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# Inside the Mind of the General Counsel

*From gatekeeper to dynamic bridge builder*

Russell Reynolds Associates' Inside the Mind of ... series addresses the leadership and behavioral attributes of various groups of executives.

# Inside the Mind of the General Counsel

## From gatekeeper to dynamic bridge builder

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Best-in-class general counsel share three core traits: They are more decisive, more likely to display dynamic leadership and more likely to cut through bureaucracy.



Interestingly, our psychometric results show that top legal executives do not conform to virtually any of the negative stereotypes commonly attributed to lawyers.



Within the C-suite, GC's leadership attributes place them in the risk management camp with chief financial officers (CFO).



In general, legal executives show a tremendous problem-solving focus and team orientation.



When we examine top legal executives against traits relating to commercial orientation, the results are mixed, with GC showing less drive and aggressiveness than chief executive officers (CEO).

### METHODOLOGY

The Russell Reynolds Associates database—unique in that it contains more than 5,000 data points from the top ranks of corporations worldwide—allows us to make statistically driven observations about the characteristics possessed by leaders in a particular field.

Our methodology was straightforward: We compared 78 top legal executives with our broader database of executives (as well as with CEOs and other executive figures) on 60 psychometric scales from well-validated leadership assessments to understand upon which scales the top legal executives showed statistical differences from the other populations.

## Inside the Mind of the General Counsel

# External forces: why the general counsel role broadens by the day

Beyond their fulcrum role as a key member of the leadership team and savvy board advisor, three external forces have put pressure on the general counsel position to be increasingly proactive and agile:

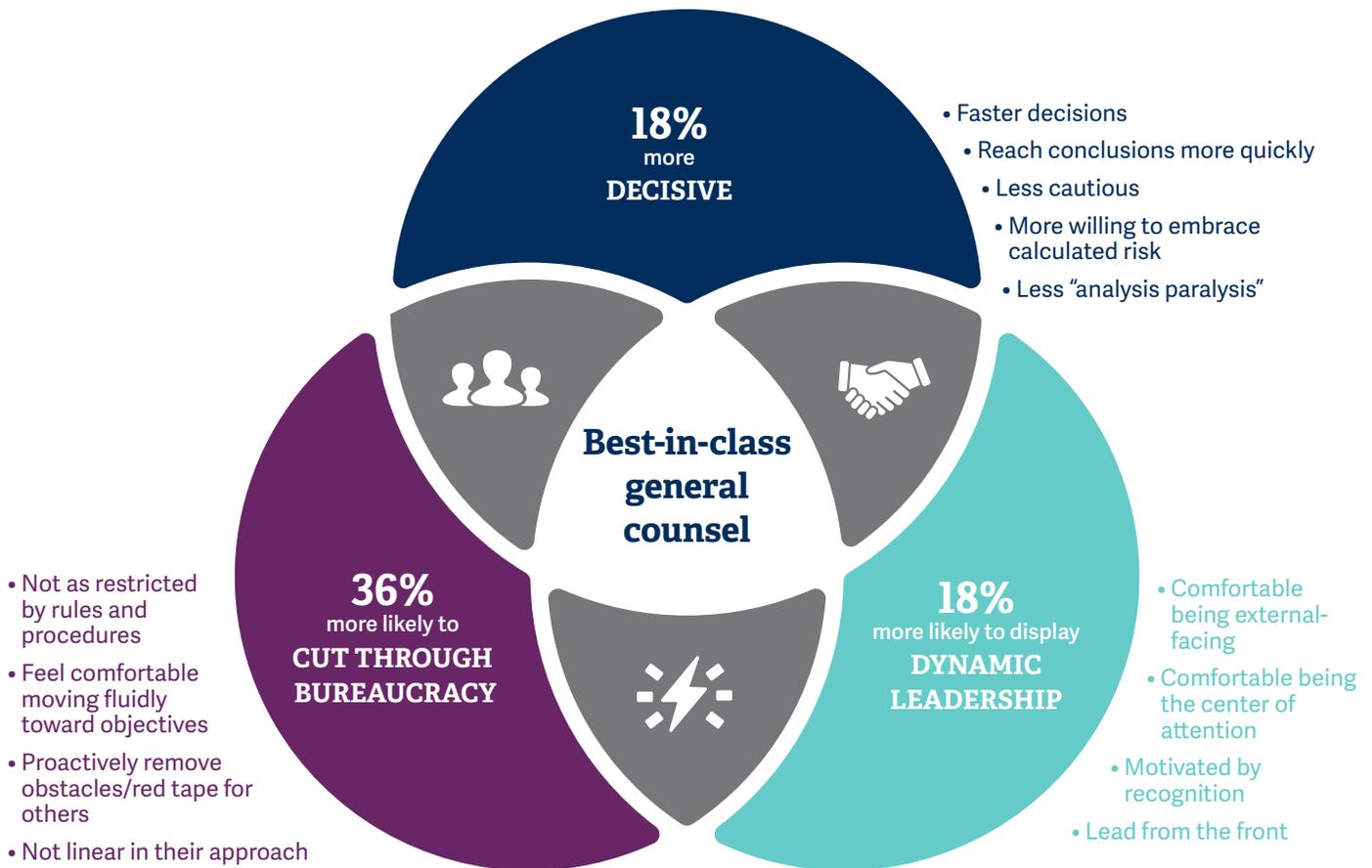
- **Globalization**—With businesses that are becoming more dispersed in terms of revenue, operations and growth opportunities across widening geographies, the complexity of the regulatory landscape and the sheer physical challenge of managing the business and risk places greater pressure on the general counsel to extend lean resources across a diverse landscape with creativity and discipline.
- **Technology**—Fast-moving information and nearly instant broad access to that information have challenged general counsel to move quickly to address a host of issues and threats—whether related to cyber, privacy, social media or a 24-hour news cycle—that did not exist in their current form 10 or even five years ago.
- **Government oversight**—Across a wide variety of industries and a global assortment of jurisdictions, government oversight into business activities has become more precise, more granular and more focused on the need for organizations to proactively take the correct steps (above and beyond simple compliance). Not surprisingly, general counsel have been at the forefront of leading organizations through this paradigm shift.

