

The GC's 1st 90 Days: How To Build Trust With The CEO

By **Chaka Patterson** (July 21, 2026)

Amid a continually shifting legal and business landscape, transitioning into the general counsel role means becoming an enterprise decision-maker and strategic adviser. In this Expert Analysis series, experienced general counsel offer practical advice for successfully navigating the first 90 days in the role. If you would like to contribute, please email expertanalysis@law360.com.

The offer letter is signed and the announcement has gone out. Now, you must start the process of proving your indispensability as the new general counsel of your company. And the faster you can do it, the better.

Most new general counsel spend their first three months learning the organizational chart, clearing their inbox and trying not to break anything. But the ones who thrive spend those 90 days doing something harder and more important: building the relationship that determines whether they become a strategic partner to their CEO or the lawyer who gets called after a decision has already been made.



Chaka Patterson

That distinction is not abstract. I have coached general counsel through product failures, regulatory investigations, activist investor campaigns and board crises. In every case, how the general counsel performed in the acute moment depended almost entirely on the foundation they had laid before the crisis ever arrived.

The foundation is the general counsel's relationship with the CEO. And the general counsel builds it, or fails to build it, in their first 90 days.

The CEO-GC relationship will define your tenure.

There is no single relationship more consequential to a general counsel's success than their relationship with the CEO. The CEO sets the tone for the entire company, controls access and ultimately determines whether you are in the room where decisions get made or in the hallway waiting to be briefed afterward.

The habits and reputations you establish in your first 90 days tend to calcify. Get the CEO relationship right early, and every other executive relationship becomes easier. Get it wrong, and you may spend years trying to recover credibility.

The following are three things that the best new general counsel do in their first 90 days to build a CEO relationship that holds under pressure.

1. Get in the room before the crisis.

The clearest sign of a functional relationship between a CEO and general counsel is this: The general counsel is involved in strategic conversations before they become legal problems.

CEOs who trust their general counsel don't wait for an issue to become a lawsuit before picking up the phone. They call during the ideation phase, the deal discussion or the moment when the company is deciding whether to enter a new market or make a bold acquisition. That kind of access is not automatic; it is earned. And there is a small window following advancement into the general counsel role in which to earn it.

New general counsel often make the mistake of waiting to be invited. They position themselves as available rather than indispensable. The general counsel who build strong relationships with their company's CEO do the opposite.

In their first weeks, they ask to sit in on strategic planning sessions, send a brief note when they spot a regulatory development that touches the CEO's priorities and connect legal risk to business outcomes before anyone asks them to. The message this sends is powerful: I am not here to slow you down; I am here to make sure we get where you want to go without tripping over something avoidable.

In your first week, request a standing 30-minute monthly briefing with the CEO. Use it to share one or two forward-looking legal or regulatory developments relevant to the company's strategy. Keep it short and useful. Do that consistently and you will be seen as a strategic partner within a quarter.

2. Speak business, not law.

This is the skill that separates general counsel who influence decisions from general counsel who get consulted after decisions are made. CEOs do not think in legal categories; they think in outcomes, like growth, cost, profit, risk, reputation and time. Your job is to translate your legal analysis into that language before you open your mouth. Your first 90 days are the best time to establish that you can do it.

The failure mode is subtle. It is not that general counsel use Latin phrases or cite statutes; it is that they frame advice around legal concepts rather than business consequences.

Using a phrase like, "this creates disclosure risk" frames an issue in a legal sense. If you want to frame the issue for business, you might say: "If we handle this the way you're describing, we are looking at a potential inquiry from the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission that will consume six months of management attention and put us on the front page of The Wall Street Journal." Both explanations are true, but only one changes behavior.

There are four translation moves that the best general counsel make consistently.

Lead with the business consequence, not the legal category.

Before you say what the legal issue is, say what it costs: in dollars, in management time, in reputational exposure, in competitive disadvantage. CEOs process risk through those lenses, not through legal doctrine.

Quantify whenever possible.

Vague warnings about "significant exposure" are easy to dismiss, but specific figures are not. Don't say, "This implicates our revenue recognition policy." Instead, say, "The SEC has repeatedly brought enforcement actions against companies that used this exact structure for premature revenue recognition, resulting in penalties, restatements and months of

management distraction. Our auditors have flagged our risk profile as similar."

Always bring a path forward.

