

Leadership Profiles

Insights from Legal & Compliance Thought Leaders



Featuring David Rowan



*Former Chief Legal Officer,
Chief Governance Officer,
and Corporate Secretary
Cleveland Clinic*

*BarkerGilmore Strategic
Advisor and Leadership
Development Coach*

How did your role at Cleveland Clinic come about?

I was a summer clerk at Squire Sanders & Dempsey – now Squire Patton Boggs – and joined the firm upon graduation. I enjoyed the people and the training that gave me the opportunity to work on a broad range of projects. After becoming a partner, I co-chaired the firm's healthcare practice and served a term on its management committee.

When the firm developed a new relationship with Cleveland Clinic, I was lucky to be in the right place at the right time. I was asked to become Cleveland Clinic's full-time General Counsel while remaining a partner at the firm. I later left the firm and assumed additional responsibilities at Cleveland Clinic. In total, I served as Cleveland Clinic's Chief Legal Officer for more than 30 years until I retired in 2024.

What was the scope of your responsibilities?

Cleveland Clinic is a physician-led academic medical center providing clinical care, research, and education. I worked with three CEOs – all cardiac surgeons

– during a period of significant growth of the Cleveland Clinic's domestic and international operations. I was responsible for all legal services and served as Chief Governance Officer and Secretary. Government relations reported to me and I had other responsibilities as part of a high-functioning executive team.

What were some of your major goals as CLO?

When I assumed my role there were three lawyers and I was tasked to develop a law department to serve Cleveland Clinic's significant growth. My goal was to develop a team of highly skilled lawyers and paralegals to handle almost all of the legal work inhouse under the direction of deputy CLOs and practice area leaders. We also developed collaborative relationships with outside counsel when additional expertise was needed. Speed of analysis and execution (but not cutting corners) can be key strategic advantages, and I believe the law department was viewed as a strategic partner in Cleveland Clinic's growth in a highly regulated environment. Benchmarking with other healthcare entities and general industry standards assisted in our efficiency efforts.

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LEADERSHIP PROFILES: Interview with David Rowan

How essential was teamwork within the law department?

Teamwork is critical for a high-performing law department, and I give great credit to the deputy CLOs and practice area leaders who helped develop and supervise the lawyers and paralegals. Paralegals were key contributors to our performance. We formed liaisons with the business and healthcare operations to provide efficient legal services. These efforts were important to develop and retain law department members.

How did you balance your legal and administrative roles?

I wanted to be a practicing lawyer as well as an administrator. I enjoy negotiating transactions and the Clinic provided great opportunities to work on exciting projects. I also spent considerable time on governance matters. I was fortunate to have a highly talented group of lawyers who exercised good judgment. I sought to provide leadership and a model for delegating responsibility with accountability but not “second-guessing” decisions based on sound reasoning.

What are some of the ways to earn trust as a strategic advisor to the CEO and Board?

Of course, the baseline always has to be your integrity and the commitment to act in the best interests of the entity within legal requirements. You are expected to “speak to power.” Having said that, I have always worked for organizations committed to “doing the right thing” in a collaborative environment.

CEOs and boards expect a concise discussion of legal issues, but also expect that a thorough review of the issues stands behind the “bullet point” presentations. CLOs play a key role in assessing all risks, not just legal risks, and working as part of a team can assist in the review of business, strategic, and reputational risks.

I believe it is also important for the CEO and the board to know the strength and depth of the law department. While it is not always easy to provide direct exposure to a parent board, opportunities exist for lawyers to present to committees, subsidiary boards, and administrators. These can be training grounds for “board gravitas.”

We also sought corporate transparency in our operations and worked closely with the board, finance and other operations.

What motivated you to remain at the Clinic for 30 years?

The CLO job was never boring and there were always new opportunities and challenges. I worked with talented and committed professionals who were providing critical healthcare services and innovating for the future. I thoroughly enjoyed being part of the team.

Where do you see the greatest opportunities for attorneys in healthcare organizations?

Healthcare and related research and education activities present exciting opportunities for lawyers. Technology developments will continue to drive improvements in patient care and research, as well as efficiency in back-office functions. Attorneys can play a key role in navigating these opportunities.

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LEADERSHIP PROFILES: Interview with David Rowan

What motivated you to become a strategic advisor and coach at BarkerGilmore?

I have always enjoyed meeting with CLOs from healthcare and other areas to discuss common problems and solutions. These candid conversations have been productive and resulted in continuing development opportunities. Having an experienced advisor or coach who has “sat in the seat” can be beneficial for General Counsel, Chief Compliance Officers, CEOs and boards. I believe the BarkerGilmore model offers a differentiated approach to coaching. I enjoy retirement and the opportunity to assist others as others have assisted me in my CLO journey.

What are some of the key attributes that distinguish a high-performing Chief Legal Officer?

Every situation is different, but a CLO needs to develop a team that is respected by the executive team and the board and is viewed as a strategic partner in advancing and protecting the organization. Of course this includes duties to comply with legal requirements and raise difficult issues. The following skills and attributes contribute to successful leadership: integrity and confidence without arrogance; high emotional intelligence and communications skills; the ability to remain calm in a crisis; and critically, a good sense of humor because you will need it.

DAVID ROWAN BIOGRAPHY

David Rowan is a Strategic Advisor and Coach at BarkerGilmore, who brings more than 30 years of experience in executive legal and governance leadership, particularly within healthcare and nonprofit sectors. He collaborates with executive leaders and boards, specializing in executive coaching, succession planning, and optimizing organizational effectiveness.

Most recently, David served as Chief Legal Officer at Cleveland Clinic, which is consistently regarded as one of the top hospital systems in the United States and the world. In that role, he oversaw a law department of 50 attorneys and was responsible for all legal functions across a globally expanding organization, including the establishment of Cleveland Clinic London and Cleveland Clinic Abu Dhabi, and collaborations with leading technology companies. During his tenure, Mr. Rowan’s roles also included Chief Governance Officer and Corporate Secretary.

David has been a frequent speaker on healthcare law, tax-exempt compliance, law department performance, international negotiations, and nonprofit governance. He received his J.D. magna cum laude from Georgetown University Law Center, and a B.A. summa cum laude from the University of Toledo.

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