

The Path to General Counsel: Serving Others



At a recent breakfast in our Path to General Counsel series, we welcomed Michael Eckhardt, executive vice president/chief administrative, legal and risk officer and secretary of the beloved and iconic convenience store, Wawa. Over a signature breakfast spread of Wawa coffee, Sizzlis®, soft pretzels and more, Mike gave insight into the arc of his own legal career and shared aspirational advice.

Mike started his career in private practice at top firms Dechert and Pepper Hamilton (now Troutman Pepper) before being recruited to Wawa. At the time, he was less familiar with the complexities of a smaller, growing business, but two decades later, he looks back on this moment as the best decision of his career.

Diligence and a willingness to seize opportunities and develop others are crucial for career growth in the legal sphere. Mike has built these characteristics into his leadership philosophy. His advice to those on the legal leadership path is to be committed to the company you work for, ensure that your values are aligned with those of your company and take advantage of the opportunities provided to you, and during our breakfast talk, he shared four key elements of that effort.

1. Raise your hand and welcome opportunities to grow

Mike views opportunities in a broader context beyond a technical legal lens. He recounted how initially, some of his law firm peers doubted his decision to join Wawa, thinking he would find it mundane “just selling coffee and hoagies.” Instead, the experience has been diverse and challenging. He has dealt with a wide range of legal issues, from maritime law to class action lawsuits and complex governance matters and has served as a key board adviser. Beyond legal and compliance, he has expanded his role overseeing risk management, quality assurance, government relations, ESG programs, shareholder relations and technology.

Intellectual curiosity around the business is essential

Being continuously stretched by Wawa’s leadership is something Mike values in his job, and his ability to handle a vast range of responsibilities is a testament to his adaptability. His advice to others is to stay open to taking on various roles and new responsibilities, and to establish oneself as a go-to person by consistently getting things done. Establish yourself as

a problem-solver and be willing to take a chance in learning and being curious about the business and the industry. Diversity in experience can lead to significant personal and professional growth.

2. Always understand how the business works

For Mike, one of the most challenging and rewarding aspects of his role as an adviser to the executive team and board has been adapting to the financial side of Wawa’s business, especially given the finance-heavy background of Wawa’s leadership team. Intellectual curiosity around the business is essential, he says, and his leadership style is characterized by a willingness to learn and to help others learn as well. “When you’re a cost center,” he says, “you must know how the business makes a dollar so you can add value — as a business adviser.”

Mike has worked hard to understand the ins and outs of the company’s finances across business lines and has had to navigate a variety of economic environments, including the pandemic, the current market uncertainty and the 2008 recession. He believes knowing the broader context of your work, and how it aligns with overarching business goals, is critical to the job of a general counsel. You must learn to balance immediate, pressing tasks with long-term strategy. To cultivate the right sort of critical thinking skills in this arena, Mike emphasizes the importance of asking questions and learning from his peers and business partners in finance, risk management, marketing and across key business lines.

3. Build yourself a toolkit

Mike advised attendees to work on building themselves a “toolkit” or a “cabinet” consisting of the right mentors and resources, both inside and outside the company.

When he transitioned to the role of chief legal officer at Wawa, Mike experienced a learning curve in working with the board and handling the myriad novel issues that seemed to crop up daily. He learned to rely on outside counsel for guidance and built strong relationships with external firms. He stressed how finding those external subject-matter experts is essential, as is looking for mentors who excel in different areas across the business. You never know where you’ll find learning opportunities and good guidance.

4. Cultivate a culture of camaraderie and caring

Mike’s personal values align with Wawa’s core values and servant leadership philosophy. Wawa’s core values include valuing people, delighting customers, embracing change, doing

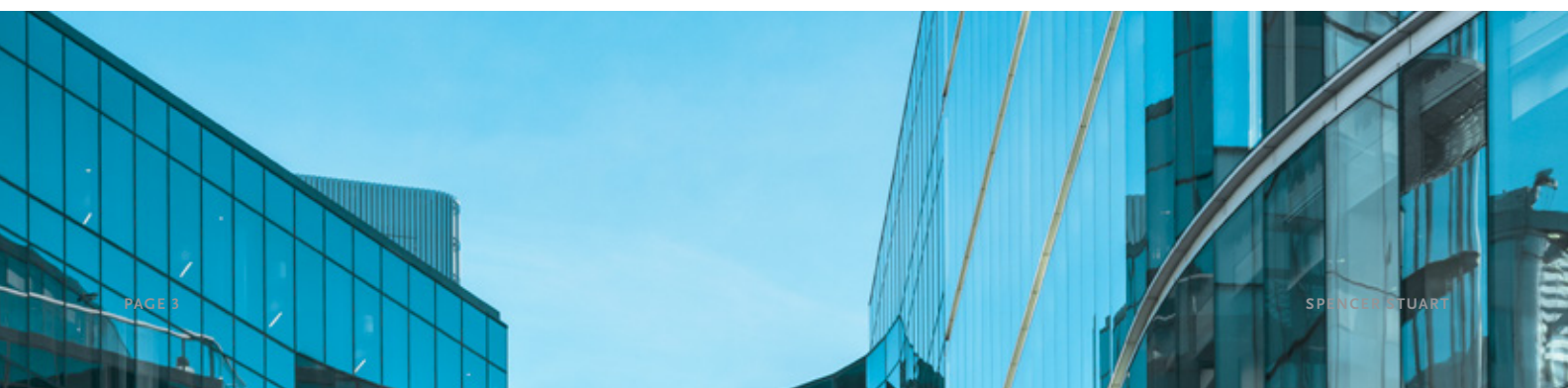
Provide your team with opportunities for growth and make sure they feel supported and valued

the right thing (and doing things right) and having a passion for winning. As a privately held family- and employee-stock-owned company, Wawa has a strong culture of employee ownership, and Wawa’s long-term chairman frequently noted that he had wanted Wawa’s associates to be able to retire “healthy, wealthy and young.” This is a good fit for Mike, who thinks it’s important to be a “full person”

with interests outside of work, and his approach to leadership is influenced by Wawa’s culture of servant leadership and shared values.

Looking ahead, Mike is focused on developing the next generation of leaders at Wawa, and he emphasizes the importance of people management and building a collaborative culture. He advises being open to feedback, slowing down to get to know people and coaching rather than micromanaging. His advice to rising general counsel: provide your team with opportunities for growth and make sure they feel supported and valued.

Prioritize connection and collaboration with your team, and coach them to take on new challenges and develop their own skills. Also, encourage them to bring their whole selves to the office, while embracing a full life outside the office. This includes encouraging his team to fully disconnect during vacations.



Work with intention and integrity

Twenty years into his role at Wawa, Mike leads from a place of healthy risk-taking and inclusive leadership. His commitment to Wawa meshes well with the culture of his employer with a family-like atmosphere, and he continues to find his work diverse and challenging. At this point in his career, he's deeply invested in sharing what he knows with other rising legal professionals and notes that, luckily, most lawyers are naturally hard workers.

Speaking to an audience largely composed of aspiring general counsels, Mike acknowledged that Wawa CEO Chris Gheysens continually stretches him beyond his comfort zone, which has been a rewarding part of the job. It has helped him in his career to be counted on as a person who “gets stuff done.” But while Mike acknowledges that he's been granted some priceless career opportunities on the path to chief legal officer, it wasn't just good fortune or the right mentors that got him where he is today. In his own words, he says, “The harder I work, the luckier I get.”





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