 <h3>GLOBALIZATION</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Cultural and legal differences</li> <li>▪ Lean and far-flung teams</li> <li>▪ Emerging market risks</li> </ul>	 <h3>TECHNOLOGY</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Transparency</li> <li>▪ Speed</li> <li>▪ Access to information</li> <li>▪ Cyber and privacy</li> </ul>	 <h3>GOVERNMENT OVERSIGHT</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Risk management</li> <li>▪ Anticipation of developments</li> <li>▪ High costs</li> <li>▪ Disclosures</li> <li>▪ Diverse stakeholders</li> </ul>
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## Inside the Mind of the General Counsel

# The best general counsel are decisive, dynamic and warriors against red tape

When we examined best-in-class general counsel against their peers, three key differences emerged. The highest performers are 18% more decisive than their executive peers—immune to “analysis paralysis.” They also are at home in the spotlight and 18% more likely to display dynamic leadership. Finally, they are a whopping 36% more likely to cut through bureaucracy—a striking trait given the stereotype of GC as upholders of rules and regulations.



## Inside the Mind of the General Counsel

### Lawyer stereotypes? (Mostly) false.

When we examined top legal executives against a roster of lawyer stereotypes, most of the stereotypes proved false. The group scored statistically identically to the general population on most traits.



Within the realm of commonly stereotyped traits, top legal executives in fact show only two statistically significant differences from the overall executive population.



## Inside the Mind of the General Counsel

# Within the C-suite, GC's leadership attributes place them in the risk management camp (with CFOs)

General counsel sit at an interesting place within the C-suite spectrum of personalities. They are not change agents/disruptors (like chief digital officers, chief marketing officers and chief information officers/chief technology officers (CIO/CTO) or even change enablers (like CEOs, chief human resources officers and chief operating officers). Rather, they are at the more pragmatic, business-oriented end of the risk management group, though not as rules driven as CFOs. This unique position among their colleagues gives them the opportunity to be the balancing voice in key conversations.

