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Why It's Smart to Admit If You Don’t Know the Answer

Skills and Professional Development





Recently, I learned that if you're in a television pitch meeting, you should never say, "I don't know." That makes sense in an industry where you should understand your own creative material, but it felt odd to hear that as an in-house counsel. Over the years, I've discovered that we're at our best when

we're aware of what we don't know.

For example, I'm currently working on a Statement of Work with our IT department and I am relying on IT's knowledge as much as they are relying on mine. That became abundantly clear in a recent meeting when I had to ask several questions in order to understand the business intent enough to do my job well. As in-house counsel, if we think we know everything and "silo ourselves off," we will not be doing our most competent work for our internal clients.

There are two key methods that help you to maximize the expertise of those around you: asking questions and respecting your colleagues' knowledge.

Ask questions

As counsel, we don't have to pretend to have all the answers. In fact, our internal clients will respect us more when we admit what we don't know and rely on their expertise as appropriate. One of the best things about in-house law is being surrounded by people with different skill sets than yours.

If you're meeting with your internal clients and they say something you don't understand, ask them to clarify. If you're working on an agreement and have questions for a subject matter expert who's involved in the negotiations, ask them to address your concerns. If you're working on litigation and can't quite figure out the details of the claim because it's too tech- or business-heavy, ask an expert in your organization.

Even if you're idly chatting with colleagues, use that as an opportunity to find out what they do beyond their job titles. Not only will your colleagues appreciate that you care about their roles in the organization, but you could use that information on a future project.

Respect your colleagues' knowledge

One of the most important lessons learned as in-house counsel is recognizing your internal clients as resources. No matter their role, they bring different insights to each negotiation, subject, and project you're working on.

It's critical to understand who knows what in your organization. Obviously, you'd ask IT an IT question, Marketing a marketing question, and so on. But, beyond that, everyone has a specialty within a department. For example, Marketing may have someone working on sweepstakes and another on social media. Learning more about your colleagues and their crafts is invaluable to your practice as in-house counsel.

As smart as lawyers are, you don't have to be the experts at everything. It takes a lot of confidence to ask for help to get things done. That's why admitting what you don't know actually makes you the smartest person in the room.

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In her role as senior legal counsel with Vendavo, Inc., Colombo works cross-functionally with the relevant business teams and stakeholders, providing legal advice on a broad range of topics and guiding the business on legal compliance with a particular focus on drafting, managing, and negotiating client and vendor contracts of moderate-to-high complexity from the bid phase through contract execution, including software licensing and SaaS-specific provisions, as well as matters

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