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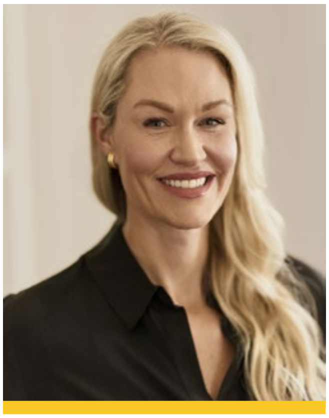
HubSpot CLO Erika Fisher Offers a Fresh View of the Path to Legal Leadership



Erika Fisher did not follow a traditional path to the chief legal officer (CLO) seat; her background was not the classic corporate or litigation track. She believes strongly that there is not a single blueprint for getting to the top legal seat.

"Everyone wants a clear path to the CLO role," she says. "But it's always industry-, environment- and opportunity-specific."

Instead of focusing on career paths and next steps, Erika advises aspiring CLOs to focus on something far more practical: what the business needs most at any given moment and how to align to it.

Start with what your company needs to win

Erika's starting point is simple: understand the business. "Keep your antenna up, especially right now, on what the company needs to win at in order to succeed," she says. Go find out. Speak to the business team. If you cannot clearly articulate the two or three things the company must "absolutely crush in order to accelerate the business" in the next 12 months, that is the first problem to solve.

From there, the question becomes personal: how do you fit? She encourages attorneys to "lean into the problem space. It is important that you are able to articulate how your skill set applies, or how you plan to adapt your skill set."

Initially as a deputy general counsel and later as CLO, Erika consistently focused not just on her own role, but on her manager's priorities. "What are my boss' biggest pressures? What does she need visibility into?" Expanding into those areas builds relevance.

At Atlassian, this mindset played out in real time. As the software company transitioned its offerings from on-premises to cloud, there was no clear data privacy function and the gap began to affect the business. "We were losing deals or slowing deals down because we could not articulate our data privacy posture," she says. She stepped in, got up the learning curve quickly and helped build that capability just as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) created a tailwind.

Erika adds: "If you are perceived as someone who understands the commercial needs of the business and can articulate and demonstrate how your skill set fits into it, that is how you build credibility."

Positioning yourself as a successor

Incumbents have an advantage, but only if they tune into what the business needs and align themselves.

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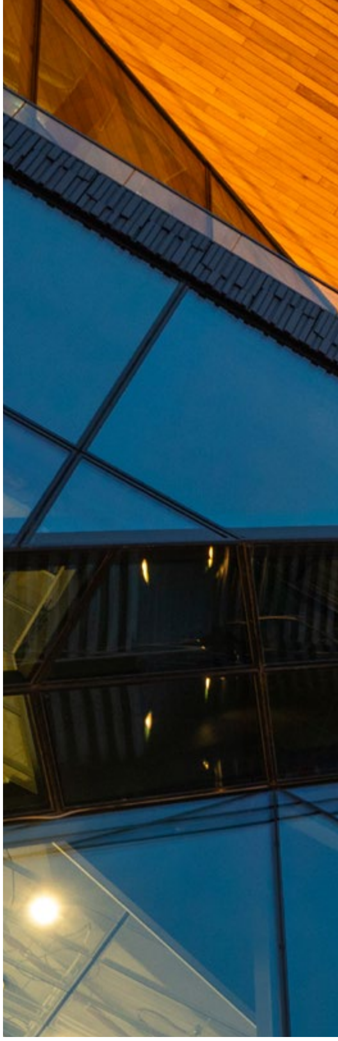
Erika pushes back on the tendency of aspiring CLOs to over-index on perceived capability gaps. "Solving for hiring a CLO based on a limited surface area, like exposure at quarterly board meetings, is probably the wrong approach." Instead, she emphasizes learning agility. "Be honest about what you have not done," she says. "But give examples of how you get up the learning curve." That includes leveraging peer networks and outside counsel and pointing to past examples of quickly building new capabilities.

During the interview process, Erika encourages internal candidates to lean into what she sees as the clear trade-offs between internal and external hires. Internal candidates may lack breadth in some areas, but they bring deep knowledge of their company's business, history and the ability to navigate the "human system" inside their organization. External candidates may bring more experience but are often "handicapped" by the reality that transplanting is hard. Even candidates who look strong on paper can struggle to execute in a new environment.

