

Global GCs: New Lessons on COVID-19 Response

By E. Leigh Dance | March 26, 2020

Tips from global counsel on guiding their teams through a time of crisis.



In March of COVID-19, it's an understatement to say that each of us learn and try something new every day. When my London roundtable was postponed, I was sad to miss that catch-up with global general counsel. Instead I gathered these practical tips and lessons they've learned—mostly in the last 15 days—directly from four excellent corporate legal chiefs that I may not see for a while (plus a global HR legal chief and a CEO), and a few of my own at the end.

What I hear in their responses is the huge value of the perhaps no-longer-to-be-called “soft skills.” A range of nuanced skills is particularly in demand and can make a real difference in guiding your team through a time of crisis. First tip: remember to say *thank you*, often!

General counsel coping with COVID-19 also have a keen eye on specifics, including the availability of good data to respond quickly to requests on contracts, for business continuity planning, data security risks, and the all-important force majeure positions. Last but not least, frequent voice and video communication is necessary among teams at every level.

“Several weeks ago, we formed a risk oversight committee (ROC) that includes, among others, HR, Communications, EH&S, Supply Chain (which includes manufacturing and purchasing), and Purchase & Sales. The ROC has global scope. It monitors external and internal developments, separating “fact from fiction,” and develops recommendations for the senior management team. The senior management team has a daily conference call every day (weekends included) to review latest developments,

such as employees testing positive, quarantine of employees, spacing of production workers on the line, acquiring and distributing PPE, governmental actions, supply chain issues, end market demand. During that call the team agrees upon actions (e.g., work from home, shut down plant, communications with unions, etc.). This seems to be working well as the situation is so dynamic—but only time will tell.”

- [Chief Compliance Officer and Corporate Secretary, EU-headquartered global industrial company](#)

“It’s a time of immense learning for every General Counsel. Our Legal team is always under huge demand in March, as our fiscal year ends on the 31st. Adding COVID-19 requires greater stamina and resilience. It’s a live test of our investment in a collaborative culture and attention to detail, and I am fully convinced that it is paying off big in terms of our performance. As most of us now work remotely, I find hearing each others’ voices really helps us focus and progress. We hold frequent video calls by region and globally to address a myriad of contract questions important to DXC customers. We keep those calls short, specific, and add some humor where possible! We begin by thanking everyone, hearing their concerns, and asking the team to be fully engaged.”

- [Bill Deckelman, EVP + GC, US-headquartered DXC Technology](#)

“Don’t be too quick to react in a time of crisis, as doing so may unleash a series of unwanted consequences for the business. When market disruptors are moving this fast and there is pressure to make critical business decisions very quickly, we – as general counsel – can bring some calm and balance into the mix by presenting an independent or unbiased view, treading mindfully and helping the business look before it leaps.”

- [Alexia Maas, SVP Global General Counsel, Volvo Financial Services](#)

“We can each benefit by remembering the lessons from our last crisis, including the 2008 recession. The General Counsel has far greater influence today. People look to the GC not only to resolve problems in a crisis, but to set the tone in managing and preserving relationships. Crises will come and go, but it is our character as human beings that constitutes our legacy. Giving and receiving help and support will encourage others to collaborate. That includes taking soundings from, and sharing experiences with, others navigating the crisis such as fellow GCs and relationship partners in your law firms and other service providers. Vigilance is also crucial: hasty policy-making can result in unintended and unfortunate outcomes. GCs have an important role to play in maintaining good governance and transparency.”

- [Helena Samaha, President & CEO, Lex Mundi, former Global General Counsel](#)

“Given this unprecedented situation, a first lesson learned by our incident management team was the admission that we may make mistakes. We may not be able to give the “right” answer every time, but we’re always trying to give the “best” answer. Secondly, it has helped to react quickly to equip lawyers with the equipment they needed to set up home offices, even if it meant dismantling some of the real office infrastructure. Another valuable learning is that we have social calls with the team to talk about anything *but* work. No agenda, just checking in and discussing what is normally said at a coffee break.”

- [Rolf Althen, Group General Counsel, EU-headquartered Actean Group](#)

“My main tip is to stay connected and informed (but with reliable sources!). We are all learning how to address this new situation. It has really helped me to speak with diverse people and connect with a range of sources, within and outside our company. Hearing their thoughts and sharing learnings enables me to take a holistic and collaborative approach when advising the business. I’ve connected with colleagues that I ordinarily do not work with, but we’ve managed to form a global, cohesive team that can react and deal with issues as they arise.”

- [Natalie Bellwood, London-based Global Head of Employment Law, DXC Technology](#)

“For in-house counsel, this is about so much more than the law. It is an opportunity to put our networks to use to find out how others are confronting this crisis. We can use our law school trained ability to digest large amounts of information and communicate key concepts clearly, which can only help when every other email is a third-party analysis of COVID-19 implications.”

- [Christine Castellano, EVP, General Counsel, US-headquartered The Andersons Inc.](#)

Send your additional comments to me if you’re a global in-house leader, and this article will have a part two!

E. Leigh Dance is grateful to the above luminaries for their comments at this busy time. Leigh is Managing Director of 25+ year-old ELD International LLC and founder and director of Global Counsel Leaders Circle. She is based in New York and Brussels, and works with in-house leaders and their teams on strategy, change management, best practices and communications.

www.ELDIInternational.com

www.globalcounselleaders.com

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