The complexity and breadth of the regulatory challenges require that top GC display the uncanny ability to cut through and find solutions that both protect and advance the corporation in what often is a sea of gray judgment calls. The GC has to bridge the risk tolerance of the corporation with the threats facing the organization and define a path forward. Judgment, pragmatism, great gut instincts, agility and people skills all are top requirements for success.

### C-suite executives vs. all other executives

Percent Differences in Attribute Scores

#### CHANGE AGENTS/DISRUPTORS

CHIEF DIGITAL OFFICERS

52%

more likely to think outside the box

CHIEF MARKETING OFFICERS

34%

more likely to take initiative and test limits

CHIEF INFORMATION OFFICERS/  
CHIEF TECHNOLOGY OFFICERS

34%

more likely to go against the grain

Cybersecurity: CIOs/CTOs operate as risk managers

#### CHANGE ENABLERS

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICERS

27%

more likely to take calculated risks

CHIEF HUMAN RESOURCES OFFICERS

27%

more adaptable

CHIEF OPERATING OFFICERS

17%

more likely to be biased toward action

#### RISK MANAGERS



GENERAL COUNSEL

13%

more pragmatic

CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICERS

8%

more likely to be guided by rules

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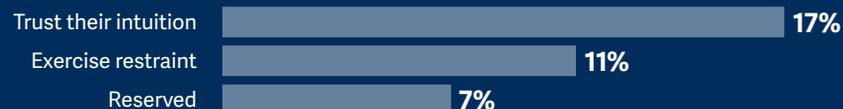
# Legal executives in general show focus and introspection

General counsel often act as pragmatic forces within the C-suite, and their leadership and behavioral attributes bear out this view. Perhaps not surprisingly given the rigors of legal training and skills development, this group is introspective and solution seeking. What makes them effective partners to their colleagues, though, is their strong team orientation and laser focus on the task at hand.