Her advice: acknowledge the gap and frame the decision clearly. "Here is how I would approach getting up to speed in the first six months … and that is a bet you would have to take on me and here is the value exchange you will get in return."

"Lawyers are not salespeople," Erika says. "We want to be seen as high integrity, operating from a place of truth." But taken too far, that instinct can lead candidates to simply present their experience and wait for others to connect the dots.



In reality, the expectation is different. “Especially in an interview process, people want to be sold.” Hiring managers “do not want to have to do all the discerning ... they want candidates to solve their problem for them.”

Done well, clearly framing the competitive advantage in opting to promote internally allows candidates to differentiate on judgment rather than credentials.

For Erika, this dynamic is more than interview advice, it is a reflection of the role itself. At its best, the CLO role is about helping leaders reframe problems, create clarity and move forward with confidence; the interview process is the first opportunity for internal successor candidates to demonstrate that.

First time as CLO working with the board

Stepping into the CLO role, Erika warns, is humbling. “If you have the swagger to make the pitch and get the job, prepare to be humbled,” she says. “In my early days with a new board, in spite of my past successes, I had moments where I wanted to shrink and crawl under the table.”

While board experience might seem transferable, it is not always a straightforward transition. “Just because you have worked successfully with one board does not mean you know how to work with all boards,” she says. “It is like a family system; every board has different personalities and dynamics.”

Erika also highlights a common mandate: improving board efficiency. “Many CEOs will tell you that board meetings are a waste of time,” she says. “They want you to make them more productive.” Early on, she thought she could drive efficiencies. Erika realized, however, that “board meetings are often long conversations where everyone is polite,” she adds. “But the value often comes in the last 90 seconds, when you finally get to the issue the board should be pushing on. “I used to think, ‘I can make this much more efficient.’ Now I say, ‘I can make it maybe 10% more productive.’”

She learned this firsthand. In one of her first board meetings, she was so focused on driving the agenda and the timing that she almost missed the most important moment. As she moved to wrap the discussion, a board member quietly said, “let this play out.” “He was right. I never missed reading the temperature in the room again.”

“You have to remind yourself you are going to make mistakes, and it is going to be okay. Understanding that no matter how seasoned you are, you may make mistakes as you come up any learning curve is the true mark of executive maturity.”

Erika also emphasizes the psychological dimension of stepping up with the board. “You have to remind yourself you are going to make mistakes, and it is going to be okay,” she says. “Understanding that no matter how seasoned you are, you may make mistakes as you come up any learning curve is the true mark of executive maturity.”

Evaluating CLO opportunities — due diligence, both ways

When considering external roles, Erika emphasizes discipline. “You can fall in love with the title,” she says. “But if the company is not successful, the CLO job will be very difficult.”

Her starting point is the business itself, which includes understanding the P&L, market opportunity, and growth trajectory. She encourages reaching into your network: get both the bear and bull case on the company from people who understand the business and use that input to ask informed questions during the interview process.

Equally important is the leadership team. “Your legal team is not your first team,” she says. “Your first team is the chief financial officer, chief revenue officer, chief people officer, chief technology officer, etc.” Alignment is critical. “There cannot be any daylight between you.”

AI and the evolving CLO role

Erika sees the CLO role becoming increasingly operational.

