the Chief Legal Officer - wants. It may not be what he or she says. That's the challenge.

Try this: If you are not good at "active listening" then get yourself on a course to develop this skill. Many coaching courses cover this so perhaps attend one of these and you will reap double the benefit.

5. **Deliver** - Do what you say you will when you say will, or let me know well in advance if you cannot and have a good reason.

I once reported to a US General Counsel who was both a great lawyer and business person. Unlike many of the people I have reported to, who have made the Stasi appear laissez faire, he just said "I can ask just one thing: no surprises!" It is as good a mantra as any. You only get one chance on this.

Try this: Promise a delivery date and beat it by 72 hours. If you do this you will be better than the vast majority of external firms I have worked with.

6. **Find yourself a mentor** - Who do you admire and respect? How did they get to where they are? Find out. Ask them if they will be a sounding board for you – there is nothing like speaking to someone who has faced the same situation before.

Try this: Don't just stick to lawyers – some of my best mentors have actually been normal people! It will really help you develop your client relationships if you do this.

7. **Don't get it wrong and if you do own up** - Actually I think this is perhaps too lofty an ambition – the best lawyers do indeed get it wrong from time to time. They are good lawyers because they own up to it. So if an error does occur be open, transparent and act ethically.



8. **Remember it's all about relationships** - In engaging you as my external lawyer, I am looking for a long term relationship – you get to know my business (and me) and I get to know you and your firm.

Like all relationships there are good and bad times – the key is to have more of the former than the latter! But every time you advise me, have this at the back of your mind.

Try this: If you are great technical lawyer, but not good at relationship management, go on a training course like the ones my good friends at The Results Consultancy run. It really is worth the effort to develop and enhance your skills in this area.

9. **Shadow the Chief Legal Officer** - One way of finding about the challenges (and joys of course!) which I face is to come and work with me for a couple of days. You won't get paid (and as above don't bill me!) but you will appreciate my work environment.

Try this: You might even decide to become a Chief Legal Officer yourself (don't worry I will talk you out of it!) Ask me!

10. **Read about business** - Read as much about business as you can and frankly anything is better than reading law books! You're in business be interested in business!

When it comes to business authors I would strongly recommend two people. The first is Peter Drucker – an Austrian who became an Englishman and ended his life as an American. He is someone who began his life as a journalist, became a banker and finally a business academic. Peter's vision was great; his insight vast.

Secondly there's Charles Handy, who sees business as being far more than simply profit – it has to lead to a better society. If corporate governance followed Handy's philosophy rather than numerous codes, then corporate scandals would be a thing of the past.

A recent book well worth reading is *Consiglieri: Leading from the Shadows* by Richard Hytner which is an excellent outline of working with leaders.

Try this: If you read anything good which helps you with your business career, don't forget to recommend it to your clients too.

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Ian's background is as a lawyer and he has been the Chief Legal Officer/Company Secretary for both listed & major private companies.

This has led him to developing an expertise in corporate governance and working with boards on effectiveness and performance. He also coaches executives on improving their performance and developing their careers.