### Top legal executives vs. all other executives

*Statistically Significant Percent Differences in Attribute Scores*

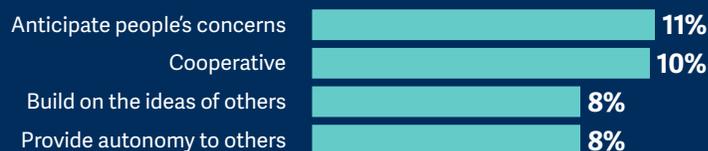
#### INTROSPECTIVE



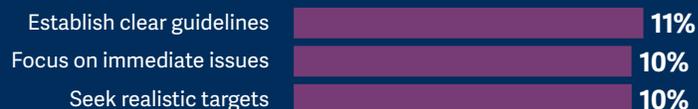
#### SOLUTION SEEKING



#### AT HOME ON TEAMS



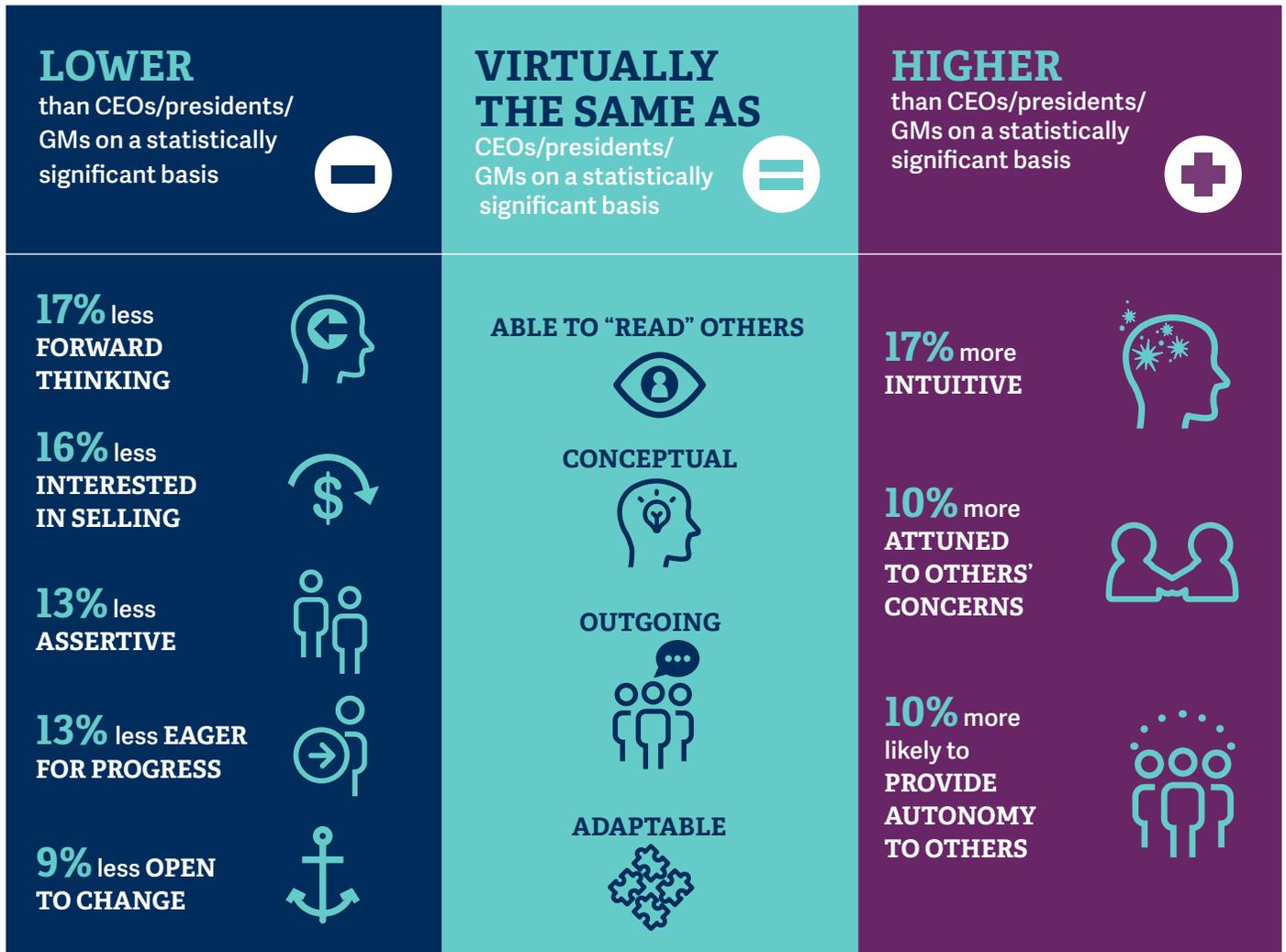
#### LASER FOCUSED ON THE TASK AT HAND



## Inside the Mind of the General Counsel

# General counsel and commercial orientation: a mixed bag

Compared with CEOs, presidents and general managers (GM) (effectively, leaders in more explicitly commercial roles), general counsel scored both lower and higher on key commercial traits.



### FOR GENERAL COUNSEL WHO WANT TO IMPROVE THEIR COMMERCIAL ORIENTATION ...

- Hone in on positive change and ways to achieve it.** GC, by nature, are less change oriented than their more commercial peers, but by focusing on the aspects of change that are most appealing to them, they can expand their commercial quotient.
- Find a model of salesmanship that matches their introspective nature.** Research increasingly demonstrates that even the most pronounced introverts can be effective marketers if they leverage their quieter nature as an asset.
- Use their strong ability to connect with colleagues as a force to attain commercial goals.** Because GC excel at delegating and understanding others' concerns, they can use these attributes to channel teams toward business results.

## Inside the Mind of the General Counsel

# What's next for general counsel?



Pressure continues to escalate on the general counsel role. The regulatory landscape is increasingly mined with challenges that only GC and their team of internal and external professionals can help navigate. Companies are sensitized that they need to do the right thing, but the GC is crucial to translating that feeling into action that allows the business to advance.



The heavier the regulatory pressure, the higher GC rise, adding additional functions, including not only compliance and government affairs but also communications, audit, cybersecurity and even commercial leadership roles.



In this environment, the traits of best-in-class GC—decisiveness, dynamic leadership and the ability to cut through bureaucracy—become critical. GC are being asked to lead more overtly and to cut through a morass of problems to find business-relevant solutions. The GC role has effectively been turned on its head—from gatekeeper to dynamic bridge builder.

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