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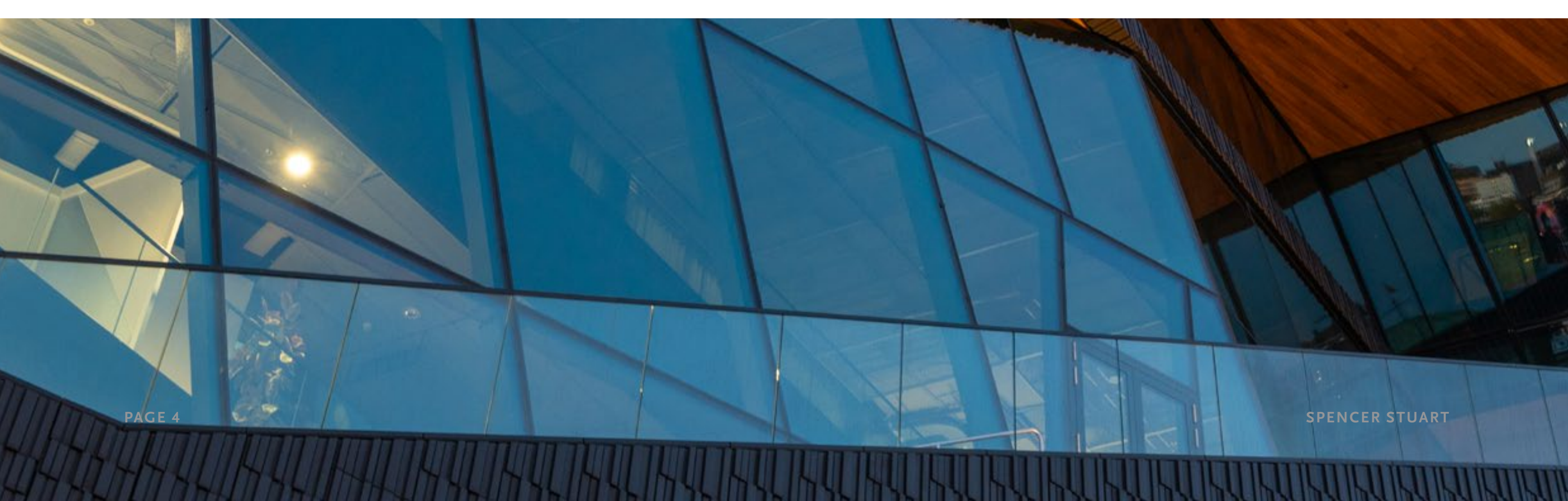
AI is reshaping expectations. “You do not have to be right,” she says, “but you have to have a point of view.” CLOs will need a perspective on tools, technology and how they shape team structure.

For those earlier in their careers, she is equally direct: do not sit this moment out. “In the deputy general counsel context, get close to that AI work,” she says. “Do not ignore it; often your CLOs may not have the bandwidth to fully address AI.”

In that context, Erika stresses that operating rigor matters more than ever. “We are all operators.” While legal teams may not drive revenue, they can directly impact cost and operating margin.

“Everyone is going to be asked to restructure their teams to positively inflect operating margin,” she notes. Developing a point of view on how to do so, through headcount, technology or process, is becoming a core skill.



Balancing risk in the era of AI

On AI, where regulation lags but commercial pressure is accelerating, Erika is pragmatic. “This is a great time to be a lawyer,” she says. “This is where we can show up as businesspeople and take calculated, smart risks.”

Her advice: start with the customer. “A regulation may not apply to your company but regulations that impact your customer apply to your company.”

For example, Erika’s team has rolled out “always-on” AI listening mode to customer calls, discovering that customer service reps often did not know how to respond to customer questions. Gathering data can help you identify where AI regulatory issues are slowing down the business, but “you cannot know what’s going to slow adoption unless you start with your customer.”

Delegation and learning — set an example for your team

Erika is equally candid about delegation. “We are all creatures of habit,” she says. “Lawyers are type A people. It feels good to be good at what you are good at, and we like the positive feedback that comes with it.”

But stepping into the CLO role requires breaking that instinct.

“You have to force yourself out of that box and throw yourself at the mercy of your team.”

At Atlassian, she stepped into a role where her former peers reported to her. “We are all going to land this transition together,” she recalls telling the team. She was explicit about her gaps: “I am going to ask really dumb questions, and part of your job is to make me smarter.”

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“If 50% of your energy is still going to doing more of what you are good at, you are just hyper-developing a muscle you already have,” she says. Erika encourages leaders to step out of their comfort zone, delegate areas they are good at to their teams and focus on developing new skill sets. She notes that when she does this, it sets a good example for her team to also be orientated towards learning.

Building and assessing teams

Erika emphasizes speed and clarity in team building. “I have gotten better at moving faster on assessing what I have and when it is not the right fit,” she says.

When hiring team members “I take over about 95% of the most important recruitment processes.” Erika defines open roles around the specific “superpowers” the business needs, not generic profiles. She tries to hire best athletes and writes her job descriptions as forward-looking road maps. “What someone is doing 12 months from now is going to be completely different from what we are hiring them for today,” she says. Your hiring process should account for that

The force multiplier: human relationships

Erika is unequivocal about the importance of relationships. “Building your peer network and having that to tap is the smartest thing that you will do during your career,” she says.

Over time, that network becomes a force multiplier. “It will amplify you.” “You have to invest in it,” she says. “It will benefit your career in ways you cannot always see in the moment, but you will absolutely feel the importance of a strong network over time.”

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