
The new General Counsel: Helping the CEO rebuild trust

In this year's PwC Global CEO Survey, three top-line themes emerged loud and clear from our UK respondents: a positive – but qualified – outlook for growth; intensifying challenges in recruiting and retaining the best talent; and the need to lead their organisations from the front in embracing technology.

In my view, all three of these themes are linked by a single pervasive thread: the imperative to rebuild and sustain trust, in an era when the trust gap between business and society has widened into an unprecedented, and arguably very dangerous, chasm.

Why trust? Well, on growth, CEOs need a team around them that they can trust to make the right calls at the 'moments that matter'; decisions that deliver business performance without compromising on the organisation's purpose and values. On talent, they need the type of strong, trusted reputation that will attract the best people to come and work for them. And on digital, they need to inspire confidence internally and externally so that they understand not only the commercial opportunities brought by stewardship of people's data, but also the related ethical, compliance and regulatory responsibilities.

Across the CEO Survey findings, CEOs' focus on laying down a bedrock of trust shines through. When we asked UK CEOs about how they make big decisions, they ranked the trusted advice and experience of others above data and analytics. Quizzed about the benefits achieved from their people diversity programmes, an identical proportion (77%) pointed to enhanced business performance and a stronger reputation – for which, arguably, read trust. And asked to name their main digital concerns, 75% cited brand and reputation as key.

It's a compelling message from the CEO

Taken together, these responses confirm that the absolute need to earn and reinforce trust is front-of-mind for today's CEO. So, what does this mean for the General Counsel? In my view, it presents a fantastic opportunity for the General Counsel to become a vital trust guardian for the CEO and Board, interacting and engaging with them in a way that helps keep the trust dimension front and centre of their debate and decisions.

This means being more than a sounding-board. It means actively challenging 'group-think' when it emerges, and – like a good friend – posing hard, searching questions and holding up the mirror when the trust and reputation agenda is at risk of being overlooked for shorter-term gain.

This role plays to the perspectives expressed in several of the other blogs in this series on 'The new General Counsel'. In 'Gaining a voice in the Boardroom', Richard Sykes and I describe the General Counsel's personal and professional journey to 'valued business partner' to the Board – combining influence and insight around all risks, including threats to trust. Additionally, in 'Being front and centre of cyber incident response', Kris McConkey sets out how the General Counsel can become central to the crucial digital trust agenda.

What's more, the General Counsel's role as the Board's trust guardian aligns with, and can be strongly supported by, PwC, as we work to fulfil our own stated global purpose, 'To build trust in society and solve our clients' important problems'. It's no coincidence that we continue to place the spotlight on trust, aiming to enhance trust between business and society through our Building Public Trust programme, including a 'Citizens' Jury' on trust with Britain Thinks.

The General Counsel can be a catalyst for change

The message is clear. Your CEO knows building trust is vital. By helping him or her to keep trust at the heart of boardroom decisions, you as General Counsel can dramatically increase your own role and influence at Board level.

Read more in our series of articles focused on 'The new General Counsel':

- The new General Counsel: Strategic adviser to the Board
- The new General Counsel: Helping the Board tackle crises
- The new General Counsel: It's legal - but is it right?
- The new General Counsel: Being front and centre of cyber incident response
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