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Ed Weiss's Post

From the Red Sox GC: Knowing the Law, Knowing the Business

Posted by Ed Weiss on 07/21/2015 at 09:22 AM



One of the great benefits of being a law student and being trained in the critical disciplines of a legal approach to problem-solving is that all doors remain open to you in terms of your career path and progression.

This is true upon graduation, after taking (and passing!) the bar, after serving in a judicial clerkship or, frankly, at any time along one's progression over the years as a lawyer at a firm, a business and for those engaged in public service.

Today more than ever, businesses, companies and enterprises of all kinds truly value the ability to problem-solve and exercise good judgment above all other skills. And in my opinion, your early legal training, including law school and externship opportunities, can provide you with any early edge – in how to think about problems, but also in finding the best ways for an enterprise to solve them.

In today's business climate, lawyers increasingly serve in less traditional roles and often are asked by "the business people" (a term that reflexively invokes a gagging reaction from me for it implies lawyers are less capable lower life forms in that realm!) to provide advice and judgment against the multifactorial environment in which any business operates (public relations, shareholder relations, operating results, budgets, corporate ethics and the moral imperative of "just doing the right thing").

In fact, you will find lawyers today serving in the broadest array of business roles imaginable. For example, almost my entire in-house career over the last two decades has been spent, directly or indirectly, working for a lawyer who had evolved to be my CEO. (In my Red Sox legal role, I am very fortunate to work for Larry Lucchino, an all-time great sports executive, and a former lawyer).

As General Counsel for the Fenway Sports Group (a parent Company that owns the Red Sox, but also other sporting enterprises and assets, such as New England Sports Network, the Liverpool Football Club, and Roush Fenway Racing), I would suggest that a relatively small percentage of my time is spent analyzing and advising on prototypical "legal" issues. And this is undoubtedly true of most in-house lawyers who for the reasons noted above are being looked to for problem-solving and judgment.

Every action being taken by an in-house lawyer -- from imparting advice on a public statement, to negotiating appropriate termination clauses for an important sponsorship agreement, to conducting an internal investigation -- has both legal and business aspects, and the business is relying upon the in-house lawyer to provide keen judgment. Perhaps that is why my in-house legal team tires of me suggesting that you cannot be a really good lawyer for your business unless you really, really know the business.

I suppose the business of sports may seem to be more fun to learn than some others. But given my roots at a diversified media company, I also really enjoyed discovering everything from how a DVD gets made, delivered and sold; or a cable signal encoded, uplinked and transmitted through a hybrid-fiber coaxial network; or an HBO show got made and what its contribution was to the bottom line. In some ways, because the in-house lawyer often spans several business or product silos, the in-house lawyer might have to know more about more than some of the "business people" (there is that horrible term again) who are entirely dedicated to a single product or offering.

No one loved being a traditional lawyer more than me — clerking for a federal judge who tries cases (what a great job) and serving as an associate at one of the country's great law firms. Although I did not have the proverbial yellow brick road career plan, those early experiences led me in-house and into a career of learning the ins and outs of some businesses (the Red Sox 2015 season notwithstanding) and trying to apply good judgment and problem-solving skills to help them.

Law school today, in my view, keeps more doors open to your eventual career development and progression than any other professional path. And law school and experiential learning can provide you with a great head start. We know, at the Red Sox, because we have been staunch supporters of RWU Law's experiential learning programs -- and have had a number of fantastic and successful RWU Law interns who we know have learned our business because they have helped our business.