CEOs are problem-solvers. If you walk in with a risk and no solution, you are adding to their burden. If you walk in with a risk and two or three ways to manage it, you are doing your job. The discipline of always pairing a concern with a proposed path forward is what distinguishes a trusted adviser from a compliance cop.

Read the room, then calibrate your depth.

A CEO in the middle of a board presentation needs a 30-second answer, but a CEO in a quiet planning session can absorb a five-minute briefing. General counsel who deliver the same level of detail regardless of context train their CEOs to tune them out. Match your depth to the moment.

3. Avoid the "yes person" trap.

CEOs need a general counsel who will tell them the truth, including the truth they do not want to hear. This requires something that goes beyond legal expertise: the courage to say, clearly and without softening, "We cannot do this."

For many in the early stages of the general counsel role — when the room is energized, the CEO is enthusiastic and slowing the momentum feels politically costly — the temptation is to build goodwill by being agreeable. At this stage, the new general counsel might nod, flag concerns in soft language and tell themselves they will manage the risk later. But that pattern kills credibility.

If a CEO ever suspects your advice reflects what you think they want to hear rather than what is actually true, the relationship is effectively over. You may keep the title, but you will have lost the trust that makes the title meaningful.

To avoid this trap, use the traffic light framework. Before any significant conversation about a proposed course of action, classify the issue.

Red-light issues involve clear legal or ethical violations. For these, say no plainly, document your advice in writing and do not retreat.

Yellow-light issues carry manageable risk. For these, describe the risk clearly and offer mitigation strategies that let the business move forward responsibly.

Finally, green-light issues are legally sound and should be approved enthusiastically. Nothing builds credibility faster than a general counsel who is genuinely encouraging when the path is clear. When your CEO knows you will say yes when yes is the right answer, your red lights carry real weight.

After significant conversations, send a brief follow-up note summarizing the issue, your recommendation and the decision made. This creates a shared record that holds the relationship accountable to honest exchange and protects the company if a decision is later scrutinized. Develop this habit in your first 90 days and it will serve you for the duration of your tenure.

Maintain discipline when the crisis hits.

Consider a hypothetical scenario: It's early morning and the company's stock is down 20% at the open and still falling following a product failure. Several hundred customers may be at risk. An investment bank analyst has already published a note blaming the company's maintenance practices before the legal team even understands what they are dealing with.

The CEO and chief financial officer are angry, and the board wants answers that don't yet exist. The general counsel is caught between the pressure to move and the knowledge that moving incorrectly could make everything worse.

The general counsel's most important job in the next 60 minutes is not to be fast, but to be the steadiest person in the room. Speed without verified facts is how companies turn a bad situation into a catastrophic one.

In a situation like this, smart general counsel use a three-step sequencing framework.

First, in writing, establish what you know and what you don't before taking any public action. Second, identify what disclosures are legally required and on what timeline. Do not let urgency collapse your judgment about what is actually mandatory. Third, bring the CEO a proposed course of action, not just a list of risks. CEOs in crisis don't want a problem inventory; they want someone who has thought through the next move.

Returning to the hypothetical: Imagine the general counsel takes 45 minutes to get the verified facts from their operations and communications teams. Then, they walk into the CEO's office with a list of three things: what they know, what they don't know yet and what they are going to do in the next two hours and why.

The CEO recalibrates almost immediately, not because the general counsel told the CEO what they wanted to hear, but because the general counsel gave the CEO something more valuable: clarity from a leader who had a grip on the situation.

As a result, the company responds to the analyst note with a factual correction that same day, files appropriate disclosures on a defensible timeline and avoids the secondary wave of damage — usually from inconsistent messaging, disclosure missteps and the appearance of concealment — that most often does more harm than the original event.

In the end, the general counsel is the hero because they moved with the most discipline at the moment everyone else was operating on panic.

That is the practical value of a strong relationship between a CEO and general counsel. When the crisis hits, the CEO needs to believe, without hesitation, that the leader standing next to them has the judgment and the courage to navigate it. You do not build that belief during the crisis; you build it in every proactive briefing, every honest assessment and every moment of candid advice that came before it.

The first 90 days as general counsel are going to be some of the most important. Use them wisely.

Chaka M. Patterson is the founder and CEO of Chaka Strategy. He previously served as general counsel of Adtalem Global Education Inc. and is author of "The Hot Seat: Mastering the Public Company General Counsel Role."

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