

Leadership Profiles

Insights from Legal & Compliance Thought Leaders



Featuring Paulette Dodson



Former GC & Corporate
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BarkerGilmore Strategic
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"I wish I had realized sooner that your 'first team' is the peer group and leadership team you work alongside, not just the people who report to you."

You've built an impressive legal career across multiple industries, from media and publishing to consumer goods. How did navigating these diverse sectors shape your approach to legal leadership?

Each industry operates at a different pace and places value on different outcomes. At that time, media companies could not afford to have a reputation for settling claims. When I joined the food industry, the approach was borne of different corporate strategic priorities. In a more traditional corporate environment, I realized that not everything can be critical. I learned that the definition of "winning" had to be made by the business, not solely by lawyers.

Moving through different industries also changed my view of talent and the power of trust between colleagues. At Sara Lee, for example, the company invested heavily in executives' growth and change management. Leadership recognized that kind of investment paid for itself in innovation and long-term success. That kind of investment was tremendously valuable to me and made me the leader I am today. In addition, I've had great leaders and not-so-great ones, and I've learned important lessons from both.

What's one leadership principle you wish you'd embraced earlier in your career?

I wish I had realized sooner that your "first team" is the peer group and leadership team you work alongside, not just the people who report to you. While direct reports are essential, building relationships with colleagues across the aisle, particularly as you move higher in the organization as a lawyer, is complicated because they are clients too.

As General Counsel, much of what we do and the why of it is not immediately visible to others. People often assume you know more than you can share, so the stronger the relationships you build, the more trust and transparency you engender. Then, when those inevitable "close-the-door" conversations arise, you may have credibility and trust that you can draw from, which will hopefully lead to effectiveness and win-win outcomes.

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LEADERSHIP PROFILES: Interview with Paulette Dodson

How do you approach building legal and compliance teams that thrive during times of rapid change?

It honestly starts with hiring and retaining colleagues who challenge you and embrace change. Early in my career, when I was in the number two or three role, I was the change agent and had leaders willing to let me thrive in that role. Later, as General Counsel, I realized how rare it was to have had that opportunity and that it was up to me to build an environment where people trusted me enough to push me. In my experience, it is far more effective when change comes from within the team, rather than solely top-down.

They are closest to the work and best positioned to ensure meaningful and lasting improvements.

In what ways can in-house lawyers better align with their company's long-term strategy and growth goals?

Build empathy — ensure you have absorbed their respective business segment's goals and objectives. An in-house lawyer's effectiveness, even existence, is derived from taking responsibility for the business strategies of their company or division.

It is also critical to run a legal department that makes business sense, and by that, I mean dollars and cents. An in-house lawyer's responsibility is to deliver high-quality work at the lowest sustainable cost. High quality at an unsustainable cost will break trust with the business. If costs are necessarily high, don't wait to communicate that upfront and get buy-in.

When I first started, I remember scoffing at a CFO who asked me for a litigation budget. That would never fly today. Being responsible stewards of cost is now a central part of the practice of law.

You've worn many hats: executive, board member, advisor. How do these different perspectives inform your coaching today?

Serving on a board shifts your perspective. As General Counsel, you feel responsible for solving problems and having the answers. As a board member, that is not your role. Your job is to advise and to hold management accountable on the shareholders' behalf.

That perspective has made me very intentional about both giving constructive feedback and recognizing good work. When I was on the executive team, I often wondered if I was meeting the board's expectations. Hearing a clear "yes, you are" or "thank you for the work you are doing" would have meant a lot.

What excites you most about working with BarkerGilmore's clients today, and how has coaching added a new dimension to your career?

What excites me is that today's General Counsel and those aspiring to the role are tackling incredibly complex issues. Most of them have the legal skills to do the work, but it's a lonely role, and being a thought partner to these amazing legal minds is fun for me.

I can often see ways of navigating the often complex personality dynamics that they can't because they are in it. It is inspiring to see how committed they are to doing right by their companies and their teams. Coaching gives me the chance to solve problems alongside them, and that is energizing and deeply rewarding.

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LEADERSHIP PROFILES: Interview with Paulette Dodson

How have your experiences on nonprofit and corporate boards shaped your views on the evolving role of the legal function?

Serving on boards taught me the importance of staying focused on strategy. As General Counsel, it is easy to zero in on legal risk. But as a board member, you must ask: What did we promise to deliver to our customers, clients, investors, or, in the nonprofit world, our funders? How are we measuring progress? Are we staying true to our mission?

My nonprofit board experiences were formative. As an example, very early in my career, I served on a board where I was part of the search committee for the executive director, essentially the CEO. Most lawyers never get that kind of opportunity, especially so early. That experience gave me insights into leadership, strategy, and talent that I was rewarded for, and I carried those insights into my role as General Counsel. As a result, I would recommend nonprofit or association participation and leadership as part of lawyers' and executives' career growth strategy.

PAULETTE DODSON BIOGRAPHY

Paulette Dodson is a Strategic Advisor and Executive Coach at BarkerGilmore, specializing in executive coaching and succession planning. She is recognized for her ability to manage strategic change on a global scale and for advancing ambitious ESG and DEI initiatives through clear, transparent communication and mentoring.

Most recently, Paulette served as General Counsel and Corporate Secretary of Alight, Inc., a global human capital and business solutions provider, where she guided the company through an IPO, multiple acquisitions, global divestitures, and long-term outsourcing relationships. Prior to that, she was Senior Vice President, General Counsel, and Corporate Secretary of PetSmart, Inc., where she led the company and its board through leadership changes, a leveraged buyout, and the transformation of PetSmart Charities. Earlier in her career, Paulette held senior legal roles at Sara Lee Corporation, including General Counsel, Corporate Secretary, and Chief Counsel for North America.

Paulette serves on the Board of Directors of Portillo's Inc. and Trupanion, and on the Board of Directors of Mather, where she chairs the Corporate Governance Committee and is a member of the Executive Committee. She also serves on the board of the United Way of Metro Chicago. Her contributions have been recognized with the Anti-Defamation League's Women of Achievement Award in 2022 and the Legal Aid Society's Avery Access to Justice Award in 2012.

Paulette earned her B.A. from the City College of New York and her J.D. from Cornell Law School.

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