

## ARTICLE

# The changing leadership style of today's general counsel

A recent survey of general counsels shows that the best leaders are more than strong legal technicians and effective business partners; they also know how to inspire and create meaning among their teams.



The most successful general counsels and chief legal officers have, for a number of years now, become more strategic and have been gaining significant influence in both the decision-making processes of their companies and in setting the moral direction of their organizations.

The past few years have been a time of significant change, perhaps best exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic and global racial justice movements that have shaped society and business since the beginning of 2020. Employees expect more from their organizations and want more from their careers—reflected in an increase in employee activism<sup>1</sup>—and corporate leaders have had to step up and act upon those demands in order to survive and thrive.

General counsels and chief legal officers have not been immune from this—legal leaders have been forced to evolve as well. The most successful general counsels and chief legal officers have, for a number of years now, become more strategic and have been gaining significant influence in both the decision-making processes of their companies and in setting the moral direction of their organizations.<sup>2</sup> More and more, they are being asked to determine not only what is legal but what is right, as corporate reputation is increasingly being measured against the good or harm companies do in communities and the way they treat their employees, suppliers, and partners.

As pressure mounts for organizations to disclose their environmental, social, and governance (ESG) actions, the need to define their purpose and do good will only become more central to organizations' strategies. In addition, given the events of the past few years, leading with meaning and inspiring teams are increasingly becoming central leadership assets if leaders are to engage and retain their teams. General counsels are playing prominent roles in their companies in both of these areas.

These changes to the leadership capabilities of general counsels and chief legal officers are reflected in the trends we have seen in the evolution of their leadership styles over the past six years. Between 2015 and 2021, 1,189 legal senior executives took a proprietary Heidrick & Struggles survey—the combined results of which highlight how much each leader leans toward each of the eight styles of leadership (see chart, "Leadership styles of chief legal officers and general counsel leaders 2015–2021").<sup>3</sup>

**Leadership styles of chief legal officers and general counsel, 2015–2021 (%)**

■ Increase ■ Decrease

Primary style	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Collaborator	9	8	8	10	13	16	21
Composer	11	15	12	12	9	2	3
Energizer	8	10	13	10	9	16	17
Forecaster	11	13	17	16	19	5	12
Harmonizer	9	15	11	14	14	28	18
Pilot	8	10	4	6	9	3	4
Producer	36	20	21	17	14	17	14
Provider	8	8	14	15	11	12	11

Now more than ever, collaboration has become important for the most senior legal executives in building their teams, as employees are increasingly prioritizing inspiring, engaging workplaces, and meaningful work.

<sup>1</sup> Megan Reitz and John Higgins, "Leading in an Age of Employee Activism," MIT Sloan Management Review, January 19, 2022, sloanreview.mit.edu.

<sup>2</sup> Victoria Reese, "How the general counsel role is changing in 2020: A new job description?" Heidrick & Struggles, heidrick.com.

<sup>3</sup> To learn more about Heidrick & Struggles' Leadership Signature survey, see Karen Rosa West, "What's your leadership signature?" Heidrick & Struggles, heidrick.com.

The biggest shift we have seen is an increase in the **collaborator** leadership style, which is defined as being empathetic, team building, talent-spotting, and coaching oriented. Now more than ever, collaboration has become important for the most senior legal executives in building their teams, as employees are increasingly prioritizing inspiring, engaging workplaces, and meaningful work. It is also crucial to success with the expanded strategic and operational scope of the senior legal role.

In that context, it is also clear why the **energizer style** is steadily gaining ground. The main characteristics of these leaders include being charismatic and inspiring and having the ability to connect emotionally and provide meaning. The rise in this style is likely a clear consequence of the role chief legal officers are now playing in setting the moral compass of their organizations as well as the increased necessity to bring purpose into the way their functions and companies operate.

The third style that gained some prominence since 2015, the **harmonizer**, is also notable. These leaders are seen as reliable, quality driven, and execution focused, able to create positive and stable environments and inspire loyalty. This style has doubled in prevalence from 2015 to 2021 and peaked at 28% in 2020—the year the pandemic hit most of the world—when creating positive and stable environments for workers became more important than ever. Although the share of harmonizers fell a bit after 2020, its overall rise indicates the increasing and continued importance of connection and reliability.

Of course, some leadership styles have declined in prevalence. In particular, there are fewer leaders who have **producer** as their main leadership style—producers are those who are characterized by being task-focused, linear thinkers, and wedded to tradition. This style seems less likely to be fit for purpose in a continuously evolving world where agility, diversity, innovation, and collaboration are prioritized.

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## Looking forward

Legal acumen and technical knowledge have long been table stakes for the role of general counsels and chief legal officers, along with the ability to provide objective judgment and serve as a counselor to the CEO, board, and senior team. As noted, we have seen a growing expectation from CEOs and boards over the past number of years that chief legal officers serve as business partners who can effectively work across functions and advise the entire organization. Given the events of the past two years, this trend has been magnified and sharpened, with a broader, more collaborative, and more engaging approach to leadership increasingly being prized. Indeed, the best legal leaders of today—and tomorrow—are more than strong legal technicians and effective business partners; they also know how to inspire and create meaning among their teams at a time when inspiration and purpose are increasingly important to employees.

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## About the author

**David Burd**  
is a partner in Heidrick & Struggles' Washington, D.C., office and a member of the Legal, Risk, Compliance & Government Affairs Practice.  
[dburd@heidrick.com](mailto:dburd@heidrick.com)

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Victoria Reese  
New York  
vreesee@heidrick.com

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