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Book Review: *Courageous Counsel: Conversations with Women General Counsel in the Fortune 500*

By Gilda R. Turitz – August 28, 2012

Courageous Counsel: Conversations with Women General Counsel in the Fortune 500 is the result of an ambitious, well-documented, and well-researched project that chronicles how women have successfully attained and fulfilled the general counsel role in Fortune 500 companies since the first woman was appointed to that position in 1979. The authors—Michele Coleman Mayes, general counsel of Allstate Insurance Co. (in 2011, No. 89 in the Fortune 500) and Kara Sophia Baysinger, a partner at SNR Denton US LLP—undertook to investigate how the more than 100 women who have held the position of general counsel in the Fortune 500 got there and the key elements that allowed them to ascend to such positions throughout the past three decades of changing business, social, cultural, and other factors. What resulted is a fascinating amalgam of career paths and personal stories that explores in detail the factors and keys to these women's successes and that relies on solid authorities for such critical components as leadership, risk taking, and mentoring. In short, this work explores and illuminates the many aspects of that elusive quality—courage—that these women exhibited to secure the chief legal officer position at the country's largest public companies. While the research amply demonstrates that there is no one formula for success, a balance of three major factors illustrates each of these women's achievements as their narratives unfold: (1) mentoring; (2) risk taking; and (3) personal and professional skills, attributes, and characteristics.

The authors interviewed representative groups of women general counsel, whom they divided across time and by industry and geography. Thirty-three personal stories form the core of the book, illustrating the challenges and successes of these women, whom the authors divided into three "waves." The pioneering "first wave" comprised the eight women who became general counsel in the Fortune 500 from 1979 to 1996. The "second wave" was the "pre-critical mass" from 1997 to 2001, when another 12 women became general counsel. The third and current wave is made up of women from 2002 to the present, with an all-time high of 101 general counsel as of the publication date of 2011. This number is more than double the number of women general counsel in the Fortune 500 since 1999, when the Minority Corporate Counsel Association's survey counted them at 44. Despite this growth, the authors note that, with 20.2 percent women in the general counsel position in the Fortune 500, full equality as corporate legal leaders is far from a reality.

Before chronicling the rise of each individual general counsel in her career path, the authors begin with the historical and social context of resistance to accepting women lawyers in the United States, starting with Margaret Brent in Maryland in the 1600s. That history highlights women's courage and persistence in the face of hostile and blatant discrimination. Women lawyers through the centuries had to assert rights that are now taken for granted: to vote, to attend law school, to be admitted to the bar, to become partners in major law firms, and to join law school faculties. While women were entering law school and the profession in ever greater numbers by and after 1979, the role of the general counsel was evolving and substantially changing during the same period—starting in 1979 with the appointment of the first Fortune 500 woman general counsel. Historically, and during the first wave, general counsel played the role of "gatekeeper" as to whether business ideas would be accepted into the marketplace. Their leadership was largely confined to the legal department, and their responsibilities generally limited to advising on standard legal issues and farming out work to outside law firms. As time progressed, senior corporate leaders began recognizing that general counsel could play a more strategic role to help make better business decisions and find creative solutions. After the corporate turmoil and scandals of the late 1990s and early 2000s resulted in the passage of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, general counsel were charged with much more responsibility. The general counsel has become integral to decision making in a corporation, as its moral compass or "conscience." General counsel now frequently fulfills the trusted advisor role to the chief executive officer and board, and is involved in the most important decisions to protect the company's interests.

With this historical and social backdrop, it is no surprise that courage is a quality any successful woman attorney would need to reach the Fortune 500. It is, as the book's title highlights, the theme of these women's career paths, which often were neither linear nor carefully planned out. Courage has no one definition in this book—or in these women's careers. Courage, however, is a "key success denominator," shared by many women, because they were willing to go outside their comfort zones and be risk takers. Many of the general counsel interviewed acknowledged that the greatest risk to advancement can be in failing to take risks. Although each individual's path to becoming a Fortune 500 general counsel was unique to her, each benefited from mentoring, guidance, and sponsorship from disparate sources within and outside her professional and personal milieus. Each took risks in making moves, some dramatically so—for example, by moving to a subsidiary with which she had no familiarity, or even into "a line" business operations position in which she had no experience. Each of these women had to step up to lead, sometimes in very stressful situations and balancing personal and family issues.

Indeed, several general counsel interviewed expressly linked mothering and family skills to success in the corporate and legal suites. They placed emphasis on the critical importance of having a mentor—in particular, a sponsor or champion who undertakes to help an attorney navigate the organization and her career, as well as publicize her successes and praise her talents and accomplishments to the right people. Through interviews with general counsel and expert consultants, the authors identify many roles, functions, and aspects of mentoring that provide excellent guidance to lawyers as to where to find mentors and what to expect from them, at all points in a career.

Courageous Counsel offers much food for thought about the value of courage and risk taking for lawyers. Whether an attorney is in-house, in private practice, or in another setting, the book provides sound career advice by example. The candor of the personal stories enhances the credibility of this work, as do the solid credentials and consultation of these women's colleagues, academics, legal recruiters, and specialists in related fields such as leadership and gender differences. This thorough effort to look at the world of women lawyers breaking down barriers in the corporate world will give insight to all those who want to learn how to navigate their own career challenges ahead.

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