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Member Spotlight: Sharon Zezima, GC of GoPro

Interviews and Profiles





Sharon Zezima

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How do you effectively lead the legal team of a dynamic, high growth, entrepreneurial company whose two stated values include “haul ass” and “be a hero”? By simultaneously being a risk manager and business partner, according to Sharon Zezima, general counsel of GoPro. GoPro manufactures action cameras, often used in extreme-action videography to capture vivid moments.

Zezima strongly believes that risk-taking is part of everyday life, and that we take risks even without realizing it. For example, on a recent trip to Hawaii, Zezima had the chance to swim with dolphins. The catch? A deadly shark attack had taken place in the same location just a week before. Zezima had to make a decision: take a risk and swim with the dolphins, or forgo the experience of a lifetime.

In the end, she jumped into the water and created amazing memories (documented with a GoPro camera, of course!).

At a company like GoPro, the decision to get into risky waters is an everyday reality. Risk-taking is an art worth perfecting because a lawyer not comfortable with risk-taking won't thrive in such an environment. The fear of a looming "bomb" at a dynamic, high growth company exists because time and resources are scarce. Embracing, riding and loving the bomb is the way to have a more enjoyable career and approach risks in a sober, calculated and realistic way.

At a recent event held by ACC's San Francisco chapter, Zezima described three realities of calculated risk-taking at a high-growth company — using GoPro videos to help people visualize her points — and she offered strategies for each one.

Reality One: You will be overwhelmed. A lawyer at a high-growth entrepreneurial company will never have enough time or resources. Being able to prioritize is an essential skill. For example, a lawyer must be able to soberly assess all risks and decide which ones have to be addressed first, and which ones can be addressed a few months later. When GoPro considered going public, Zezima deliberately shelved somewhat contained and isolated privacy issues to address them more adequately and deliberately post-IPO. Soon after the IPO, Zezima hired a privacy specialist to address privacy issues in a deliberate and business-focused way.

Reality Two: Bad things happen to good companies. Part of being at a high growth entrepreneurial company is the constant possibility of a legally-related crisis that could significantly affect the company. If that happens, it generally does not mean that the company's in house attorneys are bad lawyers; it is simply a matter of the amount of potential risks and the time and resources to account for them. For example, during the IPO, Zezima faced a challenging export control compliance issue that had to be addressed and could not be put off until after the IPO. In the end, while it made for even more work during a busy IPO process, Zezima addressed it through remediation, trainings and disclosures. As a result, Zezima realized that even though bad things happen to good companies, they don't always have to end badly.

Reality Three: You have to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. According to Zezima, a little rumble at a young and entrepreneurial company is a good thing. It often indicates that the company is at the right place and assumes the correct amount of risk. As a lawyer learns to embrace, ride and love risk, she will learn to recognize how far to push in various situations. Over time, she will be a better, more sophisticated risk-taker.

In order to thrive, Zezima adopted three principles for her legal department at GoPro that unify her staff.

First, take informed, calculated risks. Zezima encourages all legal professionals on her team to accept the fact that risks are part of life. All stakeholders must understand the risks before making a decision, and their GoPro legal partner is responsible for educating them.

Second, be resourceful. While GoPro is now a public company, it is a high growth, entrepreneurial company at heart. Being scrappy and doing more with less is not just a vague principle. It's a requirement.

Third, keep it simple — don't over-lawyer. Zezima encourages the legal professionals on her staff to think promptly and act efficiently. There's simply no room for a corporate-like culture at GoPro, so

legalese is highly discouraged. Normal, everyday English is the norm.

Zezenia's open-minded and comfortable attitude toward risk-taking is inspiring and thought-provoking. It is helpful advice for any lawyer in a high growth entrepreneurial company. Zezenia's success suggests that lawyers who are naturally highly risk-averse may not be optimizing their experiences — personal and professional — and in the process may be robbing themselves of an opportunity to thrive. Perhaps collectively, as a profession, we should occasionally try to live a little!

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Olga V. Mack is a fellow at CodeX, The Stanford Center for Legal Informatics, and a Generative AI Editor at law.MIT. Mack shares her views in her columns on ACC Docket, Newsweek, Bloomberg, VentureBeat, Above the Law, and many other publications.

Mack is also an award-winning (such as the prestigious ACC 2018 Top 10 30-Somethings and ABA 2022 Women of Legal Tech) general counsel, operations professional, startup advisor, public speaker, adjunct professor, and entrepreneur. She co-founded SunLaw, an organization dedicated to preparing women in-house attorneys to become general counsels and legal leaders, and WISE to help female law firm partners become rainmakers.

She has authored numerous books, including *Get on Board: Earning Your Ticket to a Corporate Board Seat*, *Fundamentals of Smart Contract Security* and *Blockchain Value: Transforming Business Models, Society, and Communities*. She is working on her next books: *Visual IQ for Lawyers* (ABA 2024), *The Rise of Product Lawyers: An Analytical Framework to Systematically Advise Your Clients Throughout the Product Lifecycle* (Globe Law and Business 2024), and *Legal Operations in the Age of AI and Data* (Globe Law and Business 2024).