

Being a Leader Means Changing How to Think About Success

Interviews and Profiles

Skills and Professional Development





Janet Bawcom

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AUSTIN, TX, USA

Young lawyers measure their success quantitatively. How many hours did they work this week; how many memos did they write this month; how many cases did they litigate this year? That all goes out the window when a promotion comes around, counsels Janet Bawcom, who spent 20 years honing her craft at Dell before recently taking the top legal job at Ingredion, the multinational ingredient producer. “Being a leader is not about what you can produce, but what your team can produce. There is an element of fear in becoming a leader because you’re putting your career in the hands of other people,” she says.

That initial fear gives way to joy when team members succeed. But before that happens, Bawcom says it is critical to establish the one thing all high-performing teams have in common: trust.

Joining and building a team

Bawcom joined Ingredion in April 2019 and quickly set about establishing the legal department’s culture. “You need trust, a feeling that it is a safe place to work, and that taking risks is OK,” she explains. “You establish trust by being real, otherwise colleagues can tell you’re not authentic and

see right through you.”

Asking coworkers about themselves — while also sharing details about herself — is one way Bawcom cultivates the trust that is necessary for the company to function. As the trust grows, she delegates responsibilities. When she initially joined the company, she oversaw all board committees — now they are all overseen by direct reports.

Handing off the work is part of her strategy for the department. She is very checklist driven and wants her department to have skills in each area, similar to her experience at Dell. “It is a virtuous circle,” she explains. Each lawyer rotates responsibilities so that a team member is always learning one thing and teaching another thing. By teaching each other, teamwork is established.

She believes that the “greatest learning comes from other people.” The best thing to do is ask other people for help, she says. One colleague educated her on the chemical structure of a kernel of corn, and she was fascinated.

Bawcom loves complexity — whether that means facing a flurry of M&A negotiations or completing puzzles or organizing the legal department of a F500 company. Changing industries after spending years in the personal computer space gave Bawcom a chance to learn a lot about a complex industry in a short time. First, she picked up books. She ordered textbooks — like what an undergraduate would use — and learned about food science.

Ingredion isn’t a household name, but many consumer products from companies such as Coca-Cola and Hershey’s rely on its plant-based ingredients. The company makes thousands of products at 48 manufacturing plants around the world. It’s increasingly turning to its legal department to help the business by protecting and leveraging its IP. Some corn products, like corn starch, have been around forever. The company spends a lot on research to develop new products, such as reduced calorie sweeteners. Other special ingredients are key to the company’s business and protecting the innovations falls to the legal department’s IP practice.

Getting to know... Janet Bawcom

WHAT ARE YOUR FAVORITE ASPECTS OF ACC MEMBERSHIP?

Early on, it was the opportunity to network. ACC provided opportunities to speak when that was a new thing for me. I was in one of the first classes of ELI and now I am a general counsel, so I guess you could say it worked. Our class is still very connected. And that shows that there are a number of different entry points into ACC based on seniority.

DO YOU HAVE ANY ADVICE FOR YOUR YOUNGER SELF?

Broadly, look for people who will teach you things. I learned how to be a leader from other leaders. I learned how to be a lawyer from other lawyers.

Also, worry less, enjoy more; it’s all going to work out.

While Bawcom was learning the complexities of plant-based food products, she was also examining the regulatory environment of the food industry. Compliance is built into the plans — it's literally in the blueprints of the manufacturing plants. "As soon as the grain arrives, there is a plan," she explains. But now that food regulation on a global scale is growing, compliance will always follow.

Finding the legal profession

Bawcom traveled the world as an adolescent, living in Iran, Africa, Burma, Singapore, and Scotland, among other exciting locales. Born into a family of engineers, she planned on going to college to join their ranks. But tragedy struck with her father's death. A friend's father, who was a lawyer, handled the funeral agreements with such grace that Bawcom reconsidered her engineering plans. He was the first lawyer she ever met. After working at his firm on a municipal bond issuance — and relishing the complexity of it — she transferred from engineering to finance and then went to law school.

She enjoyed private practice and didn't consider leaving until she helped a client selling items on the internet. She realized the potential and joined Dell, where she spent the next 20 years. During that time, she learned that how you approach the problem is much more important than expertise. The most challenging part of her tenure was when Dell went private and then offered IPOs of divisions. "From a lawyer's point of view, it was extraordinary work," she recalls.

Traits of a leader

When looking for a great lawyer, or an interesting person in general, Bawcom looks for someone whose ability to learn isn't fixed. "I want someone who can play in multiple arenas," she elaborates. "I look for two things: one is grit, or 'fire in the belly,' and two, a growth mindset."

Ingredion, an essential business, has grown during the COVID-19 crisis, including Bawcom's legal department. With everyone working from home who can, connections need to be built virtually. Bawcom has found that video meetings have spurred connections that didn't exist before. "It has really accelerated our work as a global team," she observes. She emphasizes avoiding burnout, advocating for taking PTO, even if it is a staycation. One of her favorite things to do is to take a walk during the day and get away from her desk.

Bawcom also acknowledges that we are in a time of learning with regard to diversity and inclusion. A leader during this time would ask: Am I doing enough as a leader? Bawcom did a lot of D&I work at Dell and believes that starting the conversation about inclusion is one of the best ways to advance it.

"Ask your colleagues what you can do to make your workplace better and more inclusive for minorities," she suggests. "Start that conversation from an authentic, vulnerable, and open place. And if you are white, like I am, it's especially important to listen and to educate yourself."

By listening to our colleagues and examining our unconscious biases, in-house counsel can acknowledge past mistakes and lead the company to a more inclusive and successful workforce.

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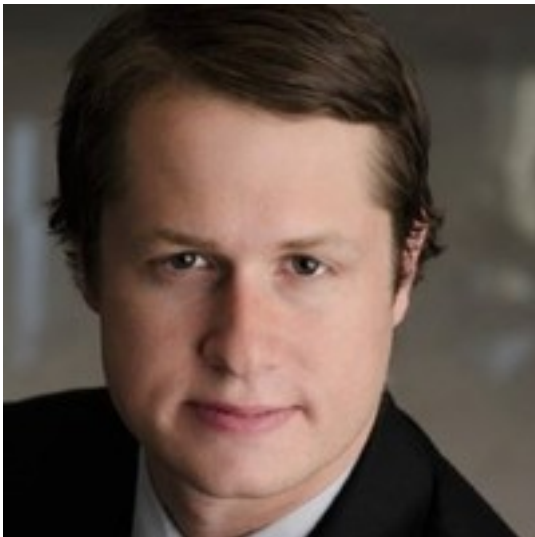
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