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Executive summary

The legal industry stands at a critical juncture. The global landscape has undergone profound geopolitical shifts, making the world we once knew hardly recognisable. In this context, legal leaders are required to prepare for the unpredictable and to train their teams to respond with agility, often stepping into leadership roles themselves.

Simultaneously, rapid technological advancements, most notably in artificial intelligence, are poised to disrupt legal services in unprecedented ways. This presents legal leaders with immense opportunities. By focusing on core deliverables and allowing systems to handle routine tasks, legal teams can enhance their effectiveness and strategic value.

Part one looks at culture as the foundation for success, positioning legal leaders as culture builders. In chapter 1, the author defines the cultural building blocks as the firm's essential values and behaviours. Thomas outlines the key elements for a successful team culture – including empathy, excellence, initiative, transparency, and integrity.

Chapter 2 then looks at how to build a winning culture. Legal leaders must articulate a common purpose that defines and unites the team. They must address common team cultural challenges such as lack of trust, fear of conflict, low commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results to build effective teams. In addition, legal leaders must accept – and learn to value – failure as a necessary step towards success.

Part Two then moves on to purpose and direction, outlining how legal leaders must be strategists and planners.

Chapter 3 creates a vision for the legal team. This chapter underscores the critical role of a business vision as both a guiding principle and an aspirational objective. The vision statement is particularly strong and relevant if built on the team's purpose.

Chapter 4 then provides a vision statement for the legal team. Building upon the team's purpose as its foundation, this chapter develops in detail a vision for legal teams as practical case study. It introduces the statement: "We are the business advisors of choice; we grow and protect the business," and discusses its practical implications.

In chapter 5, Thomas introduces how leaders are required to formulate a robust strategy and implement this through well-structured plans with clearly defined deliverables. This chapter recommends that the legal team's strategy address five key elements – supporting business growth, protecting the business, integrity and compliance, governance excellence, and people. Chapter 6 then emphasises execution via comprehensive planning and visual management tools.

In chapter 7, the focus is on how strategic direction informs organisational design, specifically the allocation of resources required to achieve the vision. The chapter elaborates on the mechanisms and foundational components involved, drawing from practical experience.

Chapter 8 then looks at legal operations. Recognised as an emerging discipline in legal team leadership, Legal Ops plays a pivotal role as the GC's principal support and as a strategic partner, especially in advancing the (AI-driven) technology agenda.

Part Three looks at the practice and techniques of legal leadership.

Chapter 9 asks the question, what is leadership? It introduces the concept of leadership and highlights its significance for teams, exploring its various facets and forms.

Chapter 10 then leads the team with mission tactics. Drawing from proven military mission-command strategies, the chapter presents agile and decentralised decision-making within a set framework, offering practical advice on enabling fast but accurate team decisions while maintaining overall leadership control.

Chapter 11 looks at operational leadership – keeping the team on track. Expanding on the previous chapter, Thomas outlines how leaders can effectively direct and guide their teams toward their objective through well-structured leadership bodies, meetings, and other communication methods, building strong connections within the group.

Chapter 12 then looks at leadership in successful talent acquisition. This chapter provides insights for legal leaders on recruiting exceptional legal talent who embody the core values and behaviours discussed in earlier chapters.

Chapter 13 then provides a case study on navigating the VUCA world. Continuing from earlier material, this case study offers techniques to help legal teams operate effectively in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environments, which are a reality in most rapid growth markets.

Part Four looks at how legal leaders can make themselves fit for the future – particularly in respect of the artificial intelligence challenge.

Chapter 14 outlines the current state of play in AI. As well as clarifying terms often used (and confused) in the discussion on AI, Thomas explains the technology behind it as well as its capabilities and limitations. Understanding the technology is key for impactful leadership, preparing the team for the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Chapter 15 looks at how prompting is the new drafting, and showcases the multiple opportunities AI can have in operating and leading legal teams.

Chapter 16 then looks at how we can be legal leaders in the AI battle. This final chapter details what legal leaders must address when introducing AI from a security, strategy, change management, and governance standpoint.

About the author

Thomas Loest is an experienced international general counsel and strategic business partner within executive leadership teams. A modern thinking inspirational leader, his track record of building high-functioning legal teams, delivering legal transformation and excellence in business advice speaks for itself. He is German qualified with 30 years' experience, 18 years with international corporations. A lawyer by passion, Thomas considers himself a solution provider, utilising the full suite of legal, advocacy, ESG and compliance process tools.