

Value Practice:

***Value-Based Staffing Practices: Focus on Communications Skills and Tools at AmerisourceBergen Corporation***

**Interview with John Chou while Senior Vice President, General Counsel & Secretary, AmerisourceBergen Corporation**

**BACKGROUND**

Since 2002, AmerisourceBergen's law department has grown from a group of 3 to around 22 in-house lawyers. Getting business leaders to involve in-house lawyers up front and enhancing communications and interpersonal skills among in-house lawyers and within the broader corporate enterprise are areas of focus that resulted in specific practices and value-add for the law department.

Important to the General Counsel is the need to overcome client perceptions about working with lawyers. The General Counsel notes that clients can sometimes view lawyers as 'inflexible and not wanting to back off a position' once the lawyer believes she/he has found the 'right' answer and that lawyers sometimes don't know 'what battles to fight and which to let go.'

To address these concerns and enhance the value-add relationship and perception of in-house lawyers, Chou implements within the law department practices specifically designed to focus on communications and interpersonal skills.

This ACC Value Practice highlights communications practices implemented by the law department to enhance value-add and encourage positive lawyer-client interactions.

**SET THE TONE; MANAGE BY WALKING AROUND**

GCs need to demonstrate the types of communications skills they want in their law departments and 'walk the talk.' He does this by interacting with members of his legal team: dropping in on people, asking how things are going and encouraging dialogue. Being visible and encouraging communications helps set the tone for collaborative thinking and interactions.

**IMPLEMENT TOOLS TO FOCUS ON INTERPERSONAL SKILLS; SELF-AWARENESS**

Baseline expectations on skills for in-house lawyers within the department include the ability to perform quality legal work at a high level. Of equal importance to this General Counsel (for in-house lawyers and for relationships with outside counsel) are interpersonal and communications skills, willingness to promote teamwork and collaboration and project management and organizational skills. Some attributes to consider include:

- Is the individual willing to partner with others?
- Is the individual willing to communicate?
- Is the individual willing to learn how to be a good project manager?

**Self-awareness Assessments**

Assessing personality types and promoting self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses in this area can be a good starting point. Lawyers and paralegals on the in-house legal team used the Myers-Briggs as a starting point. At the outset, leaders communicated that there is no right or

wrong or good or bad; the assessment is about identifying areas of focus and tendencies for individuals.

GCs can partner with their corporate human resource teams to conduct baseline assessments to help promote this self-awareness. Using this information, in-house lawyers can enhance self-awareness of their comfort zones and areas needing work, such as areas where they may be less than ideal collaborators.

### **Training & Coaching**

Awareness is good, but tools to help enhance strengths and work on weaknesses are also important to improving as a team and overall perceptions of the law department's value add.

Among the tools implemented by AmerisourceBergen's law department are:

- **Department-wide training on typical lawyer comfort zones-** lawyers and paralegals in the department participate in sessions designed to focus on the department as a whole and that include modules to discuss typical comfort zones and ways to address situations outside those zones.
- **Emotional Intelligence-** the law department implements practices to enhance and promote self-awareness of these traits; tools to enhance awareness and actions for next steps include discussions during annual legal department meetings and coaching sessions/individualized feedback.
- **Management training-** offered by the corporate human resources team, management training is offered for high potential professionals and managers; training sessions can be 1-3 days in length and are focused on leadership and management skills. In addition to the in-house management training, another training option includes sending leaders to off-site customized training sessions designed to focus on interpersonal/interaction skills. These training sessions can include video assessment of communications skills in group settings and a one-on-one de-briefing. Another training option is one-on-one coaching with an executive coach experienced in working with lawyers. The law department has developed customized development plans for several of its managers and plans to have the managers move forward with the development plans with an executive coach.

### **LEARN HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH CLIENTS; SET REALISTIC TIMEFRAMES**

Communicating with clients is critical for lawyers—after all, lawyers are in the service industry. The General Counsel emphasizes that lawyers should promise deliverables within realistic timeframes, work to deliver results and let clients know if results cannot be delivered on time.

### **CONTACT INFORMATION**

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